CECIL

Coaching early conversations interaction and language

Laura Barbour

March 2022

THE SUTTON TRUST

About the Sutton Trust

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Acknowledgements

The Sutton Trust would like to thank the Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust Speech and Language Therapy team: Claire Duffy, Susan Guest, Eleanor Marlow, David McDonald, Bibiana Wigley and Jane Young, and the Children's Integrated Speech and Language Therapy Service for Hackney and the City: Louisa Abbey, Laura Boniface, Annabelle Burns, Rebecca Clegg, Jenny Marcall, Karen Humfress and Phoebe Reilly. Both teams have given their time, enthusiasm, and commitment to the project despite all the obstacles thrown at them by COVID-19, and their involvement has been vital to the project's success. We would also like to thank all the Early Years practitioners and setting managers who made the project possible by taking part, despite also often operating as the 'fourth emergency service'.

Thank you to the Sutton Trust team, Laura Barbour for management of the project, Emma Legg, for her project support and to Janet Grauberg, who has provided an objective and clear view as a scale up consultant; with expertise in spreading effective practice, she has ensured that the relevant factors and future opportunities for development and roll out were always kept in mind.

The Steering Group have provided valuable insights and challenge: Doug Thomson, Sutton Trust (Chair), Derek Munn, Director of Policy and Public Affairs and Caroline Wright, Policy Advisor, Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT); Naomi Eisenstadt, Early years consultant; Catherine Hillis, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation; Sarah Tillotson, Programme Manager, Education Endowment Foundation.

Many thanks to Professor Kathy Sylva, Dr Ariel Lindorff, Allen Joseph, and Dr Katharina Ereky-Stevens from the University of Oxford for their expertise, academic rigour, diligence, sensitivity, and flexibility to ensure that the impact trial could continue in a meaningful way despite multiple obstacles. Thank you to Dr Anneka Dawson and Dr Clare Huxley from the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) who led on the IPE, supported by Olivia Garner who carried out many of the rigorous interviews which has brought to life the CECIL Phase 1 journey. They took the lead in the 'critical friend' role with an emphasis on 'friend', supporting the two SaLT teams to define and adapt their support models.

Thank you to Henrietta Lindsell for her support and faith in this investigative mixed-method research project, and to Catherine Hillis for being such an actively engaged and responsive funder. Thanks to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, The Lindsell Foundation and to the Sutton Trust for supporting the project and for accommodating the changes to the planned delivery and evaluation throughout which made it possible to continue despite the multiple challenges of the pandemic.

We would also like to acknowledge the late James Law, Professor of Speech and Language Sciences at Newcastle University, a fellow of RCSLT, who published a seminal review on the evidence base for children's speech and language interventions. He also made an important contribution to CECIL, being instrumental in early conversations and allowing us to use his ELIM-E instrument in advance of public use and to adapt it for the pre-test measure.

Contents

1. Contents....3
2. Summary....4
3. Key Lessons....5
4. Introduction....10
5. Background....11
6. CECIL – Project Delivery....13
7. Changes due to COVID-19....16
8. CECIL Findings....18
9. CECIL Lessons Learnt....22
10. Next Steps....26
11. *CECIL Phases 1.5, 2 & 3 Future Plans*

Summary

Jean Gross – former government Communication Champion speaking at the BERA conference July 2021.

"We know a lot about how adults both parents and practitioners in Early Years settings can best promote language development. But changing established behaviours is not easy and there are barriers to achieving high quality interactions in Early Years settings. Research should now focus on what types of experience, training and insights are most effective in overcoming barriers and changing behaviours."

This report is a summary document which explains the rationale for the CECIL project, delivery within the context of COVID-19, the findings, the learnings, and next steps. Linked to this report are the full IES Implementation and Process IPE Evaluation report and the University of Oxford Impact Evaluation report.

Sutton Trust research[1] previously has contributed to the evidence that language skills are a critical factor in social disadvantage and in the intergenerational cycles that perpetuate poverty[2]. CECIL is a mixed-method research project that aims to provide high quality provision for children in Early Years settings to enable them to develop strong communication and language skills. The mechanism for support is continuing, professional development (CPD) to develop, embed, and sustain effective practice amongst practitioners working in Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) settings in areas of disadvantage.

CECIL Phase 1 explored two support models led by specialist Speech and Language Therapy (SaLT) teams, 'Launchpad for Language'[3] in Hackney and 'Let's Interact'[4] in Nottinghamshire working exclusively in PVI nursery settings, offering training, modelling, coaching, and mentoring for those practitioners working with 2- and 3-year-olds.

The Institute for Employment Studies (IES) led an Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE), and the University of Oxford led an Impact Evaluation.

CECIL Phase 1 launched in March 2020 at the same time as the impact of COVID-19 was first felt in the UK. The pandemic significantly impacted both delivery and evaluation of the project.

[1] https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Sutton_Trust_Cognitive_Report-2.pdf
[2] Stewart & Waldfogel 2017; Law et al 2017a; 2017b
[3] https://gethackneytalking.co.uk/educational-professionals/launchpad-for-language/#:~:text=Launchpad%20for%20Language%20is%20a,fundamental%20building%20block%20for%20lif
[4] Let's Interact- An adaptation of Learning Language and Loving It™ - The Hanen Program® for Early Childhood Educators/Teachers

Key Lessons

Reflections from the IES IPE

The value of coaching support

The coaching approach has been positively received in the CECIL study. The Nottinghamshire Speech and Language Therapy (SaLT) team summarised the benefits which were supported by the IPE:

- Allows practitioners to explore and make sense of their own learning in a safe space.
- Enables application of meaningful learning by using practitioners' individual contexts.
- Supports and develops reflective practice skills that continue post-coaching.
- Supports practice improvement by moving practitioners through a behaviour change model which includes levels of awareness and motivations to change.
- Supports practitioners to apply new strategies and embed learning.
- Supports planning and decision making for appropriate next steps.

The value of a bespoke and responsive offer

The characteristics of PVI settings (tight staff ratios, limited time, space, and resources for training, less qualified workforce) mean that they particularly benefit from a tailored approach to CPD.

- The Hackney programme is deliberately designed to provide a menu of modules from which settings can select the ones that fit best for them.
- In non-COVID times, the model of a SaLT spending weekly half-days in the setting allows them to observe, identify, and respond to emerging issues.
- The Nottinghamshire model started with stronger "curriculum" offer with planned training but developed throughout the process to be more responsive – for example, providing a "pool" of coaching hours to be offered to practitioners who would benefit from them.

The value of expert input

> ***Practitioner 1 - Setting 6, Hackney***
>
> "Rather than just reading it on paper. To actually see it in practice is more helpful, because then when you do it when they're not there you have a guide to follow, like their expressions, what they're saying, how to use the puppet exactly."

- Both projects were delivered by experienced SaLTs. They were able to combine:
    - Expert knowledge of early childhood language and communication
    - Encouraging and supportive coaching approaches
    - Flexible, responsive, and solution-focused work with settings
    - Strategies, resources and prompts to reinforce practitioner learning

Practitioners and managers also commented that the SaLTs offered ad hoc advice and responses to queries about individual children, or groups of children, including where there were specific concerns.

Considerations when working with PVI Early Years settings

- **Ratios**: Early Years settings operate in the context of strict staff-child ratios, so staff availability needs to be carefully planned by setting managers. SaLTs have to liaise with settings to agree timing for visits or coaching sessions to fit around setting timetables and avoid disruption. If possible, budget for staff cover should be provided.

- **Resources:** Printing or otherwise preparing/providing materials and resources helps to reduce costs for PVI settings and also to facilitate dissemination of learning at settings.

- **Setting technology**: PVI settings may not have the technology necessary to engage with online learning, e.g., laptops, tablets, or a stable internet connection. There may be just one computer or laptop used for administration. One possible approach could be to provide technology if needed.

- **Practitioner technology**: PVI practitioners may not be very familiar with technology or have limited IT skills, as they typically spend most of their time engaging with children and are rarely sat at a computer. They may not have a work email address, so email correspondence may need to be sent to a shared work email or the practitioners' personal email address. There is often no IT support available. When face to face delivery is impossible extra IT support should be offered.

- **Space**: PVI settings may not have an extra room available for training or coaching sessions, and some settings in the study reported that the setting manager's office was also used as a staff room or training room. To reduce pressures on room capacity at settings, training/coaching sessions with individual settings could be delivered at a venue that is local or easily accessible to the setting.

Professor Kathy Sylva – University of Oxford Impact Evaluation team

"Perhaps the most important learning of all, was how committed Speech and Language Therapists are to supporting settings, and how enthusiastic and competent are the practitioners who take

Recommendations regarding feasibility and scale-up of evaluation methods

While COVID-19 affected the delivery of the Impact Evaluation carried out by the University of Oxford, they did learn some valuable lessons to inform future, larger-scale evaluations of similar approaches with an emphasis on coaching.

- The evaluation team would recommend the use of parent report alongside the researcher or practitioner assessment of child language, including dimensions of language beyond vocabulary that were not feasible to include in the present study. The combination of such measures with parent-reported child vocabulary would provide a more complete understanding of child language development and any differences in child language due to intervention.

- The evaluation team would also recommend the use of practitioner self-reporting in a larger-scale study, but, if possible, this should be complemented with an alternative measure based on researcher observation (even if in a sub-sample rather than the entire sample in order to reduce costs) for the sake of triangulation.

- If using video recordings of practice, they would recommend a structured approach that ensures the comparability and utility of video clips via a tightly defined set of instructions and the gathering of explicit information about why practitioners chose the activities and children that they include in videos.

- They would also recommend careful consideration of the strategies used to transfer videos, as this proved to be a substantial technological impediment to submitting videos for some settings.

Evaluation Findings

The results of this mixed-method research project come with a caveat, as despite every effort from the delivery and evaluation teams, there is no doubt that the project was significantly compromised by the need for the SaLTs to constantly adapt the approach to fit the unfamiliar and ever-changing circumstances caused by COVID-19. Obstacles included the sporadic opening of settings, staff absences, the irregular attendance of children, the lack of contact with parents, and the restricted and adapted mechanisms of evaluation that the two teams had to work to.

Findings from interviews as part of the Implementation and Process Evaluation

Perceived change in practitioner behaviour and the nursery environment

- Practitioners reported that they have increased skills, confidence, and motivation to support children's language and communication development.
- Practitioners reported that they have increased knowledge and awareness of individual children's language, which allows them to identify gaps and tailor strategies.
- Practitioners reported using strategies which enable interactions to be child led e.g., slowing down, balancing comments and questions, and OWLing (Observe, Wait and Listen to let the child lead the interaction).

Perceived impacts on children's language and communication skills

- The context of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt to have negatively impacted language and communications skills for some children, but other children were at the expected level or had higher levels of language.
- Both programmes appeared to be universal interventions which practitioners felt supported the language of all children at their settings, with particular benefits in targeting approaches for children who were struggling or had additional support needs, e.g., EAL or shyer children.
- Practitioners observed that improved language and communication skills also had benefits for personal, social, and emotional development, with increased turn-taking and verbal negotiation between children instead of just taking toys or objects from each other which could lead to conflict and fights.

Findings from the Impact Evaluation

The Hackney PVI settings (20) were quite homogeneous in their IDACI deciles[5] and all were within the three deciles indicating the highest levels of deprivation. In Nottinghamshire, settings (18) IDACIs varied more widely (from decile 1 to 10).

There was significant attrition from those in the research sample, which resulted in a small sample size available for evaluation. As a result, results must be interpreted with caution, and more sophisticated approaches to analysis that would have been appropriate in a larger sample were simply not possible. The Impact Evaluation team relied on a combination of simple inferential statistics (t-tests, regression) and descriptive statistics to inform the findings as a consequence of this limitation.

[5] The measure of deprivation used is from the English Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) derived from the postcode of the setting. The lower the IDACI decile, the more disadvantaged the setting.

Child language

- In Nottinghamshire, children in the Early Starter (intervention) group scored about 11 points higher on average than those in the Late Starter (control) group in Summer 2021 after controlling for scores at baseline. This difference was borderline statistically significant, suggesting that there may be an effect of the intervention despite challenges caused by the pandemic both to the intervention itself and the evaluation.
- In Hackney, no significant difference was found between the Early and Late Starter groups in terms of children's language development by Summer 2021. This does not mean that the intervention had no effect, only that the evaluation was not able to detect an effect, which may be a result of the very small analytical sample size. It is also worth noting that anticipated effect of the Hackney model relies more on the regular (weekly) presence of a SaLT in the setting, which was significantly reduced by COVID restrictions.

Practitioners' confidence and skills

- No significant differences were found between the Early and Late Starter groups in terms of change in confidence and skills based on practitioner self-report between Autumn 2020 and Summer 2021. This does not mean that the interventions in Nottinghamshire and Hackney had no effect; the evaluation was not able to detect one given the very small sample of practitioners (15 in Nottinghamshire and 14 in Hackney) for whom data could be matched across the two time points.

Next Steps:

CECIL 1.5

Despite the challenges of COVID-19, both areas continued to deliver during Phase 1, which was a significant achievement and there have been promising and informative findings regarding the value of sustained expert support in the form of modelling, coaching and mentoring.

Thanks to additional funding from Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Sutton Trust, Phase 1.5 (October 2021-July 2022) is providing an opportunity to explore the most appropriate formal method of recognising when a point of good practice has been reached in settings and when regular SaLT support can transition into a system of lighter touch engagement that monitors and embeds sustained good practice.

This transition phase 1.5 provides a further opportunity for the SaLTs to fine-tune their own internal evaluation processes so that they can capture feedback that will continue to improve their practice and the design of the CECIL approach going forward. It will provide vital information for the Sutton Trust, supported by the IES and Janet Grauberg as they explore what support contributes to improved implementation of evidence-informed communication and language practice in PVI Early Years settings, and to discover the conditions that facilitate and enable successful and sustained implementation. These findings will help to inform subsequent CECIL Phases.

CECIL Phases 2 & 3 Future Plans

CECIL Phase 2A: Exploring further support models

To date CECIL Phase 1 has explored two SaLT-led support approaches in Hackney and Nottinghamshire and for the next Phases 2 and 3, the intention is to explore alternative support options such as those led by language assistants or Early Years teachers.

CECIL Phase 2B & Phase 3: Exploring the role of support in embedding and sustaining the impact of an evidence-based intervention (Hanen 'Learning Language & Loving It™')

The forthcoming efficacy trial by the Education Endowment Foundation of the Hanen "Learning Language & Loving It"™ (LLLI) programme offers an opportunity to explore whether coaching early language approaches (such as those studied in CECIL Phases 1 and 2A) can support embedding of the LLLI programme in Early Years settings beyond the initial training period [6]. The timing of the EEF trial was affected by the pandemic, but they plan to restart the full-scale trial in September 2022, with a small pilot starting in February 2022. Sarah Tillotson, a Senior Programme Manager for the EEF and their lead for the Early Years and Language and Literacy, is a member of the CECIL Steering Group and has shared learning from CECIL to inform the new EEF Hanen LLLI trials. There are two notable changes from the original LLLI trial that have been influenced by CECIL: an intention to trial a blended model of virtual and face-to-face training, and the inclusion of the PVI sector alongside maintained settings.

The EEF Hanen trials are providing practical opportunities for CECIL to explore a range of support models to monitor, embed, and sustain good practice once the initial intense LLLI training phase has passed.

In September 2022 there will be the opportunity for one support model to work with a small number of settings in the Liverpool area (trained from February 2022 EEF LLLI Hanen pilot) to explore the best mechanisms to monitor, embed and sustain good practice.

In September 2023 there will be the opportunity to work with a larger number of settings (trained from September 2022 EEF Hanen efficacy trial) and to compare at least two models, each working with a group of settings as part of an implementation trial.

Future models of CPD in the Early Years sector

The CECIL project is currently focused on CPD for Communication and Language, working primarily within the PVI sector. In the long term we are hoping to influence a more general conversation around the value of sustained CPD within the early years, particularly in the PVI sector. CECIL is well placed to explore a variety of different models of support that can lead to implementing sustained good practice.

[6] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/learning-language-and-loving-it-efficacy

Introduction

Coaching Early Conversations, Interaction and Language (CECIL)

CECIL is a mixed-method research project that aims to provide high quality provision for children in Early Years settings to enable them to develop strong communication and language skills. A related aim has been to test the feasibility of evaluation tools and to use early findings to feed into future practice improvements. The mechanism for support is continuing, professional development (CPD) to develop, embed, and sustain effective practice amongst practitioners working in Private, Voluntary, and Independent (PVI) settings in areas of disadvantage.

In CECIL Phase 1 we have been exploring two support models led by specialist Speech and Language Therapy (SaLT) teams in Hackney and Nottinghamshire working exclusively in PVI nursery settings, offering training, modelling, coaching, and mentoring for those working with two and three year olds. The work has been possible thanks to the generous support from Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, the Lindsell Foundation and the Sutton Trust.

The project employed a 'critical friend' model managed by the Sutton Trust with the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) leading on the Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE) and the University of Oxford leading on the Impact Evaluation and with consultant Janet Grauberg advising on matters of future scale up.

CECIL Phase 1 launched in March 2020 at the same time as the impact of COVID-19 was first felt in the UK. It is testament to the commitment of all those involved that it was able to continue and deliver the essential elements of the original plan. Particular credit goes to the Early Years practitioners, who became known as the 'fourth emergency service' during the height of the pandemic, when at personal risk they continued to support vulnerable children and enabled frontline workers to do their jobs. Within this context they persisted in making the most of the opportunity to train, learn, and develop their skills as part of the CECIL project. The SaLT teams who led the interventions showed inspirational tenacity as they persevered, adapting and overcoming obstacles at every turn. The impediments of COVID-19 were also felt by the evaluation teams; both teams showed admirable persistence and creativity in finding appropriate methods of carrying out their areas of the study under exceptional conditions, and also ensured there was always sensitivity in their interaction with settings at such a challenging time.

The results of this mixed-method research project come with a caveat, as despite every effort from the delivery and evaluation teams, there is no doubt that the project was significantly compromised by the need for the SaLTs to constantly adapt the approach to fit the unfamiliar and ever-changing circumstances. Obstacles included the sporadic opening of settings, staff absences, the irregular attendance of children, the lack of contact with parents, and the restricted and new mechanisms of evaluation that the two teams had to work to.

Background

The importance of supporting communication and language in the Early Years

Sutton Trust research[7] has contributed to the evidence that language skills are a critical factor in social disadvantage and in the intergenerational cycles that perpetuate poverty[8]. There has long been compelling evidence that greater socioeconomic disadvantage is associated with weaker language skills at school entry[9]. Once gaps are created early, they can be difficult to disrupt through the life span[10&11]. Vocabulary at age five has been found to be the best predictor of whether children who experienced social deprivation in childhood were able to 'buck the trend' and escape poverty in later life.[12] The case for investing in early language and communication as a route to narrowing the disadvantage gap among children is well made and accepted[13]. This was evident even before the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has highlighted the negative impact of missing out[14].

The Importance of Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

Jean Gross – former government Communication Champion speaking at the BERA conference July 2021.

"We know a lot about how adults both parents and practitioners in Early Years settings can best promote language development. But changing established behaviours is not easy and there are barriers to achieving high quality interactions in Early Years settings. Research should now focus on what types of experience, training and insights are most effective in overcoming barriers and changing behaviours."

There have been several successful communication and language interventions targeting children aged three to five[15], but the vast majority of these have consisted of a structured training programme based on prescriptive manuals and specific materials. This mixed-method research project focuses on changing practice through, training, embedding and sustaining new skills, led by experienced Speech and Language Therapists (SaLTs). The support offered includes coaching, modelling, and mentoring for practitioners. This is a first step towards assessing the feasibility of scaling up an approach that includes coaching-centred support.

The recent publication of the EEF guidance on effective professional development[16] has further focused attention on how Early Years teachers and practitioners are supported to develop practice.

The case for focusing on Private, Voluntary and Independent Sector (PVI) settings

CECIL Phase 1 was delivered only in PVI settings. There is a strong case for focusing support for early language development in the PVI sector. Figures from the Department for Education[17] show that of the 621,351 three-year-olds in England, 379,570 (61%) are in private and voluntary settings, with only

[7] https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Sutton_Trust_Cognitive_Report-2.pdf
[8] Stewart & Waldfogel 2017; Law et al 2017a; 2017b
[9] Sylva et al. 2004; Melhuish & Gardiner, 2018
[10] Hutchinson et al 2019; Andrews et al 2017; Fernald et al 2013
[11] Too many children left behind Bradbury, Corak, Waldfogel, and Washbrook, (Russell Sage Foundation, 2015)
[12] Blanden 2006
[13] Law, J. C Charlton, J. Dockrell, J. Gascoigne, M. McKean, C. Theakston, A. (2017). Early Language Development: Needs, provision and intervention for preschool children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Education Endowment Foundation: London.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320282560_Early_Language_Development_Needs_provision_and_intervention_for_preschool_children_from_socio-_economically_disadvantage_backgrounds_A_Report_for_the_Education_Endowment_Foundation.
[14] "It would appear that the pandemic has exacerbated existing issues in oral language development, and this will need to be a key focus for any education recovery plans" (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2021: 9).
[15] Dockrell et al., 2016; Fricke et al., 2013)
[16] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/effective-professional-development
[17] https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-provision-children-under-5
https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/spdo/spdorp08.pdf

209,114 (34%) in maintained and state provision and the remainder with childminders, independent, and special schools. Contrary to the historic position, the percentage of later Free School Meals (FSM) eligible children who are accessing places in the PVI sector at age three appears to be increasing[18]. PVI settings are less well-resourced than those in the state sector, and despite playing a vital role during the height of COVID-19 they have faced unprecedented challenges with little additional support.[19]

Support for communication and language has been recognised as one of the cornerstones of high-quality early education[20]. Despite this, communication and language support in many Early Years settings has been identified as an area of practice needing improvement. The Study of Early Education and Development (SEED)[21] report recommended that "*future research should consider ways in which practice can be enhanced to increase language development in children attending a group setting*". The majority of the settings in the SEED study were from the PVI sector. High quality Early Years settings are particularly effective at narrowing the attainment gap for disadvantaged children[22]. Evidence suggests that higher quality is more often found in maintained rather than PVI settings, with links to overall staff experience and qualifications[23].

[18] (Source: Stewart and Reader (2020: 58) interpretation of the National Pupil Database)
[19] https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/coronavirus-impacts-early-years/
[20] https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/1sound-foundations-jan2014-3-1.pdf
[21] Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age four years
[22] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/455670/RB455_Effective_pre-school_primary_and_secondary_education_project.pdf.pdf
[23] https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019/12/Quality_inequality_childcare_mathers_29_05_14.pdf

The Sutton Trust selected two promising approaches to supporting communication and language in Early Years settings, the Hackney Speech and Language Therapy Team's 'Launchpad for Language'[24] and Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust Speech and Language Therapy team's 'Let's Interact'[25]. The decision was informed by a combination of the 2017 EEF review of early language development[26] (Law et. al., 2017), advice from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, and the Communication Trust's What Works database[27].

The approaches in the two participating local authorities, Hackney and Nottinghamshire, were planned and delivered by experienced Speech and Language Therapy teams. They built upon their existing approaches to incorporate further coaching, modelling, and mentoring elements, and focused on supporting Early Years practitioners in PVI settings with the aim of improving staff practice and child outcomes around language and communication. The children targeted for this project were aged two to three years old at the start of the 2020-21 school year. Delivery, which included training and ongoing support, took place between April 2020 and July 2021.

Nottinghamshire CECIL

The approach in Nottinghamshire, 'Let's Interact', is an approved local adaptation of the Hanen[28] Program for Early Childhood Educators 'Learning Language and Loving It' (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002). The intervention was staff-focused, with the aim of helping practitioners learn to make use of conversational turns to develop children's language. The enhanced 'Let's Interact' training for this project was expected to include:

- A minimum of four group training sessions (some with group video sessions)
- Three individual coaching sessions with video and feedback to settings
- Two Keep In Touch (KIT) phone calls, Language Lead network meetings, and project network sessions.

Over the course of the project an initial information session for staff, text messaging, and a pool of extra coaching sessions for practitioners needing extra support were also added. 'Let's Interact' training materials and the 'Learning Language and Loving It' guidebook and a journal to track progress were also provided to each practitioner.

Hackney CECIL

The full 'Launchpad for Language' (L4L)[29]; had previously been delivered in maintained nursery settings but not in PVI settings. It is intended to be a universal approach to support all children to reach their communication potential, developed from and based on principles from the Early Years Foundation Stage guidance from the Department for Education (DfE). Settings participating in the L4L intervention were offered a menu of packages intended to be tailored to their strengths and needs. The three key strands of support were child interventions, staff interventions and parent workshops. The original model involves a SaLT helping the setting to carry out a baseline language

[24] https://gethackneytalking.co.uk/educational-professionals/launchpad-for-language/#:~:text=Launchpad%20for%20Language%20is%20a,fundamental%20building%20block%20for%20lif
[25] Let's Interact- An adaptation of Learning Language and Loving It™ - The Hanen Program® for Early Childhood Educators/Teachers
[26] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/evidence-reviews/early-language
[27] https://ican.org.uk/i-cans-talking-point/professionals/tct-resources/what-works-database/
[28] http://www.hanen.org/Programs/For-Educators/Learning-Language-Loving-It.aspx
[29] https://gethackneytalking.co.uk/educational-professionals/launchpad-for-language/#:~:text=Launchpad%20for%20Language%20is%20a,fundamental%20building%20block%20for%20life.

and communication environment audit, then regularly (half a day weekly or one day fortnightly) visiting the setting to provide tailored support. These sessions involved modelling language enriching activities, coaching and supporting setting staff to carry out planned activities throughout the week, ongoing support by email or phone as needed, and suggestions of resources and activities for children to do at home. If requested, settings were also supported to carry out the WellComm[30] screening of children's language skills. The original model had to be modified considerably due to pandemic requirements see below.

The Evaluation

The two approaches were evaluated by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) leading on the Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE) and the University of Oxford leading on the Impact Evaluation.

An initial short feasibility phase took place May-August 2020 when settings were closed to most children. This led to both SaLT teams conducting telephone interviews with practitioners (7 settings represented in Hackney and 12 in Nottinghamshire) rather than being able to actually test the models in settings. The practitioners consulted had previously taken part in the training, so the SaLT teams wanted to gauge their thoughts on the plan for additional coaching and other modifications. The findings were used to update delivery models where appropriate, particularly in light of the ongoing COVID challenges at the time.

April to July 2020, a total of 40 settings across both areas were recruited with 20 subsequently allocated to the intervention groups and 20 to the control groups. In the end there were 10 settings in the Hackney intervention group and 9 in the Nottinghamshire intervention groups. There were 20 practitioners within the Nottinghamshire intervention group and 17 in the control group. Meanwhile, in Hackney, there were 30 practitioners in the intervention group with a similar sized control group. This is fewer than intended and relates to COVID challenges – further details below. The intervention and control groups are also referred to as Early and Late Starters respectively.

The IES Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE)

An overarching Theory of Change (ToC) was developed for the CECIL project with IES (see Appendix 1) in order to identify the rationale, components, mechanisms of change and intended outcomes of the study. The ToC was updated over the course of the project as changes were made due to COVID-19 or refinements of the interventions. In addition, each delivery team had three Theory of Change workshops run by the IES team and including the Sutton Trust and Janet Grauberg. These enabled detailed ToC models to be created and refined in a feedback loop, and original and final versions are included in the IES report so that each project's journey can be visualised. Clarification of the ToC helped the SaLTs to develop their approach and identify the key elements for future scale up.

*See Appendices 2 and 3 for the final Nottinghamshire and Hackney ToC versions.

Throughout the period of March 2020 – September 2021 the IES team worked closely with both SaLT delivery teams in a 'critical friend' model. The IPE then explored how the approaches were delivered and identified the factors moderating and influencing potential impact which may explain quantitative findings. It also sought to identify evidence of perceived effectiveness and issues which need to be considered for a wider rollout of the interventions. The IPE included 7 observations, 10 case studies (including 27 interviews overall), 4 additional telephone interviews and an Early Years practitioner survey focused on implementation at post-test only. Several additional questions were included in an impact survey of practitioners at pre- and post-test led by the University of Oxford.

[30] https://www.gl-assessment.co.uk/assessments/products/wellcomm/

The University of Oxford Impact Evaluation

In Nottinghamshire 18 settings and in Hackney 20 settings were allocated to either Early Starter or Late Starter. The University of Oxford used a well-known randomisation model to allocate settings to both groups to achieve balance in setting characteristics. Two main variables were balanced: highest practitioner qualification, and setting IDACI (Income Deprivation Affecting Children's Index) score. The team used this minimisation technique to achieve balance between groups of settings on characteristics which are known to influence practice and consequently children's language development.

In both Nottinghamshire and Hackney 20 settings were allocated to either Early Starter or Late Starter groups. The team used minimisation, a well-known allocation technique, to achieve balance between Early and Late starter groups of settings in each LA on characteristics which are known to influence practice and consequently children's language development. Specific characteristics considered in this process were different in each LA (for example, all settings in Hackney were fairly similar in terms of the level of local deprivation, so this characteristic did not require a balancing process, but in Nottinghamshire settings were quite varied in levels of deprivation so needed to be balanced based on this characteristic). Further technical details can be found in the Impact Evaluation report.

Children's language was measured via parent-report at pre-test and post-test. Parents were asked to select the words their children used on a list of 50 words in autumn 2020, and a list of 100 words in summer 2021, either in an online form or on paper.

Practitioner confidence and skills were measured via a self-report questionnaire developed by the research team. The same items asking about practitioners' confidence in supporting children's language development and their skills (in terms of interactions with children to support language development) were included in a baseline survey in autumn 2020 and a post-intervention survey in summer 2021.

Changes due to COVID-19

Impact on delivery

The arrival of COVID-19 coincided with the launch of the project in March 2020.

The feasibility phase was due to take place in PVI nursery settings from April to July 2020, but national lockdown resulted in nursery settings being closed to all but the most vulnerable children or children of essential workers. In Nottinghamshire, the SaLT team were able to carry out a replacement 'feasibility' phase by testing out their new plan to include more coaching via telephone conversations with settings whom they had previously trained and supported. This enabled them to get an idea of which elements would be well received during the CECIL trial.

The Hackney team were initially required to put the project on hold for two months as there was a possibility that their SaLTs would be redeployed to frontline work in hospitals.

By September 2020, Early Years settings had re-opened to all children and remained open through to July 2021 (although COVID staffing issues sometimes forced settings to close, temporarily). However, access to external staff such as CECIL SaLTs was for some of the time prohibited and at other times restricted due to individual setting COVID regulations.

Both delivery teams experienced significant changes to their delivery plan due to COVID-19 restrictions. Nottinghamshire had to adapt all their training to online delivery, and they delayed the individual coaching sessions for a few months until March 2021 so that it could take place in-person due to the technical difficulties encountered when coaching the settings virtually.

For Hackney, the model consists of SaLT regular weekly attendance in the setting. Between October 2020-July 2021 the SaLTs visited the settings whenever COVID restrictions allowed. At several points all support had to move to virtual delivery and the SaLT team recorded videos of themselves modelling language activities and provided online training, parent, and parent-child sessions.

Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Impact Evaluation

Changes to measures

Children's language was originally intended to be measured using reliable and previously validated instruments (practitioner- and/or researcher-assessed). However, neither practitioner nor researcher assessment was feasible due to COVID-19 upheaval in settings and restrictions on external visitors.

To test for effects of the intervention on practice, both evaluation teams had originally intended to visit settings to observe practice, but this aspect of the study also had to change due to COVID-19 restrictions. As a practical alternative, the Impact Evaluation team they invited participating practitioners to submit brief videos of their practice, which could (for those in both Early Starter groups) be videos already created for coaching discussions if these were part of the intervention design. Videos were requested at pre-test and also post-test.

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Attrition in the impact evaluation sample

The move to a parent-completed child language assessment and staff-completed practitioner rating scales led to low returns of data. Moreover, delays in the intervention timetable meant that post-test data had to be in mid-summer, leading to low response rates during the school holiday period.

It is important to note that the Attrition in the research sample was much greater than in the actual intervention sample. Settings continued to engage with the CECIL training and support but the challenges of COVID – 19 meant that they often did not complete surveys or distribute language assessments to parents.

Limitations of the trial

Due to the limited sample size, the Impact Evaluation team cannot make strong claims about the effects of the interventions (on practice or on child language) in Nottinghamshire and Hackney based on their analyses. They can, however, discuss indicative effects where observed based on the small sample, and provide guidance on the feasibility of Impact Evaluation methods for future studies at a larger scale.

The inability to make allocations of settings to the Early and Late Starter groups based on child data, though arising from practical necessity as noted above, constitutes an important limitation. The evaluation team controlled for child language at baseline in their analysis of the effects of interventions on child language to address this limitation to the greatest extent possible. However, it is important to acknowledge that ideally allocations (and therefore the balance across Early and Late Starter groups) would be based on a combination of setting, practitioner, and child baseline (pre-intervention) data.

The inability to conduct in-person observations of practice was another important limitation. The use of video clips of practice in settings, though it was an attempt to approximate observations of practice without causing undue additional burden to participants, did not allow the impact evaluation team to make claims about differences in practice over time or between Early and Late Starter groups in each LA. This is because of both the lower number of video clip submissions in Summer 2021 (in some cases because of technical difficulties), and the wide variations in how practitioners chose what activities to record and which children to include.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Implementation and Process Evaluation

Due to the changes to delivery caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the IPE was also adapted. The main driver for these changes was that it was no longer possible for the IES team to visit settings in person to conduct case studies because of restrictions around visitors, and staff-child bubbles. However, as both SaLT teams moved to online delivery of training and support, the IES team were able to observe virtual support delivered by both SaLT teams. Without COVID there would have been observations of Hackney's delivery during the case study visits, but no observations of Nottinghamshire's training or coaching. This has resulted in a richer picture of delivery for the Nottinghamshire CECIL programme, but a slightly less detailed picture of the Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) delivery as the evaluation team were not able to join SaLTs in the settings for case study visits.

The case studies and interviews were all conducted by telephone or videoconferencing instead of in-person, which meant that the evaluation team were not able to collect additional contextual data by being in the setting environment, or have some of the informal conversations that often happen when fieldwork is conducted face-to-face.

CECIL Findings

This chapter explores findings from the study including results from the University of Oxford Impact Evaluation and the IES Implementation and Process evaluation.

The University of Oxford, Department of Education, Impact Evaluation:

Research questions

The Impact Evaluation focused on the following (original pre COVID- 19) questions:

1. What is the effect of each intervention on child speech and language?
2. What is the effect of each intervention on practitioner outcomes (observed practice, confidence, and professional knowledge)?
    a. How do practitioner outcomes relate to child outcomes?

Additional feasibility questions included:

1. What early language child assessments are appropriate as pre- and post-test measures for a future larger-scale study?
2. What measure(s) of observed practice, practitioner confidence and professional knowledge are appropriate as pre- and post-test measures for a future larger-scale study?

Changes due to the pandemic meant that the questions could not be fully answered as in the original study design.

Sample size and characteristics

As part of the designated evaluation group, 191 children were recruited at baseline from a total of 19 settings (all required parental consent and completed parent language report questionnaires). This is not the total number of children who were supported; 48 practitioners (Hackney 30 Nottinghamshire 18) were delivering to at least one nursery room of children in each setting and only a sub-sample of these children were recruited into the study. This means that around 382children will have received some form of input from the project.

The Hackney settings (20) were quite homogeneous in their IDACI deciles[31] and all were within the three deciles indicating the highest levels of deprivation. In Nottinghamshire, settings (18) IDACIs varied more widely (from decile 1 to 10).

There was severe attrition in the number of parent responses over the course of the evaluation, likely in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Autumn 2020, there were 178 valid parent responses in Nottinghamshire and 117 in Hackney. In Summer 2021, only 45 parents provided responses in Nottinghamshire and 22 in Hackney. This is likely at least in part due to challenges associated with the pandemic such as: setting closures, staff absence, heavier workloads for practitioners, in the context of which distributing links and materials to parents constituted an additional burden on setting managers. In addition to the restrictions caused by the pandemic, delays in the implementation timetable brought about by covid (e.g., staff absence, setting closures) meant that post-test data collection took place in mid-summer when some children had already left provision or parents were too busy to complete questionnaires.

[31] The measure of deprivation used is from the English Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) derived from the postcode of the setting. The lower the IDACI decile, the more disadvantaged the setting.

There was also considerable attrition in practitioner responses: 41 responded in Autumn 2020 and only 19 in Summer 2021 in Nottinghamshire, while 54 responded in Autumn 2020 and 20 in Summer 2021 in Hackney.

Due to the small sample size as a result of the severe attrition, results must be interpreted with caution, and more sophisticated approaches to analysis that would have been appropriate in a larger sample were simply not possible. The evaluation team relied on a combination of simple inferential statistics (t-tests, regression) and descriptive statistics to inform the findings as a consequence of the small sample sizes.

Results

Child language

After taking into account children's language (number of words) in Autumn 2020, in Nottinghamshire, children in the Early Starter group scored about 11 points higher on average than those in the Late Starter group in Summer 2021. This difference was borderline statistically significant, suggesting that there may be an effect of the intervention despite challenges caused by the pandemic both to the intervention itself and the evaluation.

In Hackney, no significant difference was found between the Early and Late Starter groups in terms of children's language development by Summer 2021. This does not mean that the intervention had no effect, only that the evaluation was not able to detect an effect, which may be a result of the very small analytical sample size. It is also worth noting that anticipated effect of the Hackney model relies more on the regular (weekly) presence of a SaLT in the setting, which was significantly reduced by COVID restrictions.

Practitioners' confidence and skills

No significant differences were found between the Early and Late Starter groups in terms of change in confidence and skills based on practitioner self-report between Autumn 2020 and Summer 2021. This does not mean that the interventions in Nottinghamshire and Hackney had no effect, but the evaluation was not able to detect one given a very small sample of practitioners (15 in Nottinghamshire and 14 in Hackney) for whom data could be matched across the two time points.

Observations of practice

Originally, the intention was to observe practice during research visits to settings. This was not possible due to the pandemic. Instead, the evaluation team used video clips shared by practitioners and developed a coding instrument to observe practice via these video recordings, with reasonable evidence of inter-rater agreement on most items. Unfortunately, few settings submitted post-intervention videos, and it was not possible based on the sample obtained to make comparisons from Autumn 2020 to Summer 2021 or across Early and Late Starter groups.

Institute for Employment Studies (IES) Implementation and Process Evaluation:

Research Questions

1. What evidence is there of change in practitioner behaviour and/or perceived impacts on the nursery environment with regards to language and communication support?
2. What, if any, are the perceived impacts on language and communication skills among children supported by practitioners who have received one of the interventions?
3. Do settings find the interventions useful and are they able to incorporate them into their practice? Do they feel able to sustain this in the longer term?

4. What are the barriers or enablers for nurseries to participating in the interventions?

5. What factors may need to be considered in scaling up the interventions to deliver them in more nurseries?

Twenty settings in Nottinghamshire were randomised (using minimisation techniques) to take part across the early starter group (eleven settings who would receive the enhanced intervention in the 2020/21 school year) and late starter group (nine settings who would receive only the four sessions of training after the intervention ended and for which post test data was collected).

The overall sample numbers were relatively small as the study itself is quite small with 10 or less settings receiving each intervention, and training focuses mostly on practitioners working with two-year olds. However, the IPE evaluation team were able to interview staff at 14 of the 18 early starter settings across both interventions that were still in the study at the time the interviews took place. Although they heard a range of views on the programmes, it is possible that those who engaged positively with the programmes may have been more motivated to engage with surveys and interviews.

Findings from interviews:

Perceived change in practitioner behaviour and the nursery environment

- Practitioners reported that they have increased skills, confidence, and motivation to support children's language and communication development.
- Practitioners reported that they have increased knowledge and awareness of individual children's language, which allows them to identify gaps and tailor strategies.
- Practitioners reported using strategies which enable interactions to be child-led e.g., slowing down, balancing comments and questions, and OWLing (Observe, Wait and Listen to let the child lead the interaction).
- Some practitioners in Nottinghamshire had previously received similar, which minimised the potential effect of the programme but helped reinforce good practice.
- Changes to the environment were limited due to COVID-19 restrictions, but included sharing learning and resources with other parts of the setting, and parent engagement.

Perceived impacts on children's language and communication skills

- The context of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt to have negatively impacted language and communications skills for some children, but other children were at the expected level or had higher levels of language.
- Both programmes appeared to be universal interventions which practitioners felt supported the language of all children at their settings, with particular benefits for children who were struggling or had additional support needs, e.g., EAL or shyer children.
- Practitioners observed improved language and communication skills also had benefits for personal, social, and emotional development, with increased turn-taking and verbal negotiation between children instead of just taking toys or objects from each other which could lead to conflict and fights.

Usefulness, ease of implementation, and sustainability of the interventions

- The strategies and/or activities learned by practitioners on the programmes were thought to be widely applicable, suitable for universal and targeted approaches.

- Support offered from the SaLT teams, including coaching and responding to queries, facilitated practitioners to make the most of the programme and implement the strategies and/or activities.
- Practitioners generally felt supported by their setting manager, although manager involvement with the programme was not consistent across settings.
- The strategies and/or activities were overwhelmingly felt to be useful and straightforward to implement into regular practice and timetables and so could be possible to sustain longer term.
- The level of support and structure of the programme was suitable, however some delays to the programme due to COVID-19 were disruptive.

Barriers to settings participating in the interventions

- Staffing shortages – this was even more challenging in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the need for bubbles meant staff could not be transferred between rooms or bubbles to share learning more widely.
- Time taken – many staff, especially in the survey, highlighted not having enough time in the working day to take part in programme activities. However, compared to similar studies, time taken was not a significantly large barrier.
- Technical issues – with accessing training, coaching, or learning materials. In Nottinghamshire especially, the coaching videos were not always the ideal setup in terms of quality and framing. There was a strong preference for face-to-face learning.
- Lack of room capacity – some staff reported that one-to-one coaching sessions took place in the setting manager's office or in the lunchroom as there was no spare room that could be used for coaching or training. This then impacted on other staff in the setting who wanted to use the room.
- Other small resource costs – there were some small costs for stationery, but often the SaLTs would do costly things for the settings such as printing resource materials.

Enablers for settings' participating in the interventions

- Manager support – including assisting practitioners with videos and resolving tech issues, helping disseminate learning from the programme, and allowing practitioners space and time for participating in the programme.
- SaLT support – the SaLT was highly valued at each setting for their expertise in supporting children's language and communication skills and facilitating practitioners to benefit from the programme.
- Peer support – other practitioners on the programme at one setting could help each other.

CECIL Lessons Learnt

This chapter explores lesson learned during the study including:

- The digital divide in PVI settings
- Reflections from the Implementation and Process Evaluation:
    - Working with PVI Early Years settings
    - Factors to be considered in scaling
        - The Nottinghamshire approach
        - The Hackney approach
    - The value of coaching support
    - The value of a bespoke/ responsive offer
    - The value of expert input
    - Mechanisms for embedding learning and sustaining practice
- Recommendations regarding feasibility and scale-up of evaluation methods from the Impact Evaluation

The digital divide in PVI settings:

When in-person delivery was impossible, the virtual option was welcome. However, many of the PVI settings experienced very significant technical challenges which included: inadequate broadband, the lack of designated tech support (compared to schools), insufficient appropriate equipment such as individual laptops or tablets, lack of individual work email addresses for direct interaction, and no quiet place to access virtual support. Despite additional technical resources being made available by the SaLT teams, sometimes the challenges were insurmountable, particularly around the sharing of individual videos demonstrating practice. This needs to be considered for future virtual delivery in the PVI sector.

Reflections from the Implementation and Process evaluation (IES)

Working with PVI Early Years settings

- Ratios: Early Years settings operate in the context of strict staff-child ratios, so staff availability needs to be carefully planned by setting managers. SaLTs have to liaise with settings to agree timing for visits or coaching sessions to fit around setting timetables and avoid disruption. If possible, budget for staff cover should be provided.
- Resources: Printing or otherwise preparing/providing materials and resources helps to reduce costs for PVI settings and also to facilitate dissemination of learning at settings.
- Setting technology: PVI settings may not have the technology necessary to engage with online learning, e.g., laptops, tablets, or a stable internet connection. There may be just one computer or laptop used for administration. One possible approach could be to provide technology if needed.
- Practitioner technology: PVI practitioners may not be very familiar with technology or have limited IT skills as they typically spend most of their time engaging with children and are rarely sat at a computer. They may not have a work email address so email correspondence may need to be sent to a shared work email or the practitioners' personal email address. There is often no IT support available. When face to face delivery is impossible extra IT support should be offered.Space: PVI settings may not have an extra room available for training or coaching sessions, and some PVI settings in the study reported that the setting manager's office was also used as a staff room or training room. To reduce pressures on room

capacity at settings, training/coaching sessions with individual settings could be delivered at a venue that is local or easily accessible to the setting.

Factors to be considered in scaling (IES IPE)

Nottinghamshire

- **SaLT experience**: Given the importance of coaching individual practitioners, trainers need to be experienced and understand the needs of Early Years practitioners and settings, ideally including the PVI sector.
- **Online/ Face-to-Face**: With online delivery, if a practitioner missed a training session, they could often attend an alternate session. This may not be as easy if delivery is face-to-face and travel is required. Some training took place at a local venue due to lack of space in the setting; with a wider geography, more venues may need to be found.
- **Technology**: Settings did not always have the technology or stable internet connection for virtual delivery or sharing video examples of practice. A budget may be needed to provide settings with technology, such as tablets, as either a loan or permanent resource.
- **Printing:** The programme included a handbook for practitioners, and some settings created posters and/or PowerPoint presentations to share learning and prompt practice. If delivery is scaled up to a larger number of settings, it may be necessary to allocate a budget for printing these resources.
- **Time**: Most practitioners reported being able to engage with the programme wholly within their working hours, but some reported doing reading or other activities in their personal time. This could be off-putting to settings when scaling up the intervention.

Hackney

- **Presence in settings**: A key feature of the model is for SaLTs to spend half a day per week in each setting. If delivery were scaled up to a larger geographical area, it may not be possible for staff to visit as many settings during the week.
- **SaLT experience**: Given the programme is individually tailored to the needs of a setting and its staff through the selection of modules, trainers need to be experienced and understand the needs of Early Years practitioners and settings, ideally including the PVI sector.
- **Bespoke Resources**: The team created videos and other resources to share learning remotely with settings. If delivery is scaled up to a larger area, it may not be practical for the team to make ad hoc visits to settings to deliver resources and provide advice. More standardised resource packs or a handbook may need to be developed.
- **Printing**: The SaLTs sometimes printed out materials or prepared resources for settings. It would be good if this could be provided consistently to help costs, i.e., for each module, specific materials would be provided to all settings. A budget could be allocated for this when scaling up to a larger number of settings.
- **Venue space:** Some one-to-one training used a local venue as settings had limited space or availability. When scaling up to a larger number of settings, economies of scale could be found in inviting multiple settings to a training venue.
- **Time:** Most practitioners reported being able to engage with the programme wholly within their working hours, but some reported doing reading or other activities in their personal time. This could be off-putting to settings when scaling up the intervention.

The value of coaching support

- The characteristics of PVI settings (tight staff ratios, limited time, space and resources for training, under-qualified workforce) suggest that conventional approaches to CPD will have limited impact.
- The coaching approach has been positively received in the CECIL study. The Nottinghamshire SaLT team summarised the benefits as follows:
    - Allows practitioners to explore and make sense of their own learning in a safe space.
    - Enables application of meaningful learning by using practitioners' individual contexts.
    - Supports and develops reflective practice skills that continue post coaching.
    - Supports behaviour change by moving practitioners through a behaviour change model which includes levels of awareness and motivations to change.
    - Supports practitioners to apply new strategies and embed learning.
    - Supports planning and decision making for appropriate next steps.

The value of a bespoke/ responsive offer

- The Hackney Launchpad for Language programme is deliberately designed to provide a menu of modules from which each setting can select the ones that fit best for them.
- In non-COVID times, the model of SaLTs spending weekly half-days in the setting allows them to observe, identify, and respond to emerging issues.
- The Nottinghamshire model started with stronger "curriculum" offer but developed through the process to become more responsive – for example, providing a "pool" of additional coaching hours to be offered to practitioners as needed.

The value of expert input

- Both projects were delivered by experienced Speech and Language Therapists. They were able to combine:
    - Expert knowledge of early childhood language and communication
    - Encouraging and supportive coaching methods
    - Flexible, responsive, and solution-focused approach
    - Strategies, resources and prompts to reinforce practitioner learning
- Practitioners and managers commented that the SaLTs offered ad hoc advice and responses to queries about individual children, or groups of children, including those where there were specific concerns.

> *Practitioner 1 - Setting 6, Hackney*
>
> "Rather than just reading it on paper. To actually see it in practice is more helpful, because then when you do it when they're not there you have a guide to follow, like their expressions, what they're saying, how to use the puppet exactly."

Mechanisms for embedding learning and sustaining practice

- Nottinghamshire introduced a systematic learning assessment tool and created a coaching need protocol in order to offer additional coaching to identify those most likely to benefit.

- They also encouraged the practitioners in the trial to share their learning with others in the setting as a way of embedding their learning, although they recognised that more could be done to formalise this process.
- Nottinghamshire developed the practitioner handbook (and journal for recording progress) to give practitioners something to refer back to.
- Hackney developed resources, posters, and checklists for settings to use. Some settings in Hackney adopted "strategy of the week" approaches to reinforce and review learning.
- They also created an accreditation system for settings using the Communication Environment Pyramid. Settings would self-determine which level they felt was best matched to them and provide written evidence, and the SaLT would follow up to ratify the self-assessment. This accreditation system is now offered to all settings across the borough.

Reflections from the Impact Evaluation Team (University of Oxford)

Recommendations regarding feasibility and scale-up of evaluation methods

While it is clear that there were circumstantial hurdles to the University of Oxford's implementation of this evaluation, they did learn some valuable lessons to inform future, larger-scale evaluations of similar interventions/programmes with an emphasis on coaching.

- There is plenty of previous evidence of the validity of parent-report to measure child language (e.g., Dale, 1996; Feldman et al., 2005; Law et al., 2020). Despite the various limitations of the present study, they also found some evidence of the validity of parent-reported child vocabulary as well as the potential of such measures to be sensitive enough to detect an effect (Sylva et al 2021). The evaluation team would therefore recommend the use of parent report alongside the researcher or practitioner assessment of child language, including dimensions of language beyond vocabulary, that were not feasible to include in the present study. The combination of researcher or practitioner- administered measures with parent-reported child vocabulary questionnaires would provide a more complete understanding of child language development and therefore provide broader evidence for gains in child language due to intervention.
- There is previous evidence of the validity of practitioner self-report to measure pedagogical skills and knowledge (e.g., Mathers, 2021), even though in this study there were issues with the response rate/sample size and no effect of the interventions in Hackney or Nottinghamshire was detected. The evaluation team would recommend the use of practitioner self-report in a larger-scale study, but, if possible, this should be complemented with an alternative measure based on researcher observation (even if in a sub-sample rather than the entire sample in order to reduce costs) for the sake of triangulation.
- If using video recordings of practice, they would recommend a structured approach that ensures the comparability and utility of video clips via a tightly defined set of instructions and the gathering of explicit information about why practitioners chose the activities and children that they include in videos. They would also recommend careful consideration of the strategies used to transfer videos, as this proved to be a substantial technological impediment to submitting videos for some settings. For example, in some cases videos would not upload to the secure sharing platforms due to limitations with internet connections and computers, despite the best efforts of practitioners and the research team.

The resilience and expertise of the SaLTs and Early Years Practitioners

The University of Oxford team conclude their report by noting that perhaps the most important learning of all, was how committed Speech and Language Therapists are to supporting settings, and how enthusiastic and competent the practitioners are who take part.

All of this bodes well for future intervention and evaluation.

Next Steps

CECIL Phase 1.5

Despite the challenges of COVID-19, both areas continued to deliver during Phase 1, which was a significant achievement and there have been promising and informative findings. The Steering Group had been considering next steps and towards the end of Phase 1, and the Sutton Trust recognised that there was a unique opportunity to maintain momentum from CECIL Phase 1 through adding a year of in-depth training and support and to explore the options of sustainability.

Thanks to additional funding from Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and the Sutton Trust, Phase 1.5 (October 2021-July 2022) provides an opportunity to explore the most appropriate formal method of recognising when a point of good practice has been reached and when regular SaLT support can transition into a system of lighter touch engagement that monitors and embeds sustained good practice. This could include an accreditation system or similar, which has already been implemented by the Hackney team. Several of the Phase 1 settings in Nottinghamshire had already reached a point when they would be likely to be able to transition to the lighter touch system of support, whilst others required further coaching before reaching that point. In Hackney several of the settings had reached the highest level (which they call Blast off) on the accreditation system they created (a pyramid), others would require further support to achieve that.

This transition phase provides a further opportunity for the SaLTs to fine-tune their own internal evaluation processes so that they can capture feedback that will continue to improve their practice and the design of the approach going forward.

Phase 1.5 will provide vital information for the Sutton Trust, supported by the IES and Janet Grauberg as they explore what support contributes to improved implementation of evidence-informed communication and language practice in PVI Early Years settings, and to discover the conditions that facilitate and enable successful and sustained implementation. In the PVI settings context, the implementation components are even more critical to success than they are in maintained nursery classes, because they are less predictable and more variable. The intention is that these findings would help to inform a subsequent CECIL Phase 2.

CECIL Phases 2 & 3 Future Plans – See Figure 1

CECIL Phase 1 has identified that the support model plays an important role in the implementation of CPD. Phase 1.5 is exploring the monitoring, coaching, mentoring, and sustaining period. An eventual Phase 2 would intend to build on Phase 1 in two different ways.

Figure 1:

CECIL PHASE 1 SEPT 20 – JULY 21	CECIL PHASE 1.5 SEPT 21 – JULY 22	CECIL 2A APRIL 22 – DEC 22	CECIL 2B SEPT 22 – JULY 23	CECIL 3 SEPT 23 – JULY 24
Explore SaLT-led coaching model –	Explore Sustain &	Explore new support models	Explore Sustain & Embed support model for EEF Hanen pilot trial sites	Comparative Trial of Sustain & Embed models for EEF

CECIL Phase 2A: Exploring further support models

To date CECIL has explored two SaLT-led support approaches in Hackney and Nottinghamshire and for the next phases 2 and 3 the intention is to explore alternative support options such as those led by language assistants or Early Years teachers. Such models are already being implemented in the National Lottery Community Fund's A Better Start and other areas.

CECIL Phase 2B & Phase 3: Exploring the role of support in embedding and sustaining the impact of an evidence-based intervention (Hanen 'Learning Language & Loving It™')

The forthcoming efficacy trial by the Education Endowment Foundation of the Hanen "Learning Language & Loving It"™ (LLLI) programme offers an opportunity to explore whether coaching early language approaches (such as those studied in CECIL Phases 1 and 2A) can support embedding of the programme in PVI settings [32]. The timing of the EEF trial was affected by the pandemic, but they plan to restart the full-scale trial in September 2022, with a small pilot starting in February 2022. Sarah Tillotson, a Senior Programme Manager for the EEF and their lead for the Early Years and Language and Literacy, is a member of the CECIL Steering Group and has shared learning from CECIL to inform the new EEF Hanen LLLI trials. There are two notable changes from the original trial that have been influenced by CECIL: an intention to trial a blended model of virtual and face-to-face training, and the inclusion of the PVI sector alongside maintained settings.

The EEF Hanen trials (*see Figure 2*) are providing practical opportunities for CECIL to explore a range of support models to monitor, embed, and sustain good practice once the initial intense LLLI training phase has passed.

In September 2022 there will be the opportunity for one support model to work with a small number of settings in the Liverpool area (trained from February 2022 EEF LLLI Hanen pilot) to explore the best mechanisms to monitor, embed and sustain good practice.

In September 2023 there will be the opportunity to work with a larger number of settings (trained from September 2022 EEF Hanen efficacy trial) and to compare at least two models, each working with a group of settings as part of an implementation trial.

Figure 2:

HANEN EFFICACY PILOT FEB 22 – JULY 22	HANEN EFFICACY TRIAL SEPT 22 – JULY 23
Trial in 15 settings in Liverpool of delivering Hanen LLLI to maintained & PVI settings	Randomised Control Trial in 150 settings (maintained & PVI settings)

EEF Effective Professional Development Report[33] (see Figure 3)

CECIL phases 2 and 3 plan to use the EEF guidance on effective professional development, published in October 2021 as a framework for exploring different CPD support models. The guidance has prompted a debate on how Early Years teachers and practitioners are supported. Although it does not focus on the Early Years it has similar implications for the sector, in the context of cuts to local authority advisory teams and financial pressures on PVI settings (see for example the article by Dr

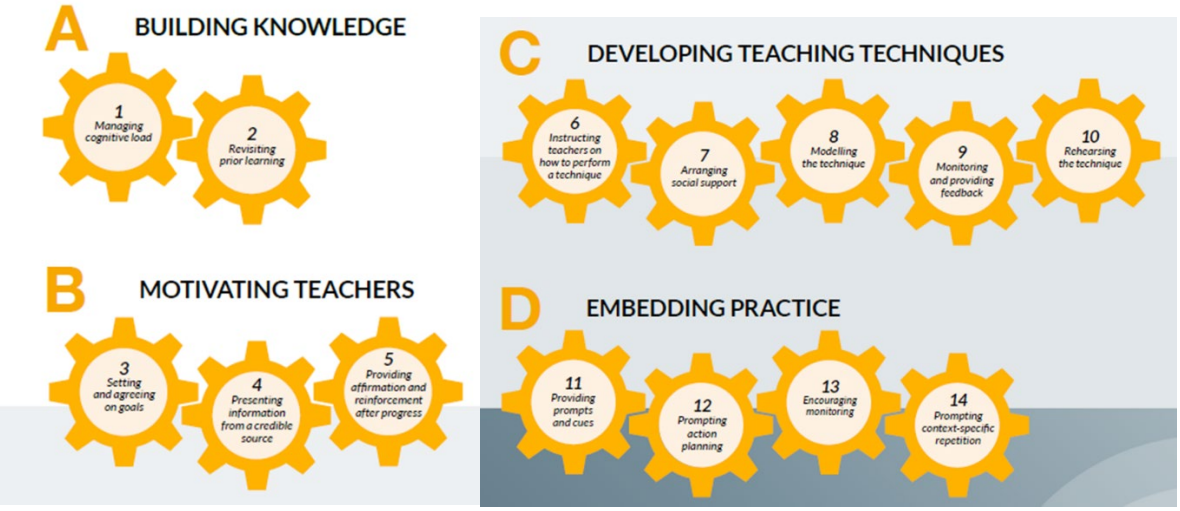
[32] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/learning-language-and-loving-it-efficacy
[33] https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/effective-professional-development

Julian Grenier, headteacher of Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre, and co-leader of the East London Research School). [34]

The EEF guidance model outlines the key elements of evidence-based CPD.

The Hanen LLLI initial training programme aims to perform all the roles of evidence- based CPD i.e. BUILDING KNOWLEDGE, MOTIVATING TEACHERS, DEVELOPING TEACHING TECHNIQUES and EMBEDDING PRACTICE. CECIL support models will focus on Embedding Practice for the longer term, but this will likely also include reinforcing the Development of Teaching Techniques and Motivating Teachers as well as monitoring the need of Building Knowledge, for instance if there is significant staff turnover.

Figure 3:



Future models of CPD in the Early Years sector

The CECIL project is currently focused on CPD for Communication and Language, working primarily within the PVI sector. In the long term we are hoping to influence a more general conversation around the value of sustained CPD within the early years, particularly in the PVI sector. This would include monitoring, coaching, modelling, and mentoring support which would be just as relevant for other areas of development.

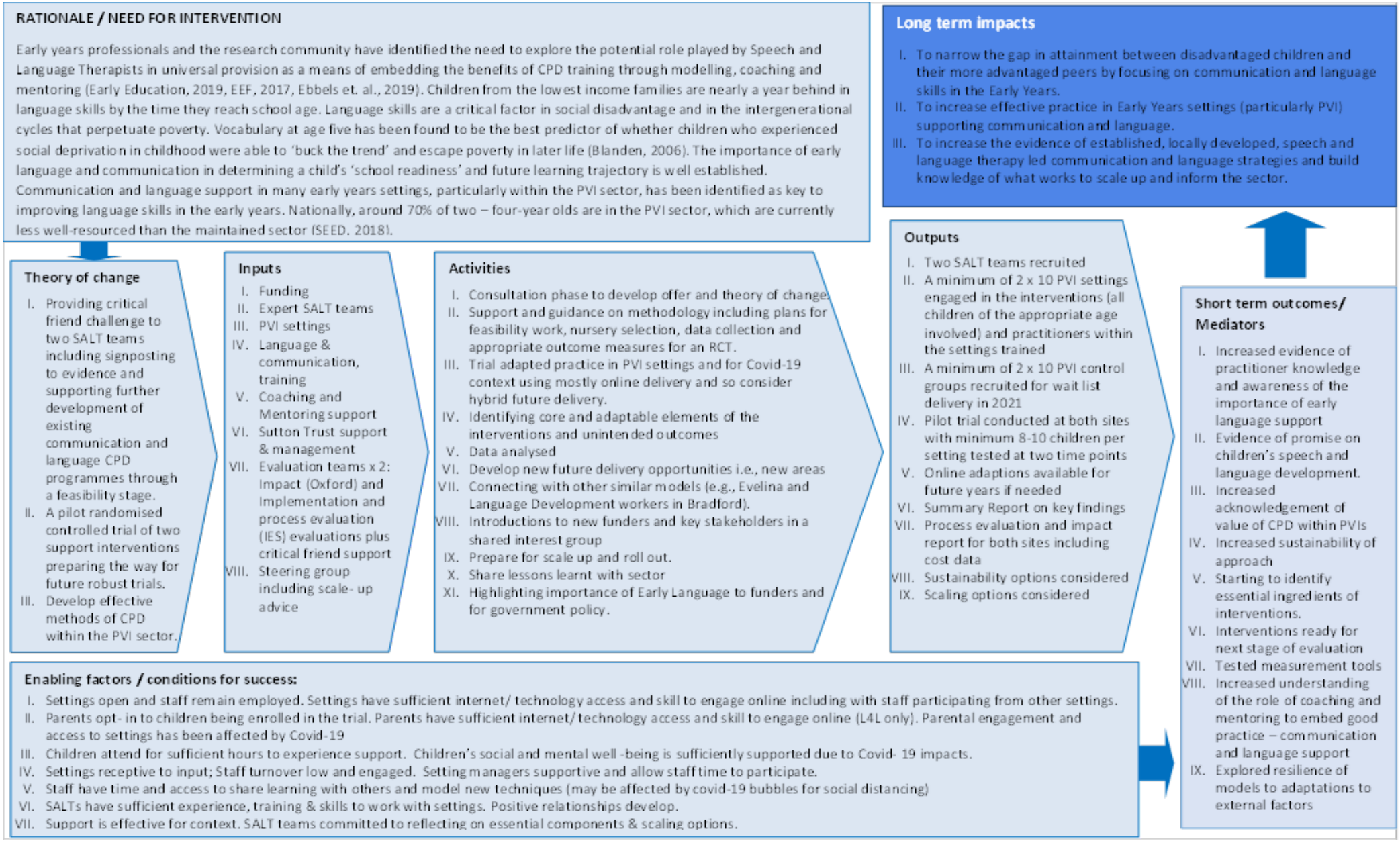
The DfE recognise in their current Early Years recovery strategy that improving training for Early Years practitioners is one of the key levers for driving up quality in early education settings. They also recognise the need to strengthen specialist expertise and leadership in the sector by boosting skills to develop children's early language. For those settings in need of most support, there should be access to mentoring for Early Years practitioners to help strengthen children's learning and development, along with bespoke whole-setting and leadership support.

CECIL is well placed to explore a variety of different models of support that can lead to implementing sustained good practice.

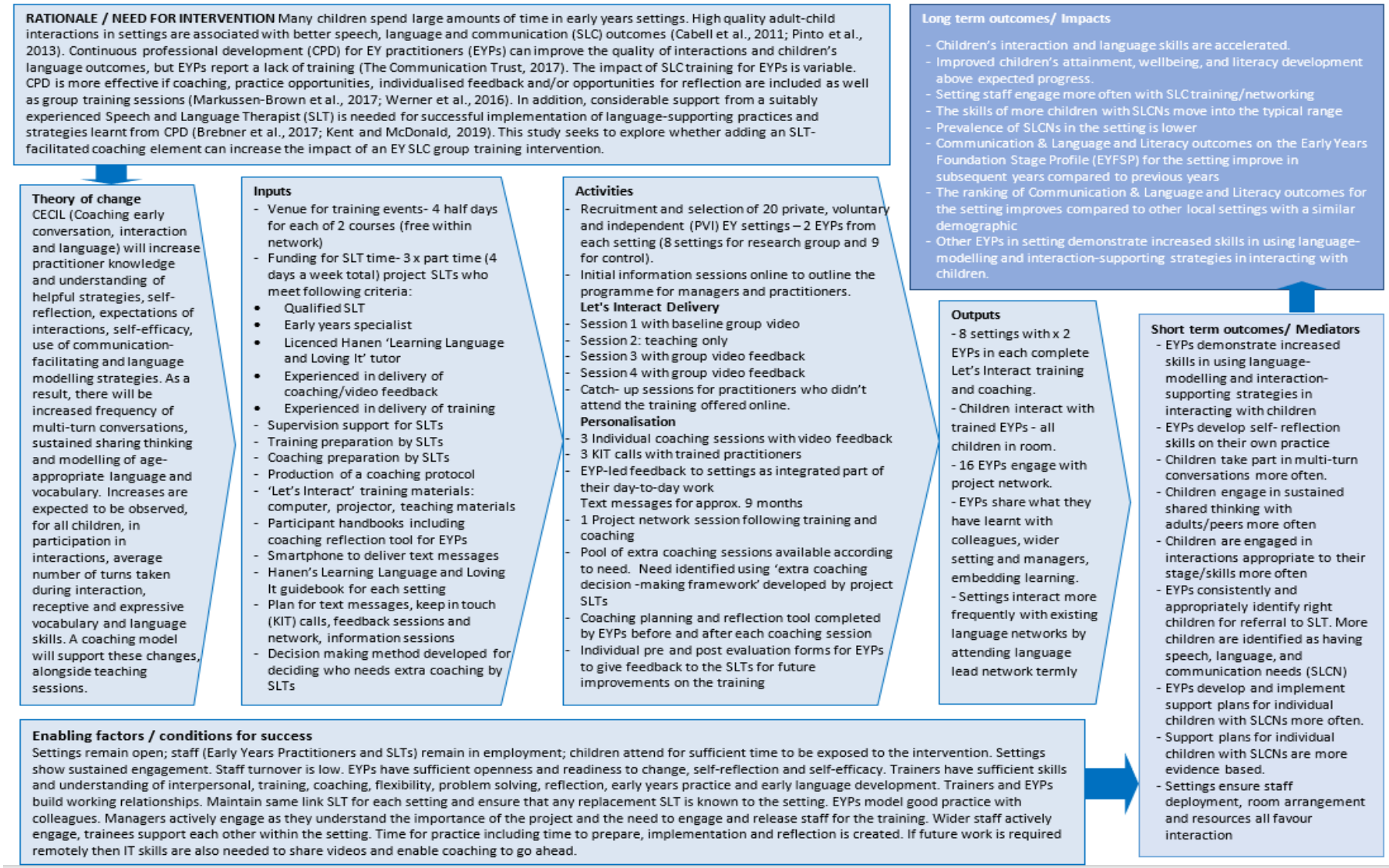
[34] https://www.tes.com/news/eyfs-why-we-need-high-quality-cpd

Appendix 1:

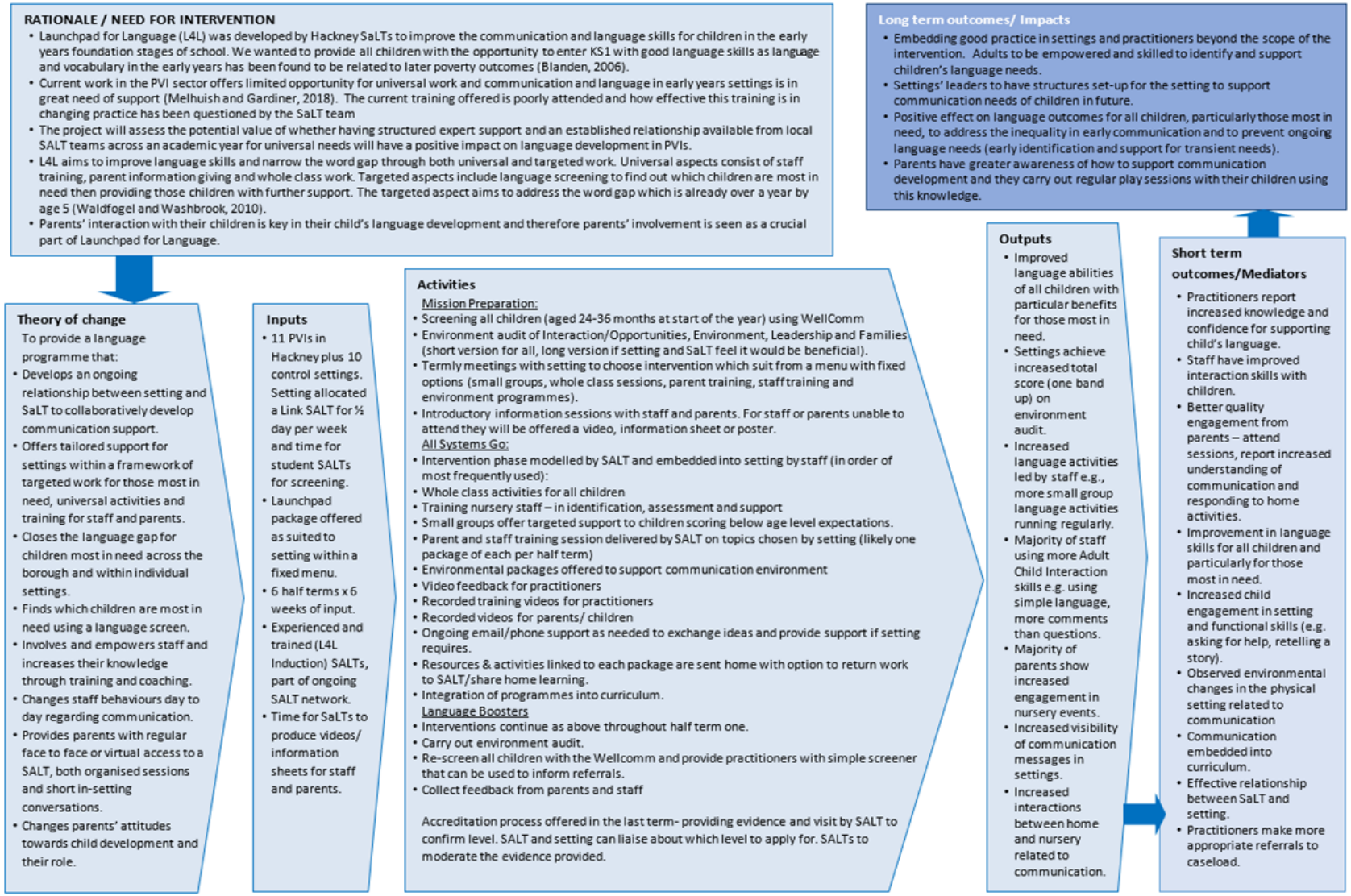
Coaching Early Conversations Interaction and Language - CECIL Theory of Change



Appendix 2: Final Nottinghamshire CECIL TOC after the last IDEA workshop, August 2021



Appendix 3: Final Hackney CECIL (Launchpad for Language) TOC model after final IDEA workshop, August 2021



Enabling factors / conditions for success

- Children attending the setting throughout period of project at least 15 hours per week in a regular pattern (i.e. in on the same day as SaLT).
- Impact of COVID-19 on child attendance: children who attended throughout lockdown had more exposure to the interventions.
- Identifying and supporting settings where children are at risk of language delay.
- Building a relationship between SaLTS and settings.
- Ensuring engagement of settings and staff delivering programme, including manager and/or SENCO.
- SaLTs able to empower staff and integrate programme into setting.
- Setting managers support the interventions that practitioners are running.
- Regular meetings with managers to reinforce knowledge for practitioners working with two year olds and support practitioners having time to deliver L4L and Wellcomm.
- Consistent training and supervision of SALTs. Staff – turnover, capacity.
- Having appropriate space and resources in the setting to run the programme.
- Amount of face to face contact or able to have with settings (COVID 19 restrictions) and suitability of alternative virtual delivery.
- Ability of SaLT to stay for admin/ follow- up work (not often possible during COVID-19 pandemic) and having a space to do this.

Unintended consequences

Positive Impact on Delivery

- Intervention videos made, which can be watched and re-watched when convenient, for parents and practitioners
- Parent workshops all virtual enabling more parents to attend
- Child live virtual sessions held on zoom (twice weekly for the winter lockdown)
- Most group staff trainings were virtual- staff able to join from home.
- Seems to be a significant correlation between management being involved, and having a good relationship with staff, and the success of the project.
- Other staff in the setting picked up strategies from SALT without express teaching due to the settings involvement in L4L.

Negative Impact on Delivery

- Virtual delivery has meant less interaction between SALTs and different practitioners. SALT unable to model approaches. No ad hoc contact with parents.
- SALT wearing masks making interaction with children (and adults) more difficult
- Communication Champions Network (SALT facilitated video calls between settings) low attendance possibly due to Zoom burnout
- SALT not able to visit two settings in one day meaning unable to pop in between visits, less flexibility.
- One setting virtual throughout and contact through email with manager has been challenging as not direct contact with practitioners and resources were not always passed on

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