



Creative play...

...with a pinch of SaLT

Discovery Schools Trust Lead School: Parklands Community School

CONTEXT

Discovery Schools Trust has been established for 7 years and consists of 13 primary schools. Wellbeing services are driven by an educational psychology service (EPIC), established for 4 years, and a speech and language therapy (SaLT) service, established for 3 years. EPIC had produced a creative play intervention over the previous 2 years.

The content included a blend of Solihull Approach principles and the work from Margot Sunderland (Centre for Children's Mental Health). Its aim was to improve parent-child interactions highlighted by class teachers as needing some support in this area. Creative Play was successfully delivered in 4 MAT schools. Now the intention was to integrate the work of the SaLT team. Funding by Laurel Trust enabled this to take place.

Both services, working with schools, parents and children aimed to uncover what impact both a targeted and a universal creative play provision could have on the development of cognitive, social, imaginative, language and communication skills.

The lead project school indices of deprivation are 71.1% (County average 39.4%) with FSM at 19.1% (National 19.2%, DfE 2022) whilst

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the other partner school is 98.5%. The intervention was the first joint venture for the EPIC and SaLT teams, combining the expertise of both services to address wellbeing, speech and language skills and learning outcomes for some of our most deprived children within the Trust. Our MAT has a strong focus on research and innovation, having associations with a teaching school alliance, teacher training and inspiring leaders' programmes. Its work is underpinned by its core tenets of Improvement, Connectivity, Altruism and Democracy.

The planned work was necessarily adapted in the light of the disruption to schools caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

STUDY AND RESEARCH FOCUS

The key drivers for the project were the links between the importance of play for language and cognitive development and the importance of play for developing positive relationships through reciprocity, fun, warmth and joint attention.

The overarching intention was to study the impact that both a targeted and a universal creative play provision in school, supported by informed parents, could have on the wellbeing and development of cognitive, social, imaginative, language and communication skills of disadvantaged pupils aged 4-5 in two comparable schools.

The study wanted to review the following in the light of an extensive literature review of the importance and range of play and language for a child's social, intellectual, emotional and mental development:

- What is the impact on parent-child relationships in terms of quality & changed perceptions of the parent/s?
- What is the likelihood that play will happen more in the home environment?
- Does the involvement of a SLC focus change the language that parents use when engaged in play with their child/ren?
- How does the child's language change as the intervention goes on?
- What impact has there been on the language level used by adults in the classroom?
- Has there been a change in the types of play children choose to engage in?
- Is there any change in the children's confidence and quality of social skills in play and confident use of language?
- Is there an impact on the number of utterances used &/or vocabulary development in children?

- What impact have the interventions had on a child's SLC screening assessment and on their EYFS tracker since baseline on entry?
- Has there been any impact on the child-teacher/TA relationship as a result of the interventions?
- What added value does the targeted after school intervention provide for the focus children?

WHY IT IS SIGNIFICANT?

The role and impact of language in development is well-documented e.g. low language levels at age 5 are still evident at age 35 (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2020). Previous research has shown a link between deprivation and low language levels on entering primary school and the link between deprivation and attainment as well as the link between deprivation and general relationship skills/prosocial behaviours (CLS, 2020).

Language and interaction problems are often indicative of special educational needs and disability (SEND). 25.1% of children requiring SEND support in primary schools have speech, language and communication needs and 20.0% have social, emotional and mental health needs (DfE, 2022). Children from poor socio-economic backgrounds can have a gap of 30 million fewer words heard by age 3 (Hart, B., & T.R. Risley, 2003.)

Children with SEND generally have poorer life chances. They are, for example, three times as likely to be unemployed and 49% of those who do work don't retain that job for long (Department for Work and Pensions). 30% of the prison population has special needs (Ministry of Justice) and more than 60% of young offenders have literacy and/or speech, language and communication difficulties. (Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists).

METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

This project set out to: Adapt the Creative Play Programme to include a speech, language and communication (SLC) focus in addition to boosting child:parent relationships, love and friendship.

Use Multidisciplinary collaboration to map creative play ideas onto the classroom curriculum to implement at a whole class level.

Select a group of Foundation 2 children with their parent/s and siblings where appropriate for after school intervention ran by a SaLT and Assistant Psychologist modelling language use and play interaction.

Design a training and coaching programme on the principles of creative play and language use for classroom staff, to be delivered as a 1 session training input with 3 coaching sessions in situ to model language use and monitor language load.

Develop and disseminate a Creative Play and Language pack for parents and Foundation teachers to use after the project.

Share the project findings with the rest of the MAT





Project team

Head Teacher of the lead school, Senior Educational Psychologist, Senior Speech and Language Therapist, Assistant Psychologist, a Psychological Services Assistant and an undergraduate psychology student on work experience with EPIC.

Targeted Intervention

Participants were 9 parent-child dyads split across 2 schools. Class teachers selected participants through purposive sampling, selecting EYFS children from their knowledge that they felt would benefit from the aims of the project. Guidance was given to select children that showed difficulty in the sub-category areas of assessment: Prosocial scale (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire), Personal, social and emotional development (PSED) and Creativity

(EYFS Trackers), play, attention and listening and expressive language (SaLT Screening Assessment).

Class Intervention

Both schools had 2-Form entry for EYFS children. The class intervention group were the classes of the EYFS lead teachers that were on the project team. The second class were the control class group. These children and adults did not know any information about the project. The aim was that the control group would receive the intervention after both target and class interventions had been delivered in the project classes.

School Participant Profiles

A questionnaire in schools A and B measuring child psychological adjustment showed the EYFS children in both schools had an above average

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level of difficulty. School B had a higher level of difficulty than school A in their control, experimental and target groups.

The Speech, Language and Communication screening assessment indicated that 66.7% of school A's target group had significant speech and language difficulty and 14.3% some difficulty. In school B, the figures were 85.7% and 14.3% respectively.

The project would:

- have SaLTs model appropriate language to use in play with parents
- have the psychology team and SaLTs look at aligning the play activities with curriculum topics from the classroom
- train class staff in the approach so that it can be reinforced for focus children and delivered to the rest of the children at a whole class level
- expand a child's variety and enjoyment of play, contributing to language development, wellbeing and learning outcomes
- monitor staff's use of language
- be supported by Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) and ELKAN trained staff

Operations

- Time and budget monitoring
- Keeping in touch meetings
- External evaluators secured
- Launch events for schools and parents
- Project evaluation and measures were constantly revisited
- Assistant psychologists ran the targeted interventions with coaching from SaLT
- SaLT carried out initial and ending observations to look at changes in aspects of these key speech and language areas between parents and children
- Teachers were consulted about how best to adapt the targeted programme for the full class and a resource pack written fit for purpose
- Teachers and their LSAs were then invited to training ahead of the coaching sessions

- Data, pre and post project, from the parent-child group, class intervention group and control groups
- Reflective journals were kept.

The Covid pandemic and lockdown had a significant impact on the second half of the project, cutting short plans to complete the intervention and gather final data and information. The school could not deliver coaching sessions after the 2nd one due to school closures. Because the bulk of the project was so close to completion, the team was still able to gather meaningful data against the evaluation structure, thanks to the dedication of the teachers.



IMPACT

Although the project was curtailed by Covid, the targeted interventions were completed, and two thirds of both the class sessions and the coaching support were delivered. Data was gathered from teachers, SaLT and Assistant Psychologist observations, the Parent Child Relationship Scale, parent focus groups and EYFS trackers. The study notes the small numbers

of children involved and differences between how progress can be reported in EYFS trackers. The SaLT observations noted that the 3 parents involved in School A had adapted positioning and used more open questions. Positioning in School B was less changed although there were some encouraging linguistic signs. Praise, however, was not noted in either setting. In both schools, all children seemed more engaged and

confident in finishing their activities. The SaLT noted in one school, amongst other things, how rarely adults get down to the level of children, how frequently closed questions are used and how little praise is offered. In the other school, better positioning was used and children encouraged to face each other, take turns and share ideas. Signing, gestures and praise was also in evidence.

Targeted children School A

- More improvement than the control group in communication and language, PSED and expressive arts and design with PSED being the most noticeable difference
- Parents average enjoyment was 4.6/5 and children 4/5.

School B

- Parent-child questionnaires showed an increase in conflict, closeness and dependency
- Improvements in all EYFS areas with the greatest in arts and design
- PSED showed a slight but narrowing negative compared to the control group
- Parents average enjoyment was 5/5 and children 4.4/5.

Class children School A

- The experimental group showed no change in communication and language and the control group a slight decline
- Both groups showed a small increase in PSED skills
- The experimental group showed improvements in literacy but the control group a decline
- Both groups showed a minimal decline in arts and design.

School B

- Both groups showed a positive shift in communication and language, PSED and expressive arts and design with a slightly greater gain in the control group
- Both groups showed literacy gains with a slightly higher shift in the experimental group.

Target children vs experimental class group

School A Target Group

- A maintained level of communication and language whilst the experimental group saw a decline
- An increase in PSED notably in confidence and self-awareness
- A decrease in literacy but the experimental group an increase
- An increase in expressive arts and design but a decrease in the experimental group.

School B Target Group

- Higher increase in communication and language than the experimental group
- Higher increase in PSED
- an increase in literacy but less so than the experimental group
- Similar increase to the experimental group in expressive arts and design but more gains in imagination whereas the experimental group gained more in media.

NEXT STEPS AND SUSTAINABILITY

A process evaluation was written with close reference to the Education Endowment Foundation's school improvement 'Guidance to Implementation', focusing specifically on the aspects of PREPARE and SUSTAIN, given the aim of the project to produce a sustainable approach for future use by schools in the MAT.

The external evaluator recognized the project's ambitious number of intended outcomes and a narrower focus would have provided greater clarity and evaluation. The plans, however, were logical and well-specified. The team agreed that involving participants in the planning stage would have helped in assessing readiness and anticipating specific needs, and this would also have supported clarity around the complex timeline and layers of intervention.

Participants would have benefited from more thorough assessment before this stage. Although the team and the schools knew each other well before the project began, clarity for the school-based participants about the project itself came at the launch event and the different needs of schools and practitioners had an impact on the project, with one school withdrawing at an early stage and differing levels of experience shaping the coaching focus for those teachers delivering the intervention. Ideally, the assessment of readiness would have an impact on practical preparation for implementation of the intervention. Once ready to implement an intervention, practically prepare for its use. Everyone involved praised the planning, preparation and quality of supporting materials, and there was a clear readiness to adapt to different needs from all sides. Attendance at the launch and at training events –for staff and parents –was given high priority and worked well. Workload was carefully considered, with release time



offered to make each element of the intervention more likely to succeed, and the timeline was adjusted around school calendars and practical issues, which was greatly appreciated.

The project team is proud of what has been achieved and is pleased with a number of the outcomes. The targeted intervention was complete and so firmer conclusions can be drawn.

The project has provided a summary and poster and materials for downloading. There is to be a recorded form of training to accompany the targeted and classroom intervention booklets so that school staff can implement the programmes themselves. A live Q&A session via Teams could be offered

for any schools who have queries following the receipt of the materials. Resources on the website are freely available to schools and a research paper could be written. It would be good to think that we will be able to attend a celebration conference with The Laurel Trust too.

This work offers much in terms of practical approaches to improving play, language and communication for children, parents and schools. The focus is undeniably important, educationally, emotionally and morally. It underlines how much more needs to be done both universally and specifically in the training and informing of teachers, parents and the harnessing of other disciplines. ●

Note: all of the images used in this summary are stock images