URLEY Language Leaders Programme 2018 to 2020

Overview:

The overall aim was to improve children's communication and language skills to enable them to be ready for primary education. Numerous research and key reports reference closing the word/language gap for disadvantaged children to address social mobility (Communication Trust 2012; Law, 2017; Unlocking Talent Fulfilling Potential DfE 2017). The most recent of these (at the time the project application was submitted) (DfE 2017) states '*Our best quality early years settings are proof that prevention is better than cure, putting children from all backgrounds on the right track from the very beginning and enabling them to begin school in a position to thrive'*.

The primary long-term goal was to improve children's oral language outcomes, supporting later literacy, PSED, wider learning and long-term life trajectories. Specifically, the project aimed to:

1. Achieve an average gain across participating schools of 10% in good level of development (GLD) and the % of children achieving expected level in Communication and Language (C&L)
2. Lift 80% of participating schools to the relevant area average for GLD and Communication and Language
3. Lift 50% of participating Liverpool schools and 75% of Sefton schools to the national average or higher for GLD and C&L

Short-term goals to ensure that long-terms aims were achieved and sustained included improvements in:

- Practitioner knowledge of language development & evidence-based practice
- Quality of practice through practical application
- Quality improvement practices (development of a high-quality sustainable QI cycle)
- Leadership skills
- Collaboration between early years providers

Progress towards short-term goals was monitored and tracked throughout through detailed Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

The project also aimed to create a sustainable cross-sector Language Learning Community across the local area with specialist expertise in supporting early language, via use of the evidence-based URLEY programme. Finally, the project built on and developed existing collaboration between practice and research institutions, with University of Oxford as a key partner.

Good practice to share with others interested in running school improvement projects to ensure projects deliver the intended outcome.

- Having a Project Lead responsible for liaising with all project schools and settings
- Setting out clear expectation at the programme launch event, ensuring sign up and commitment to the whole programme is expected and that attendance to all workshops or sessions is essential, this ensures minimal drop out of participants
- Agree before the onset of the project, the recruitment of highly experienced early years leaders to become Mentors and to undertake specialised training in Mentoring and Coaching of other schools and settings
- Training workshops spread out over long period of time. Not just one training day
- Gap tasks in between each training workshop to enable implementation of each of the URLEY Principles and practicing using the evidence-based adult and child assessment tools
- Having both adult and child assessment tools to look deeper at own practice as well as regularly tracking children's development
- Time in workshops to quietly read research that informs practice, this helped participants to stop doing what was not working and to focus on evidence-based and research-informed practice that works and to learn how to disseminate or explain to others why a particular practice principle should be used
- Sharing with the whole team back at project settings, this enabled the URLEY approach to be understood and much more likely to be implemented and not resisted
- Ensure that all participants are given lots of notice for the collection of any data or children's outcomes and for the completion of regular surveys and professional growth records and communicate this in a number of ways i.e. face-to-face during workshops and then follow-up emails and telephone calls
- Be aware of staff workload and not to add to this to cause added pressure on staff with already high level of workload
- Be aware of staff turnover in schools and PVI settings and that participants on the programmes can change throughout the life of the programme. Be prepared to recruit new staff member from the school or setting where staff move on. Provide detailed induction to the programme for new programme participants
- Initiate participants in developing their own professional Poster Presentation that shows the impact the project has had on practice and children's outcomes, to deliver at sharing learning and Knowledge Exchange events at a wider local level as well as in-house sharing and learning with staff, governors, leaders and parents.

What the project may do differently in the future

- Training workshops being spread out over time, allowing for meaningful learning and improvement. Provide catch up sessions for those that

missed workshops and for those taking over staff that have left the programme

- Be aware of newly inducted participants late onto the programme becoming overwhelmed. Project Lead and or mentors to provide on-site support and guidance to help catch up
- The adaptability of the URLEY programme to individual contexts
- The gap tasks in between each training workshop to scaffold implementation
- The additional structure provided – as compared with the original URLEY programme – for these gap tasks. Rather than allowing schools and settings to choose, core tasks were identified (which everyone was expected to complete) alongside a number of optional tasks which could be completed if desired
- Use of the Implementation, Analysis and Progress Record (completed at every workshop) and the Professional Growth Record (completed termly) to structure implementation, reflection and self-monitoring throughout – as well as providing evidence for evaluation of the project as a whole
- The whole-team approach and support for this within the programme (e.g. core tasks relating to sharing materials/ engaging the wider team in implementation). This was felt enable all staff members to take ownership, and to support implementation and sustainability.
- The use of local early years leaders as mentors for participating schools and settings, with specialist training provided to prepare them for this role. Prior to this project, the URLEY research/development team had provided all training and mentoring. Training local mentors will strongly support sustainability
- Mentors attending training alongside schools (i.e. learning together) was felt to strongly support rapport and positive working relationships (although logistically it was not always easy to ensure the attendance of the schools/settings being supported by one mentor at the same workshop)
- The focus on children who are reluctant communicators. Schools and settings consistently identified how helpful it had been to 'tune in' to these children more effectively, and reported the greatest impacts for these children
- PVI settings and schools attending the same training put them on an equal footing, and promoted collaboration/development of joint professional capacity. These links need to be further encouraged/developed following the project end.

Challenges, learning and potential improvements:

- Tracking showed that the URLEY programme was put into practice, with core tasks completed by the vast majority of schools/settings, and 80% of final evaluation form respondents reporting that they had implemented the approach 'quite a lot' or 'very much'. Three quarters also reported having engaged their wider teams 'quite a lot' or 'very much'. However, 34% also reported that cascading the approach/learning was 'quite' or

- 'very' challenging. More support for cascading could be included, e.g. briefings/training for other early years staff.
- Although the vast majority of participants found the Environment Rating Scales observations useful and constructive, a very small number found the process threatening. Although this likely reflects the mind-set of particular schools who may be feeling vulnerable at that time, it is important to note. In this project, we chose to have the observations conducted by an external team to ensure reliability of data for evaluation purposes. Although the feedback was provided by a mentor, the presence of an external person can contribute to the perception of being 'assessed'. The balance between support and rigour is one which all projects using the ERS will need to be aware of.
- Feedback from the focus groups suggests that greater involvement of local mentors from the start of the project would have been beneficial. In relation to the above point, conducting joint ERS observations (i.e. a trained assessor alongside a local mentor) would enable accurate data to be collected but also support the provision of feedback from an observer known to the school/setting
- The half-day afternoon workshops supported attendance in comparison to the original URLEY format of five whole days. Despite this, some found it challenging release staff for workshops, and attention was sometimes fading by 5pm.
- We invited Heads/Leaders to join a workshop session, which was very beneficial for those who attended. Additional measures to engage less proactive leaders may further support ongoing buy-in, implementation and sustainability. Briefing in schools if hard to release staff.

Sustainability measures taken by projects to ensure improvement are sustained beyond the funding period.

URLEY Language Community Leaders Sustainability Plan 2020 and beyond
NURSERY SCHOOL 'ECERS HUBS'

Sustainability Measures for the LANGUAGE LEADERS URLEY PROJECT 2018 TO 2020

7 Nursery Schools, in partnership with a local Teaching School, are to become Environment Rating Scales Hubs (ERS Hubs). Trained Specialist Mentors from each of the Nursery Schools will continue work with in-project Language Leaders from each of the identified partner schools and settings using the language indicators from the Environment Rating Scales: ECERS-3, ECERS-E and SSTEW and other evidence-based and research-validated URLEY Communication and Language tools

- To promote the URLEY Approach to wider non-project schools and settings
- To continue using the URLEY Approach as a model to other early years staff in own Mentor Nursery School
- To attend URLEY Community of Practice Network Meetings to

disseminate Nursery School Mentor on-going support

- To provide regular mentor support to existing schools and settings and to engage new schools and settings
- To showcase schools and settings progress and change as a result of engaging in ECERS Hubs support
- To work in partnership with the North Liverpool Teaching School to share outcomes with other Nursery Schools

The outcome of this will be:

- URLEY Approach will be shared wider than the original URLEY project participants and sustained in future practice beyond Liverpool and Sefton
- In-project schools and settings will demonstrate professional growth and confidence
- Non-project schools will learn how to use URLEY tools and research through further induction and training via Mentors
- Children's outcomes in C&L will show sustained improvement over time
- Role of Nursery School ERS Hubs to continue URLEY Approach in their own Nursery School practice and to keep records of work done to enable future sharing
- Provide outreach Mentor visits to existing partner schools and settings to look at enhancing environments and practice using the language indicators of the ECERS-3 and E /SSTEW and implementing the URLEY Language Learning Principles (LLPs) as well as continued support to demonstrate use of the URLEY tools
- Host in-project plus new non-project schools and settings to own Nursery School ERS Hubs to look at ECERS/SSTEW in action. For example, URLEY Approach re ECERS/SSTEW and other URLEY tools as well as wider language development training and planning for language and reading
- Engage wider schools and PVI settings per Nursery School ERS Hub – extending to settings beyond Liverpool and Sefton who have not been engaged with the project
- Provide brief induction sessions about URLEY for new schools and settings, at own Nursery School ERS Hubs