

West Dunbartonshire: Title

Closing the vocabulary gap in early years – engaging and involving parents and early years practitioners.

What did we ask? (Research Questions)

- Is there evidence of a pre-school vocabulary gap within 3 target nurseries which have above average levels of SIMD 1-2?
- What is happening already to promote vocabulary development within the 3 target nurseries?
- What is the impact of 'word aware' (Parsons and Branagan, 2016) on vocabulary development?
- What is the impact of 'word aware' on the quality of learning experiences offered to children in the target nurseries?
- What is the impact of 'word aware' on parental engagement with learning?
- What is the impact of text alerts on parental engagement with learning?

What is the evidence base?

Research evidence has shown that by the time children reach the age of 5 years the expressive vocabulary gap between children from the richest and poorest backgrounds is around 18 months (Bradshaw, 2011). In addition, comparing the number of hours that children are read to reveals significant disparities between those from rich and poorer backgrounds (Adams, 1990; Teale, 1984). The net result is that there are significant differences in the number of words that children are exposed to and the quality of interaction that they experience (Parsons and Branagan, 2016). Given the significance of vocabulary in terms of later attainment, there is a clear need for early intervention (Sosu and Ellis, 2014).

The question that this poses is: what is the best way to intervene to improve children's vocabulary?

Given that the difference between low and high SIMD children seems to be in number of words exposed to and the number of words in a child's vocabulary, it may follow that the best solution to address the difference is to simply teach children as many words as possible. There are two key reasons why this approach would be unsuccessful. First, the size of the gap in terms of number of words known would mean that the number of new words required to be learnt each day would be impossible to achieve. Second, in terms of how we know children learn language, learning lists of words out of context and without repeated exposure will not result in deep and meaningful learning (Christ and Wang, 2011). Children learn words by being surrounded by them orally, by the quality of adult – child interaction and by being given opportunities to talk. Therefore the clear aim of any vocabulary intervention should be to look at improving the quality of adult-child interaction alongside the provision of a broader literacy rich environment. The need for this is highlighted by findings from the effective pre-school and primary education (EPPSE) research which clearly demonstrated differences in children's experiences based on differing home circumstances and parental educational level. Significantly it also highlighted the combined effect of quality of pre-school provision and home learning environment (Sammons et al, 2007). Intervention therefore has to target both parents and early years practitioners. This dual approach is very much in keeping with the drivers for improvement outlined within the National Improvement Framework (NIF) notably, parental engagement and teacher professionalism.

What did we do?

The intervention undertaken within 3 nurseries (approximately 130 children) focused on developing staff skills in the delivery of high quality interactions through the use of reciprocal teaching (Oczkus, 2010) and '*Word Aware*' (Penno, Wilkinson and Moore, 2002; Kindle, 2009; Parsons and Branagan, 2016). A key aspect of the intervention was the integration of these two approaches to form one coherent methodology which staff were mentored to use in their daily interactions with children. The

premise of the intervention was that by increasing attention to words and interaction, vocabulary would improve.

Parental engagement was promoted using: parent information sessions; text alerts; information leaflets and the support of outreach workers all trained in the same methodology.

One of the key challenges within this project has been the assessment of children's vocabulary. The dilemma and discourse around different methods of vocabulary assessment is helpfully discussed in a review by Hoffman, Teale & Paciga, 2013 and the content of this paper was integral to the shaping of the bespoke measure used in this vocabulary intervention. The measure used has been designed to be used by nursery staff which can be scored by two raters to improve reliability and validity.

The intervention was implemented as outlined below:

Pre-intervention phase

- Prior to intervention being planned, a snapshot of vocabulary level and problem solving ability was taken of children in their pre-school year attending the 3 intervention nurseries. The measures used, mirrored that from the Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) study and was an attempt at seeing whether local data aligned itself to the national picture.
- Communication environment checklist (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2015) completed within the 3 nurseries.
- Staff training on the impact of poverty on attainment to ensure a shared understanding of the issues and to engender a unified sense of purpose and collegiate approach.
- Staff training on reciprocal teaching and 'word aware' including the opportunity for the three nurseries to work together to share experience and good practice.

- The use of outreach workers to engage with parents on a range of activities associated with learning e.g. library visits; stay and play sessions.
- Information session for parents on the approach in each of the nurseries.

Intervention Phase

- Each nursery identified a children's book to use as the focus for learning over a four week period. During this time staff were coached and supported as they brought together the methodologies of reciprocal teaching and 'word aware'.
- Each nursery identified four words from their chosen book around which learning opportunities were planned and delivered. These words formed the basis of the baseline and follow-up assessments with children.
- Free copies of the books to each nursery child (funding from Scottish Attainment Challenge).
- The use of text alert (in one nursery) and leaflets within the other 2 to provide information on word of the week and suggested activities for parents.
- Pre-assessment of children's vocabulary.
- Ongoing-feedback from staff.

Post-intervention phase

- Post-assessment of children's vocabulary.
- Questionnaire feedback from parents.
- Verbal feedback from staff.
- Communication environment checklist (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2015) completed within the 3 nurseries.
- Photographic evidence of wall displays gathered.

All of the training, mentoring and on-going support was provided by the Psychological Service.

What have we found so far?

Results

- ✓ Replication of GUS measures evidenced low vocabulary scores but careful interpretation of data needed due to high numbers of pupils in the lowest SIMD.
- ✓ Baseline measure shows promise as a method of measuring improvement in taught vocabulary.
- ✓ Statistically significant improvement pre to post test in vocabulary scores of taught words.
- ✓ Significant improvements to the learning environments and learning experiences of the children with greater focus on literacy generally and words in particular.
- ✓ Parents responded very positively to the use of text alerts with evidence that compared to other ways of being updated on learning, the text alert system led to greater perceived involvement in learning by parents.
- ✓ Evidence of children using words within and outwith the nursery.
- ✓ All staff in the nurseries responded very positively to the intervention with evidence of impact beyond that expected within the project e.g. better planning and more collegiate approach within and between nurseries.

Lessons learned

- ✓ Care needs to be taken in ensuring that chosen book has appropriately challenging vocabulary. Many books aimed at pre-schoolers do not have enough challenging vocabulary to enable learning conversations to take place.
- ✓ The key importance of on-going support to staff to assist in effective intervention.
- ✓ Focus on words could have been longer than the 4 weeks that intervention ran.

What do we plan to do next? 100 words

- Use a second book within each nursery to check on whether the method has continued impact.
- Roll-out the use of text alerts to parents across the 3 target nurseries for the next book focus.
- Roll-out the approach to a further 2 nurseries.
- Train all early level teachers in the integrated approach of reciprocal teaching and 'word aware'.
- Continue to mentor and support staff in providing high quality interactions through the use of VERP (video enhanced reflective practice).
- Continue to provide learning opportunities for parents using our outreach workers.
- Begin to look at other available data e.g. P1 baseline information to triangulate results and consider wider, longer term impact.

References

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For further information and materials

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