Evaluation of HELLO: A tool to improve communication, language and literacy practice in early years settings

May 2016

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Contents

Executive Summary

Helping Early Language Literacy Outcomes (HELLO) is a National Literacy Trust audit tool for Early Years practitioners to improve Communication, Language and Literacy (CLL) outcomes for children aged 0-3 years. The HELLO audit tool focuses on three key areas; partnerships with parents, practitioner skills, and enabling environments. Each setting completes the tool to devise an action plan outlining how they are to improve their current provision to enhance CLL outcomes.

Between May 2015 and April 2016 the National Literacy Trust received funding from the Department for Education (DfE) to pilot HELLO in seven areas with local authorities and teaching schools acting as Expert Area Leads. 74 Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) nursery settings took part in the project. The evaluation of HELLO used a mixed methods approach. This report focuses on the survey responses and reports that:

- Over the course of the HELLO project, practitioners reported significant improvements in several areas; including a 37.1% point increase in practitioner confidence to identify key milestones in children's development and a 44.5% point increase in practitioners strongly agreeing that they were confident the activities they deliver impact positively upon CLL.

- Practitioners after the project were significantly more likely to provide CLL opportunities for children every day by providing more mark making opportunities (62% point increase).

- After taking part in HELLO, practitioners were significantly more likely to strongly agree that they have positive relationships with parents (26% point increase), and more specifically, significantly more likely to talk to parents about the importance of talking to their children, singing songs, mark making and reading stories for CLL (a point increase of 18.9%, 33.3% points, 18.5% points and 29.7% points respectively).

- After taking part in HELLO practitioners were significantly more likely to strongly agree that they were confident in their understanding (an 11% point increase) and use of digital media (22.2% point increase).

- Practitioners were significantly more likely to work with colleagues in their own setting to improve practices after taking part in HELLO, with a 33.4% point increase in those strongly agreeing it was something that happened within their setting.

- Significant improvements were reported in practitioner's confidence to identify key milestones, assess children's CLL and use activities with children that impact on CLL.

- Practitioners were significantly more likely to understand how digital media could be used, and use digital media to improve CLL with children.

Recommendations
- Further roll out of the HELLO tool due to significant positive findings.
- To continue with the evaluation of the HELLO tool due to the low survey response and different implementation models across settings and areas.
- For the National Literacy Trust to provide ongoing support to help settings continue with their peer networking, in order to help with barriers such as time, money and focus.
- For the National Literacy Trust to develop with nursery settings accredited training courses in the areas of speech and language, as well as digital technology use within the early years.

Introduction

Background

Helping Early Language Literacy Outcomes (HELLO) is a National Literacy Trust audit tool for Early Years practitioners to improve Communication, Language and Literacy (CLL) outcomes for children aged 0-3 years. The HELLO audit tool focuses on three key areas; partnerships with parents, practitioner skills, and enabling environments. Each setting completes the tool to devise an action plan outlining how they are to improve their current provision to enhance CLL outcomes.

Between May 2015 and April 2016 the National Literacy Trust received funding from the Department for Education (DfE) to deliver the HELLO programme in seven areas across England. Those areas were Derby, Bradford, Bedford, Scarborough, Reading, Liverpool and Middlesbrough. The HELLO programme was facilitated in the seven areas by an Early Years Lead based at either a Teaching School (5 areas) or Local Authority Early Years Team (2 areas). The Teaching schools or Local Authorities were responsible for recruiting between 7-12 Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) early years settings. As part of their role as Early Years Lead, these partners provided support, guidance and best practice to their local settings. This was mainly through organising Network Meetings; these were part of the HELLO programme to share best practice, encourage peer-to-peer support and review the HELLO audit tool in a friendly environment. In total 74 settings delivered the HELLO project. Coventry University was commissioned by the National Literacy Trust to independently evaluate the implementation of HELLO.

The HELLO audit tool focuses on self-assessing and action planning in three key areas of early years practice:

1. Skilled practitioners
2. Partnership with Parents
3. Enabling environments

The *partnership with parents* area of the tool focuses on sharing information with parents and exchanging advice to support parents with their child's CLL development. The *skilled practitioners* area was included to improve the quality of interactions of early year's practitioners with children to enhance children's CLL outcomes. The *enabling environments* area aimed to improve the settings' capacity to enhance and promote CLL development. Included within this section was a focus on digital media and supporting settings with how digital media can promote CLL development in the early years.

The HELLO audit tool comprised three questions to prompt discussion and create a clear action plan of how settings would seek to improve; '*what we do now'*, '*what we need to do next*' and '*who will do it and by when*'. These questions were to prompt practitioners to think about what they do well but also what gaps exist in their provision whilst also evidencing points made. Through this self-reflection process, while completing the HELLO tool, practitioners devised their action plan. Alongside the HELLO self-assessment tool, a resource pack relevant to each area of the tool was devised to provide ideas of what settings could do next. This resource pack was made available online through the National Literacy Trust Network and via Dropbox for the HELLO area leads.

Methodology

A mixed method evaluation was used to provide a comprehensive report for the National Literacy Trust on the impact and effectiveness of the tool. The evaluation was designed around the three key objectives for the project (see Table .1). This report will use the survey data to evidence the impact of KO1 and KO3, and will highlight the qualitative evidence to put these results into context. This data comes from case studies conducted in three focus areas. These areas will be referred to as Areas A, B and C to ensure anonymity. For more details about the implementation of the HELLO programme in these areas see the process evaluation report.

Table 1: Key Outcomes of the HELLO Project Evaluation

Outcome No.	Outcome
KO1	Improvement in practitioner understanding of early years communication, language and literacy skills.
KO2	Evidence on the implementation of the improvement tool across settings.
KO3	Improvement in practitioner's confidence in developing children's literacy skills, engaging parents and use of digital media in settings.

To capture the impact of the HELLO programme, an online survey devised with the National Literacy Trust was e-mailed to all settings; the survey was to be completed by all staff members, and this was explicitly encouraged in the e-mail. The survey focused on the three areas of the HELLO audit tool: partnership with parents, practitioner skills and enabling environments. The pre-survey was completed in September/October 2015 before settings started the programme and the post survey was completed in April 2016 when areas had completed the project. Practitioners from Bedford (N=12), Bradford (N=2), Derby (N=5), Scarborough (N=5), Reading (N=1) and Liverpool (N= 2) completed both the survey pre and post implementation, equating to a total of 27 respondents. For the post survey, there were 60 respondents from Bedford (N=17), Bradford (N=6), Derby (N=7), Scarborough (N=10), Middlesbrough (N=6), Reading (N=9) and Liverpool

(N=5), this data is analysed separately and focuses only on the reflection questions i.e. changes they had seen in the last six months.

The low response rate is likely to be due to a multitude of factors, including high staff turnover, some settings leaving the project and lack of staff time to complete the survey. The responses were matched and analysed using a non-parametric Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Signed-rank test. Due to the small sample size it is important to bear in mind when discussing the results that these responses may not be representative of all those involved. Due to the nature of the HELLO project, it was implemented in a variety of ways; the qualitative data will be highlighted and integrated throughout the report to provide context to the findings discussed.

Results

Survey responses: Improvement in practitioner understanding of early years communication, language and literacy skills (CLL)

Analyses indicate that practitioners improved their skills around CLL during the course of the project. Statistically significant differences between pre and post responses were found; practitioners were more likely to 'strongly agree' that they were able to identify key milestones after taking part in HELLO; an increase from 29.6% to 66.7%, thus a 37.1% point difference[1] (Figure 1). Practitioners were also significantly more likely to 'strongly agree' that the activities they deliver impact on CLL development after taking part in the project; an increase from 22.2% to 66.7%; thus a 44.5% point difference[2] (Figure 2). Also observed was a significant 33.4% point increase (from 33.3% pre project to 66.7% post project) in practitioners who 'strongly agree' that they can confidently assess children's CLL development [3](Figure 3). This suggests that participating in HELLO enhanced practitioners' understanding of early years CLL outcomes.

Figure 1: Percentage agreement with ability to identifying key milestones pre and post HELLO
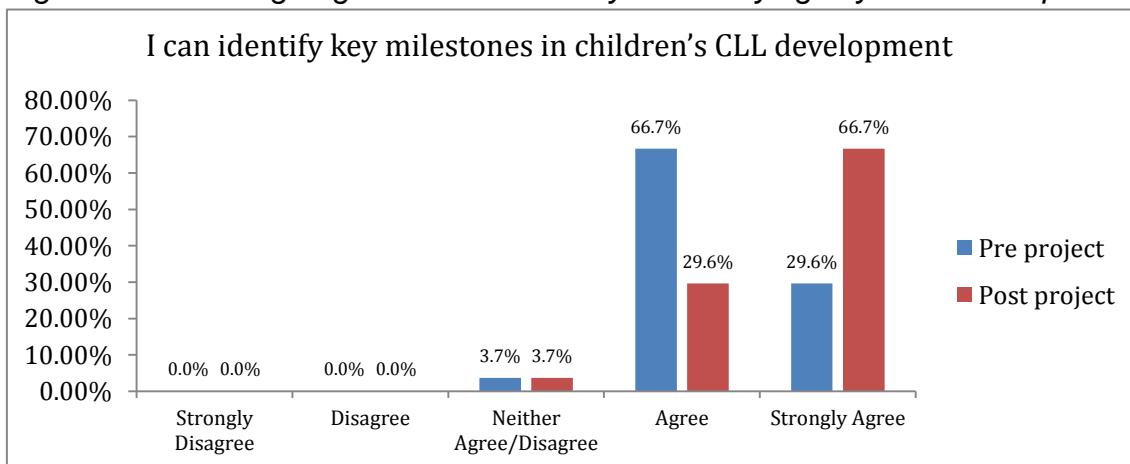
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[1] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were statistically significantly higher than pre-test scores (Z = -2.5, p =0.01).
[2] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were statistically significantly higher than pre-test scores (Z = -3.1, p =0.002).
[3] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were statistically significantly higher than pre-test scores (Z = -2.7, p =0.008).

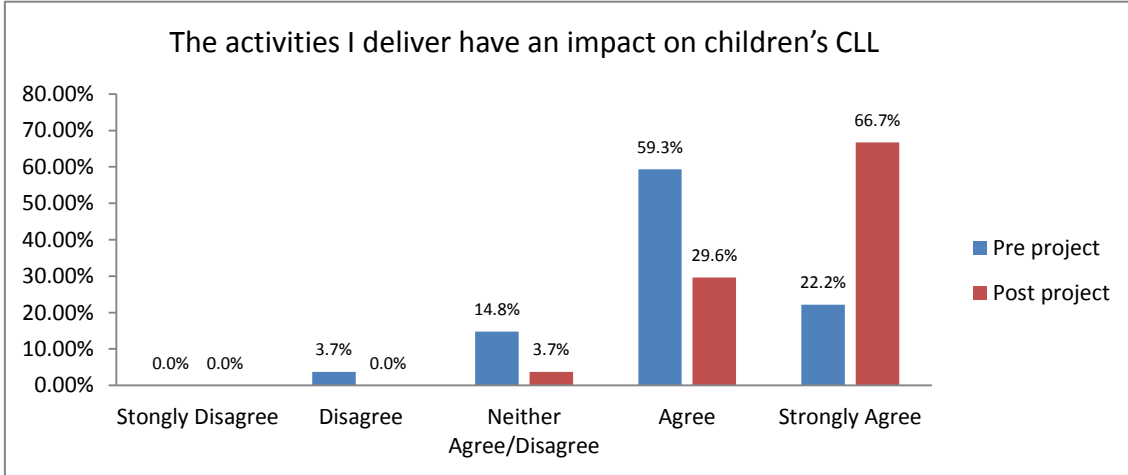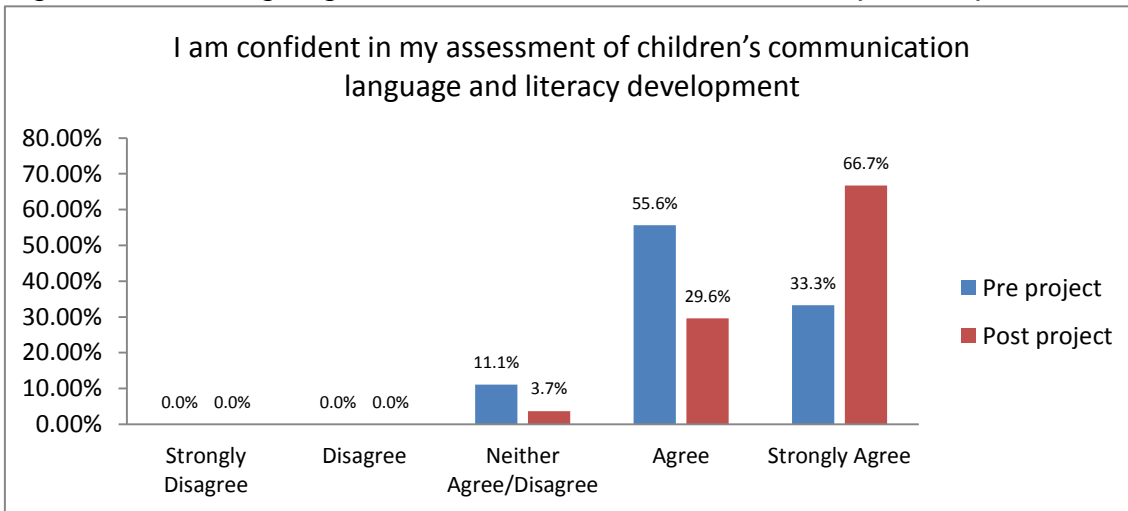*Figure 2: Percentage agreement that activities impact on CLL pre and post HELLO*

The activities I deliver have an impact on children's CLL

	Stongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree/Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre project	0.0%	3.7%	14.8%	59.3%	22.2%
Post project	0.0%	0.0%	3.7%	29.6%	66.7%

Figure 3 Percentage agreement in confidence to asses CLL pre and post HELLO

I am confident in my assessment of children's communication language and literacy development

|	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree/Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Pre project	0.0%	0.0%	11.1%	55.6%	33.3%
Post project	0.0%	0.0%	3.7%	29.6%	66.7%

Survey responses: Improvement in practitioner interactions to support early years communication, language and literacy skills (CLL)

In addition to the statistically significant increase in practitioners developing their understanding of children's development as outlined above, there were also changes in the activities completed with children. The main difference in activities undertaken after taking part in HELLO was practitioners reported providing significantly more mark making opportunities, with a 62% point increase in the number of practitioners providing this several times a day (from 26.9% to 88.9%;

Figure 4)[4]. However, practitioners reported using environmental print significantly less often, with a decrease in 19% points from pre to post HELLO (56% to 37%; Figure 5)[5]. Figure 6 shows an increase in practitioners reporting reading books several times a day (an increase of 22.2% points; 51.9% pre project to 74.1% post)[6] compared to a decrease in Figure 7 in relation to group story sharing time (a decrease of 18.5% points; 70.4% reporting doing this several times a day pre project to 51.9% post)[7], suggesting that reading books individually with children increased as a result of taking part in the project; however, it is important to note that differences in individual book reading were not statistically significant. There was also, during the course of the project a slight decrease in the percentage of practitioners who reported singing with children every day, with a decrease from 88.9% to 74.1% however; this was not statistically significant (Figure 8)[8].

Figure 4: Percentage of practitioners reporting providing opportunities to mark make pre and post HELLO
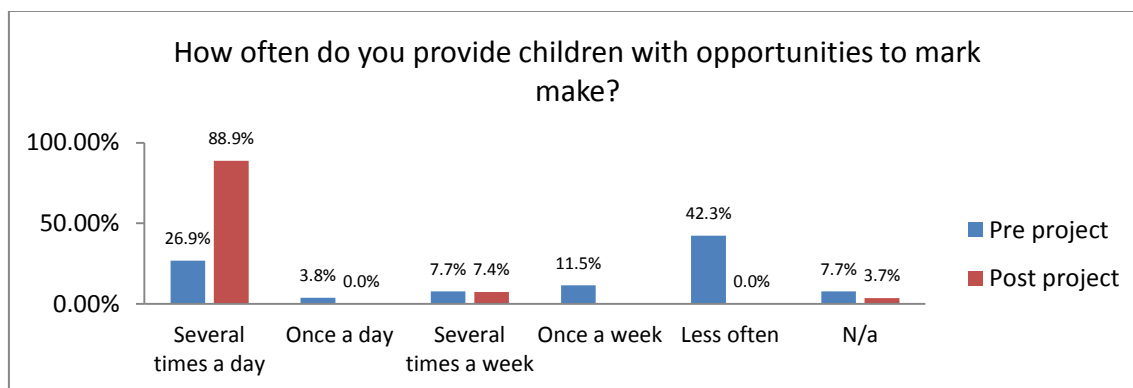
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[4] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were statistically significantly higher than pre-test scores (Z = -3.8, p <0.001).

[5] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that pre-test scores were statistically significantly higher than post-test scores (Z = -2.8, p =0.005).

[6] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were not statistically different to pre-test scores (Z = -0.6, p >0.5).

[7] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that pre-test scores were statistically significantly higher than post-test scores (Z = -2.5, p =0.01).

[8] A Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test indicated that post-test scores were not statistically different to pre-test scores (Z = -1.0, p >0.05)

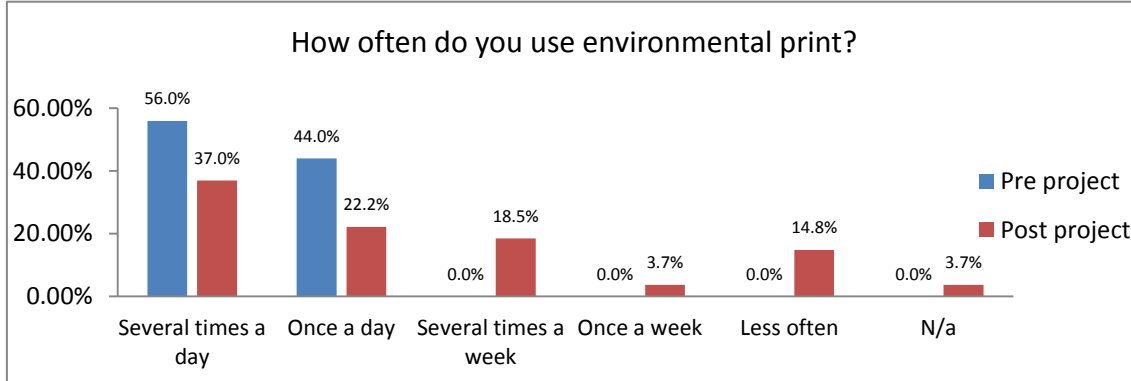*Figure 5: Percentage of practitioners reporting use of environment print pre and post HELLO*

How often do you use environmental print?

Pre project / Post project

	Several times a day	Once a day	Several times a week	Once a week	Less often	N/a
Pre project	56.0%	44.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Post project	37.0%	22.2%	18.5%	3.7%	14.8%	3.7%

Figure 6: Percentage of practitioners reporting reading books with individual children pre and post HELLO

How often do you read books with individual children?

Pre project / Post project

	Several times a day	Once a day	Several times a week	Once a week	Less often	N/a
Pre project	51.9%	33.3%	7.4%	3.7%	3.7%	0.0%
Post project	74.1%	7.4%	11.1%	0.0%	3.7%	3.7%
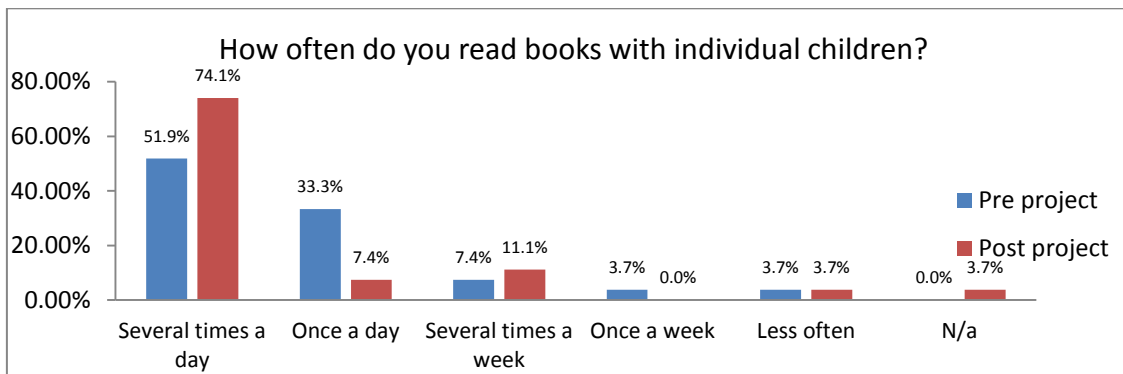
Figure 7: Percentage of practitioners reporting group story time pre and post HELLO

How often do you have group story time?

Pre project / Post project

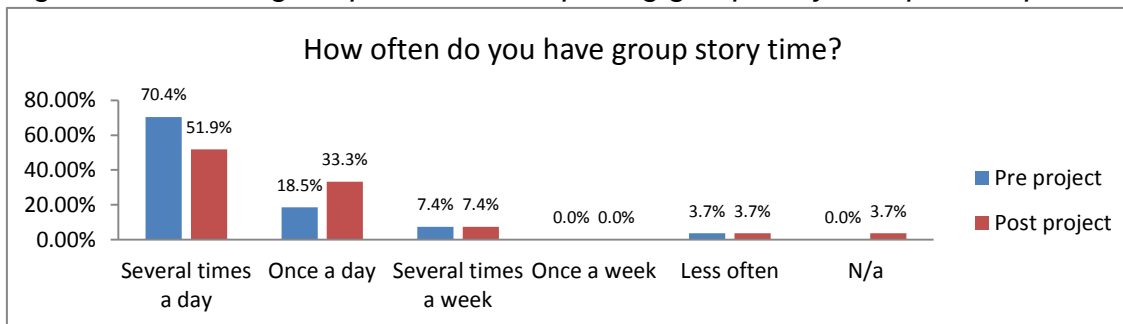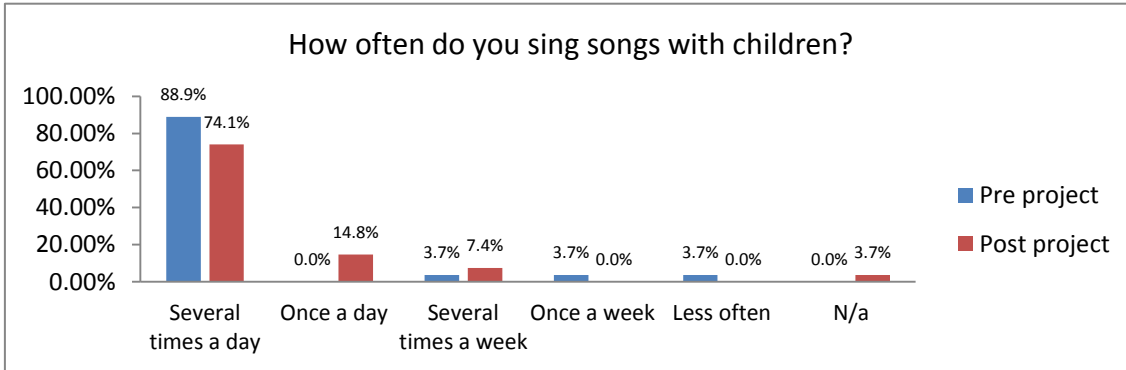|	Several times a day	Once a day	Several times a week	Once a week	Less often	N/a
Pre project	70.4%	18.5%	7.4%	0.0%	3.7%	0.0%
Post project	51.9%	33.3%	7.4%	0.0%	3.7%	3.7%

Figure 8: Percentage of practioners reporting singing songs pre and post HELLO

Qualitative Data to Support Improved Practitioner Knowledge and confidence

To put these findings in to context, we can look at them alongside in depth data from the case study areas.

A number of changes were made by the settings since developing their understanding around early years CLL. These changes for Area A reflected a better understanding of the needs of children, and thus they set up new services e.g. the library service, developed their environments e.g. creating and developing cosy areas, as well as developing new resources to be used within the setting to promote CLL e.g. story spoons (wooden spoons with characters of the story painted on to act out the story), book bags, they also created resources to encourage parent partnerships e.g. parent evaluation for chatterboxes and updating' *All About Me*' books. Direct evidence of these changes derives from interviews and focus group discussions, for example:

'*Song sacks have really helped out, you have got a variety of songs now.*' (Area A)

'*We have noticed from the children since September if we put the stories out they will go over and read the stories, they hold the book and read the story.*' (Area A)

'*We realised the book corner was in a really difficult place, it made us really look at things and we looked and we realised that it wasn't very comfortable…now a quieter area and put more seating in and stuff for staff to be comfortable alongside the children who love to sit and have a story.*' (Area A)

'*This has been a huge success in our nursery [All About Me Books]. It has promoted more discussion with the children and allowed us to help them make comparisons and notice differences between their lives and their teachers.*' (Area A)

In Area B, practitioner knowledge improved in terms of being able to evaluate one's own setting; an example of this comes from one setting using a communication hotspot map to understand

which areas needed further development to enhance the opportunities for communication; this shows that rather than just updating the environment, practitioners were gaining knowledge to continually develop and evaluate their own practice and setting. Also in Area B, another setting made significant progress between the two observation visits, changes included changing the layout of the setting, phonics had been implemented with the older children, along with circle time for the younger children, setting up story sacks, introducing books to each corner of the nursery and introducing a home library service; this shows that practitioner knowledge had dramatically increased on how to encourage early reading skills. The reflective logs received demonstrated a deeper understanding, as practitioners noted that in order to increase access to books and literacy activities, books need to be available in all areas of the nursery not just in the book corner, whilst also remembering that the book corner needs to be inviting to children too.

'We have upped the way we present our book corner and tried to make it more appealing'. (Area A)

In Area C, the practitioners reported being more reflective of their practice, this may explain increased confidence levels. As a result a number of changes were made such as improved parental engagement, packs for EAL children, visual timetables, parent events such as craft days, changes in the environment from ITERS and the use of Facebook to disseminate information to parents.

Understanding and practitioner confidence in settings had also developed through peer observations. For example in Area C, settings used videos for peer observations, and found this enhanced critical reflection as they were able to look back and say '*I should be doing this to enhance communication skills*'.

'We have changed the planning, so it's a bit more detailed and it's got language and literacy activities in there now.' (Area C)

The coaches in Area C for the majority of the settings deliberately selected settings with poor Ofsted ratings, thus knew that CLL was an area that many required development with, and thus focused on CLL. The practitioners in Area C were given many resources and signposted to others including ICAN, dialogic talk guides, and squiggle whilst you wiggle. One of the most useful resources was the language wheel, nearly all of the settings used this to enhance practitioner understanding, and all provided positive feedback on it. Additionally, the coaches in Area C introduced practitioners to The Speech, Language and Communication Framework (SLCF) from the Communication Trust which they used to highlight any language delays; this was considered to be a very useful tool by all. The use of this tool along with the coaching team helped children with delay to be identified earlier. From use of this, one setting successfully made referrals for six

children to speech and language therapists, which would have been missed if it was not for participation in the project

'*We used the language wheels but we adapted them a bit and took all the writing out so they were blank they had to create it, worked quite well for us.*' (Area C)

'*We know how to ask an open-ended questions. Sometimes you find that you are very repetitive so just different ways we can overcome this, so we had language wheels put in place in every area, so when we are with the children we can just have a glance. So if it's the maths areas, it's what questions you use, open questions/closed questions, how/when/where questions and key words to use like a prompt.*' (Area C)

In developing their understanding staff at one setting devised a pack for children with English as an Additional Language to support language development. Furthermore, this setting had improved on assessing children for speech and language due to increased knowledge and understanding.

'*We can see an improvement in speech and language, but some of the children have gone backwards, but we have put that down to the staff are assessing the children a lot more vigorously now and they are understanding where to place [children] whereas before they were a bit more generous, so I think that is something we can highlight as a pro.*' (Area C)

'*We created a pack to support EAL children with regards to language development and tracking them.*' (Area C).

To improve practitioner understanding all areas included involvement from local Speech and Language Therapists, in Area A a training event was organised by the teaching school, in Area B a training event was organised by a number of settings using project funding and in Area C two Speech and Language Therapists were part of the coaching team. Across the areas from the training received practitioners improved their understanding around communication and language. A log from Area B noted that the '*training gave staff lots of good points and evidenced by critically assessing their own practice*'. Overall the Speech and Language training ensured '*good quality interactions*'.

'*All day I was like how can I put that, but not in a question, it is interesting questioning yourself a bit more about what you are saying.*' (Area A)

Overall, the small survey sample along with the qualitative data suggests that participating in the HELLO project improved practitioners' understanding around CLL. Practitioners discussed how their understanding had translated into practice during the project by for example changing

activities that were on offer and increasing access to books. The main change in practitioners' knowledge, was their ability to reflect on their own practice; this supports KO1.

Survey responses: Improvement in practitioner's confidence in engaging parents

After participating in the HELLO project, practitioners were significantly more likely to report having a positive relationship with parents, with a 26% point increase in those strongly agreeing that they now felt they had a positive relationship with parents and carers (Figure 9)[9].

Figure 9: Percentage of practitioner agreement that they have positive relationships with parents pre and post HELLO

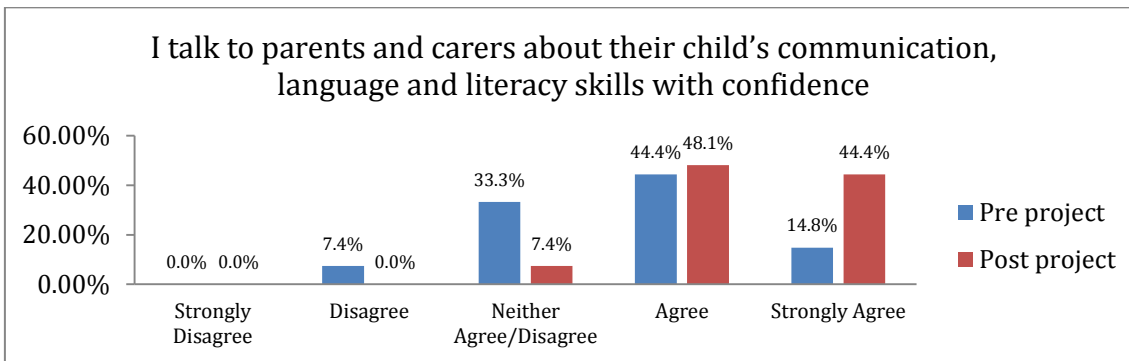I feel that I have a positive relationship with the parents and carers I have contact with.
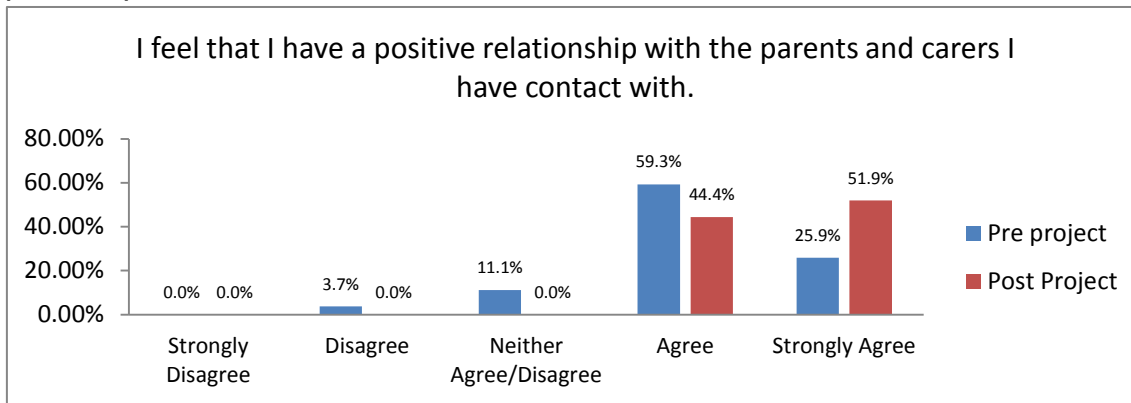
There was also a significant 29.6% point increase in the number of respondents who strongly agreed that they can talk to parents about their child's CLL, with 25.9% strongly agreeing with this statement before the programme and 51.9% strongly agreeing with it after taking part (Figure 10)[10]. This may be due to an increase in confidence and also an understanding regarding children's development.

Figure 10: Percentage of practitioner agreement that they can confidently talk to parents pre and post HELLO
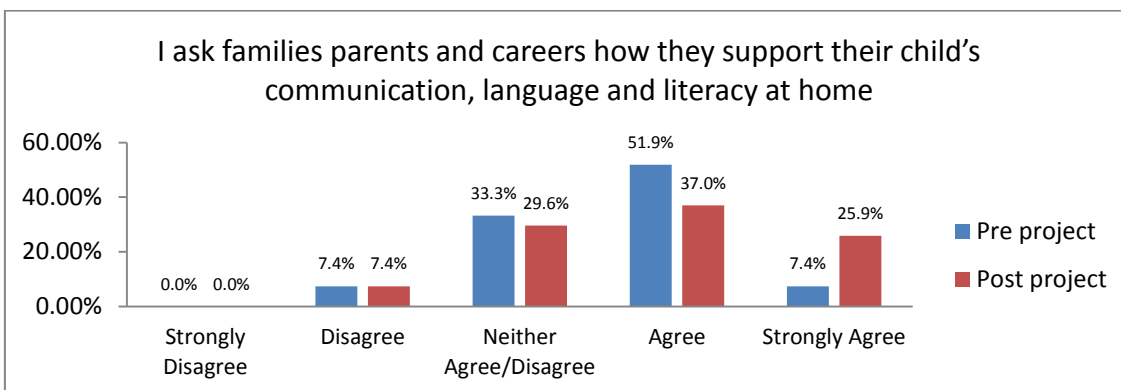
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[9] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were statistically significantly higher than pre-test scores (Z = -2.7, p =0.007).

[10] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were statistically significantly higher than pre-test scores (Z = -3.3, p =0.001).

I talk to parents and carers about their child's communication, language and literacy skills with confidence

There was an increase of 18.5% points, for practitioners reporting that they 'strongly agree' that they have started to ask parents more about home practices regarding CLL, unfortunately this was not significant (Figure 11)[11].

Figure 11: Percentage of practitioners that talk to parents about how to support CLL practices pre and post HELLO

I ask families parents and careers how they support their child's communication, language and literacy at home
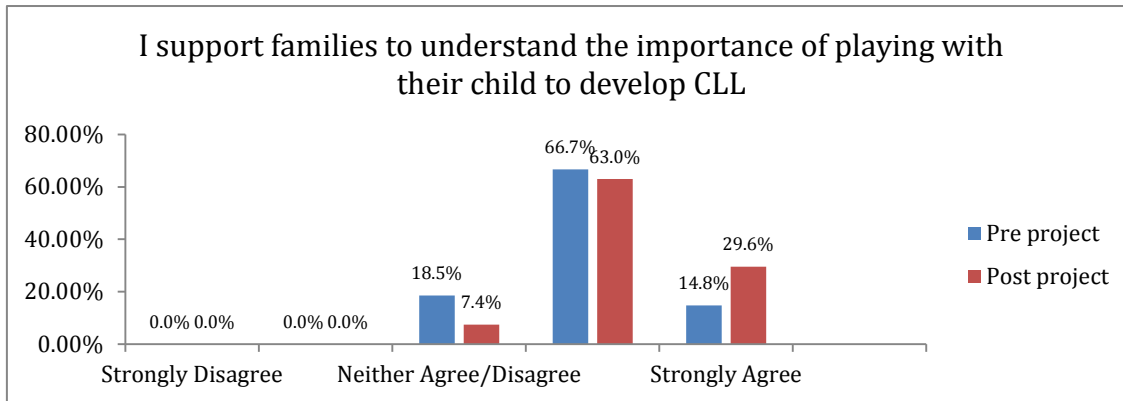
In developing these partnerships, practitioners over the project become more confident in supporting parents/carers with their child's development. Practitioners felt they were more confident in supporting parents to play with the children; there was a 14.8% point increase in those 'strongly agreeing' that they could support parents to understand the importance of play for CLL, however this was not significant (Figure 12)[12].

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[11] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were not statistically significantly different from pre-test scores ($Z = -1.0$, $p > 0.05$).
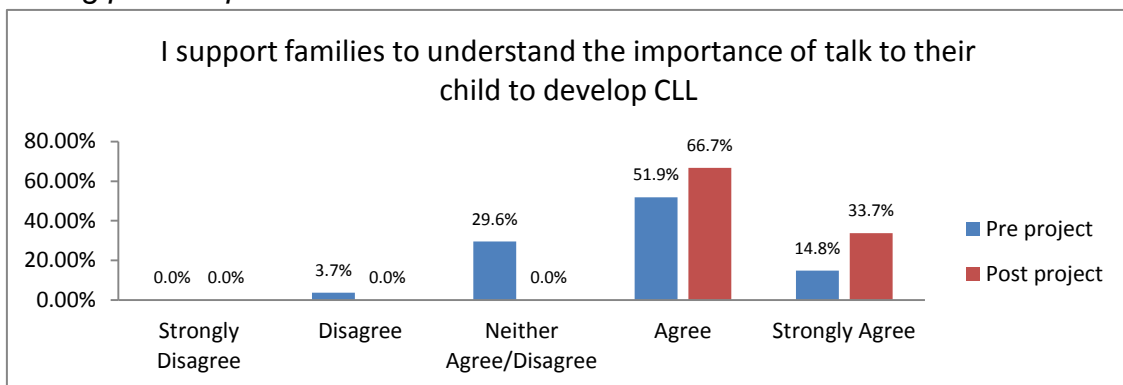
[12] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were not statistically significantly different from pre-test scores ($Z = -1.5$, $p > 0.05$).

Figure 12: Percentage of practitioners that can support parents to understand the importance of play pre and post HELLO

I support families to understand the importance of playing with their child to develop CLL

- Strongly Disagree: Pre project 0.0%, Post project 0.0%
- (unlabelled): Pre project 0.0%, Post project 0.0%
- Neither Agree/Disagree: Pre project 18.5%, Post project 7.4%
- (Agree): Pre project 66.7%, Post project 63.0%
- Strongly Agree: Pre project 14.8%, Post project 29.6%

Practitioners felt more confident in helping parents understand the benefits of talking to their child, this did reach significance and there was an increase in 18.9% points for those who strongly agreed that they could help parents understand the importance of talking to their child (Figure 13)[13].

Figure 13: Percentage of practitioners reporting supporting parents to understand importance of talking pre and post HELLO

I support families to understand the importance of talk to their child to develop CLL

- Strongly Disagree: Pre project 0.0%, Post project 0.0%
- Disagree: Pre project 3.7%, Post project 0.0%
- Neither Agree/Disagree: Pre project 29.6%, Post project 0.0%
- Agree: Pre project 51.9%, Post project 66.7%
- Strongly Agree: Pre project 14.8%, Post project 33.7%

A small percentage of practitioners felt more confident in discussing the importance of listening to develop communication, language and literacy skills; an increase of 11.1% points who 'strongly agree', however, this was not significant (Figure 14)[14].

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[13] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were statistically significantly higher than from pre-test scores (Z = -2.6, p =0.008).
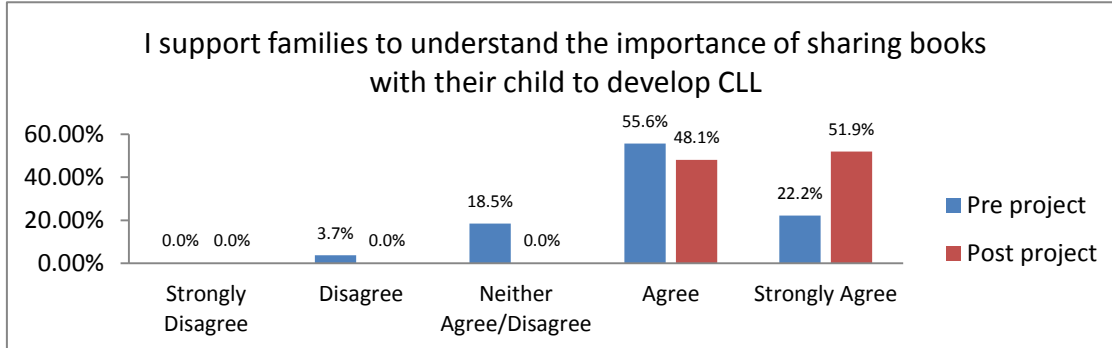
[14] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were not statistically significantly different from pre-test scores (Z = -1.0, p >0.05).

Figure 14: Percentage of practitioners reporting supporting parents to understand the importance of listening pre and post HELLO
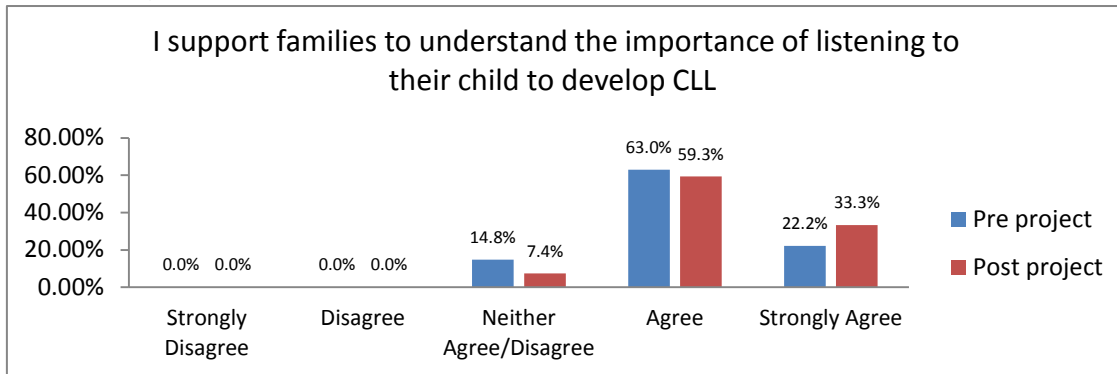
Practitioners were significantly more likely to 'strongly agree' that they felt confident talking to parents about sharing books with their children after taking part in HELLO, with a 29.7% point increase over time (Figure 15)[15].

Figure 15: Supporting parents to share books pre and post responses by percentage
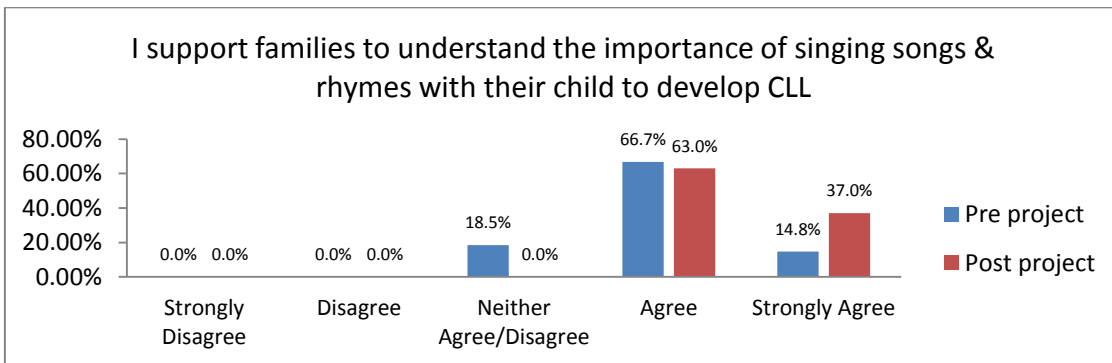

Practitioners were significantly more likely to 'strongly agree' that they could support parents to sing songs to enhance CLL after taking part in HELLO, with a percentage point increase of 22.2% (Figure 16)[16].

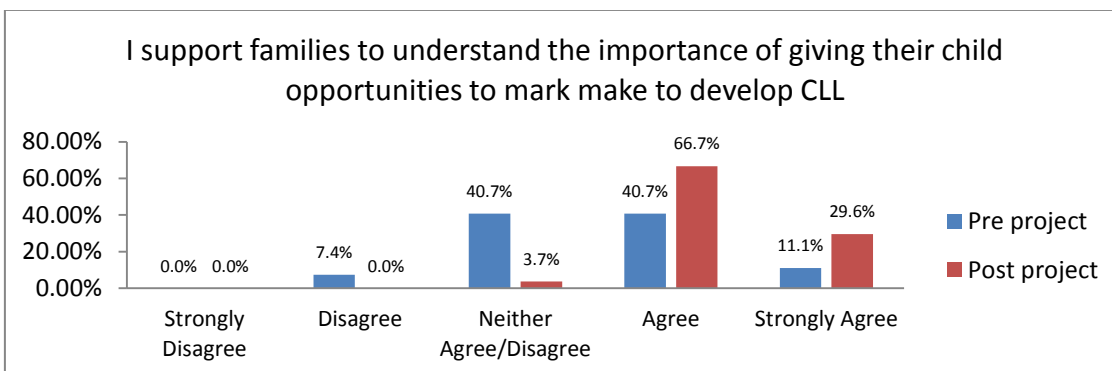*Figure 16: Percentage of practitioners reporting supporting parents with singing songs pre and post HELLO*

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[15] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were statistically significantly higher than pre-test scores (Z = -1.0, p =0.01).

[16] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were statistically significantly higher than pre-test scores (Z = -2.5, p >0.05).

I support families to understand the importance of singing songs & rhymes with their child to develop CLL

Practitoners were significantly more likely to report feeling confident discussing mark making with parents to help with CLL after taking part in HELLO; with an 18.5% point increase in those 'strongly agreeing'.(Figure 17)[17].

Figure 17: Percentage of practitioners reporting supporting parents with mark making pre and post HELLO

I support families to understand the importance of giving their child opportunities to mark make to develop CLL

Overall, there were significant differences pre and post regarding practitioner and parent relationships from this small sample, suggesting that HELLO can positively impact on parent/practitioner relationships, supporting KO3.

Qualitative data to support improvements in engaging parents
To put these findings in to context, we can look at them alongside in depth data from the case study areas.

Supporting evidence for the survey changes in parent practitioner partnerships were reported during the interviews and focus group discussions. Engagement of parents had been improved in

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[17] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were statistically significantly higher than pre-test scores (Z = -3.3, p =0.001).

the majority of settings taking part in HELLO, one setting in Area A reported that parent consultations were now taken up by all of their parents; this was achieved by scheduling flexible stay and play sessions, so that parents considered hard to reach could attend.

'Parent Partnerships have grown bigger and bigger.' (Area A)

One setting in Area B increased parental interaction using Tapestry (an EYFS online learning journal for staff and parents) by allowing parents to add comments to pictures or videos uploaded by the setting. Thus from participating in HELLO a number of methods were used across settings to improve parent and practitioner relationships.

'*What I have really noticed is our parent participation so I think that is the biggest thing that we have gotten from it and that's really improved so I am pleased with that.*' (Area C)

At an observation in Area C practitioners were focusing on explaining to parents why they had completed certain activities with the children during the day, as opposed to just saying what they were doing. This highlighted the importance and reasons behind activities to parents by explaining how they impacted upon skills e.g. using messy play to improve fine motor control, which in turn could be used for pencil grip and thus writing.

In Area A, after participating in HELLO one setting included more detailed questions on their home visit form, showing that practitioners were more confident and knowledgeable about CLL when talking with parents.

'*Probably the way we do home visits, we have some questions we ask about books, reading at night, do you go to the library- more of those questions now because before there weren't really those questions.*' (Area A)

Improvements noted may be due to setting provisions and practitioner knowledge. For example a number of settings introduced an onsite library for children and parents to borrow books, supporting home literacy practices.

'*Yes we are still working on the library because that was the main thing that came up in the parent questionnaire so we are planning to take small groups of parents to the library to get them to register and show them what's accessible like the story session.*' (Area C)

In Area C one setting discussed printing song sheets to help parents who were not familiar with nursery songs; parents enjoyed taking these sheets home and it was used as a way to explain to parents the importance of rhyming and songs. Another setting in Area A had started singing

nursery rhymes in other languages spoken at the nursery such as Polish, thus making it easier for EAL parents to engage with the activities.

These changes impacted on practices with examples demonstrating how practitioners' newfound confidence and understanding was being put into practice. Furthermore during the course of the project, parent and practitioner confidence developed, thus supporting KO3.

Improvement in practitioner's confidence and understanding around digital media use
Practitioners during the project started to develop their understanding of how digital media could be used to aid CLL. There was a significant increase in practitioners who reported that they 'strongly agreed' that they understood how to use digital media to support CLL; with an 11% point increase from pre to post project (Figure 18)[18].

Figure 18: Practitioners understanding of digital media pre and post HELLO by percent
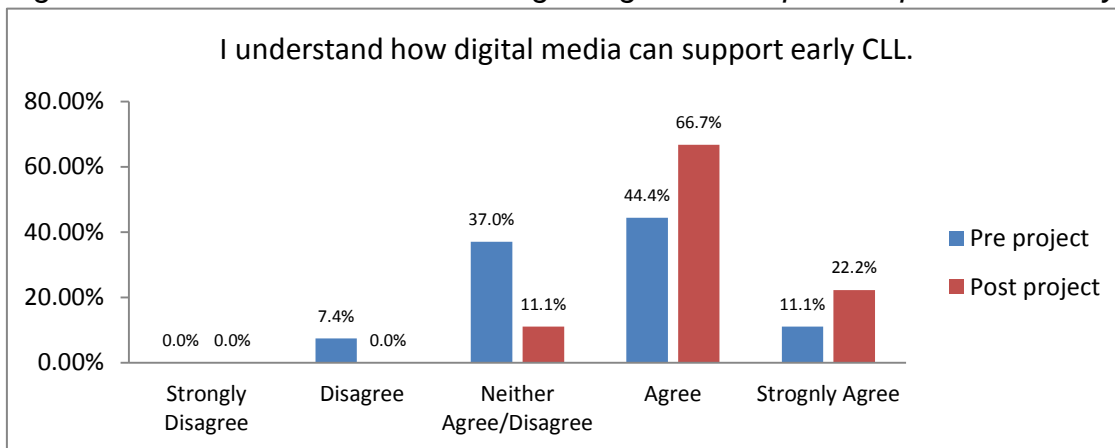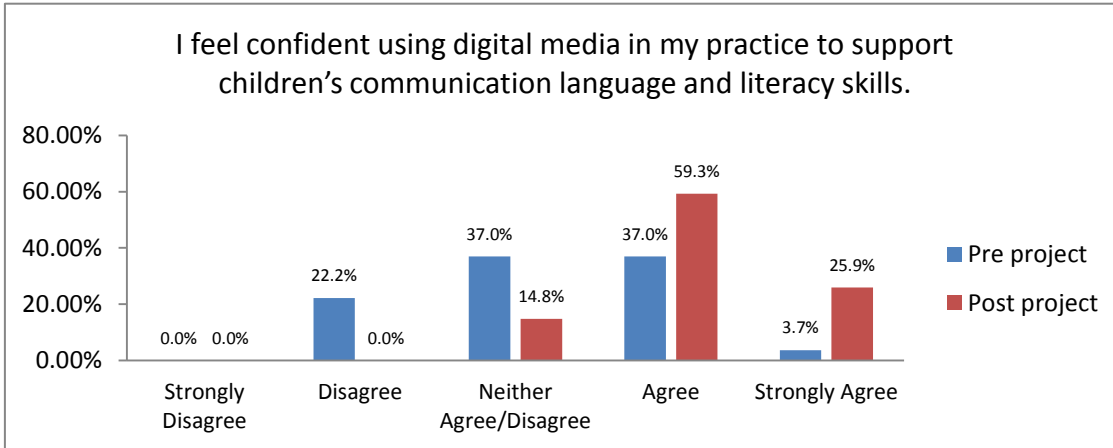

There was also a significant increase in practitioner confidence to use digital media to support children's communication language and literacy skills; with an increase of 22.2% percentage points in those reporting they 'strongly agree' (as shown in the Figure 19)[19].

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[18] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were statistically significantly higher than pre-test scores ($Z = -2.5$, $p < 0.05$).
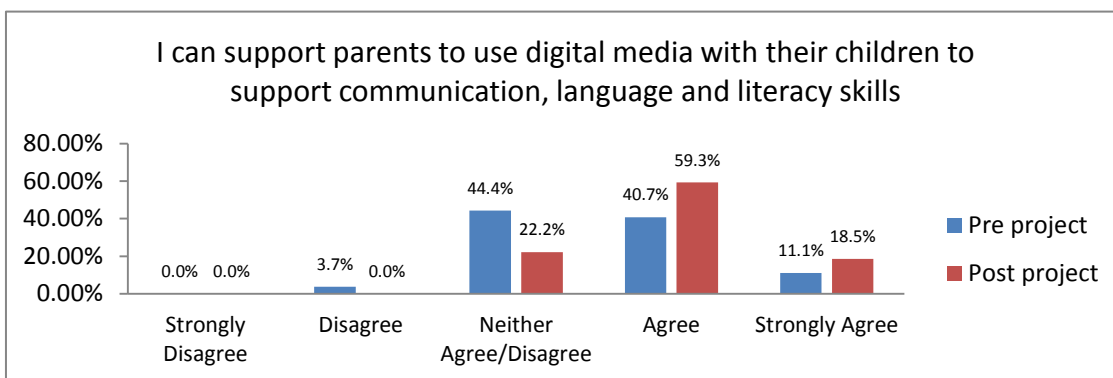
[19] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were statistically significantly higher than pre-test scores ($Z = -3.6$, $p < 0.001$).

Figure 19: Practitioners confidence using digital media pre and post HELLO by percentage

Chart title: I feel confident using digital media in my practice to support children's communication language and literacy skills.

- Strongly Disagree: Pre project 0.0%, Post project 0.0%
- Disagree: Pre project 22.2%, Post project 0.0%
- Neither Agree/Disagree: Pre project 37.0%, Post project 14.8%
- Agree: Pre project 37.0%, Post project 59.3%
- Strongly Agree: Pre project 3.7%, Post project 25.9%

Over the course of the project practitioners reported supporting parents more with using digital media. There was a small significant increase in those who 'strongly agreed' that they could support parents to use digital media to enhance CLL; with an increase of 7.4% points during the project (Figure 20)[20]. This may be due to practitioners' confidence in using digital media increasing, thus they may feel more comfortable offering advice. These findings support KO3.

Figure 20: Practitioners reporting supporting parents to use digital media pre and post HELLO by percentage

Chart title: I can support parents to use digital media with their children to support communication, language and literacy skills

- Strongly Disagree: Pre project 0.0%, Post project 0.0%
- Disagree: Pre project 3.7%, Post project 0.0%
- Neither Agree/Disagree: Pre project 44.4%, Post project 22.2%
- Agree: Pre project 40.7%, Post project 59.3%
- Strongly Agree: Pre project 11.1%, Post project 18.5%

Qualitative data on digital media confidence and use

We suggest that increases in digital media knowledge and confidence across the settings is due to the fact that the project highlighted that settings should be engaging more with digital literacy,

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[20] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were statistically significantly higher than pre-test scores (Z = -2.4, p <0.05).

by explicitly having a section in the HELLO audit tool for digital media use. This increase in use was achieved mainly through training and networking with other settings. For instance, Area C incorporated digital media training into their Network meeting due to the requests from practitioners. This training was well received, and challenged common misconceptions that digital media only includes tablet and computer use:

'I think they [staff] are reflecting on it a bit more so and also understanding particularly digital media what that means, it is not just having a computer it's a lot more to it that's been an eye opener for me and the staff as well.' (Area C)

'You always think digital technology; pcs, laptops, remote control cars, you know if it's got a button and it moves it's digital technology, but things like when you read a book and you listen to it on a CD that is classed as digital technology and it's things like that that you don't really think about that you do every day.' (Area C)

This training helped to develop practitioner confidence, and encouraged settings to engage with more ICT use. However, this training was only a twilight session, thus felt rushed as there was more information that could have been covered if a larger session had been timetabled. The coaches delivering the training were wary of being too positive of ICT as they were aware that the research into ICT use with the early years is still in its infancy. Thus the coaches highlighted their beliefs; the importance of ensuring that all ICT use has a purpose, and encouraging group use of ICT to encourage language development, as opposed to solitary play. Despite this training, it was felt more could have been done; potentially this is due to the lack of research in this area, and the time available to deliver said training.

"That was rushed if I was honest but we got loads of hand-outs around it … it was more around what resources were out there to use whereas it could have been a bit more on the theory behind ICT and the pros and cons of being used" (Area C)

The need for digital media training was highlighted to the National Literacy Trust, and they have subsequently created a video guide for use with parents around good ICT use, however, perhaps something more is needed with explicit guidelines for practitioners.

The implementation of digital media across the areas and settings differed greatly. An example in Area A demonstrates the changes some settings went through; at the first observation this setting was rather negative about digital media and was against the use of it in the nursery. However, at the second observation a play computer and keyboard had been put in the preschool room so the children could play office, the children also had access to their own iPads. This change was based on improved knowledge regarding the positive impact of digital media from Network meetings and practitioners' confidence to use iPPads with the children. In the log the practitioner described

using spare tablets in the room with great success and the setting was looking to purchase more. This is a significant turnaround in this setting with them looking to purchase more iPads and Bee Bots for the children.

'We have tablets for EYFS logs and we had a couple of spare ones so we get the children to use those ones, with different apps for different ages, so under 2's love like the animal noises and most of them knew how to use it before I did.' (Area A)

'When I started here they had no technology… We want to get more now because it has been successful.' (Area A)

In Area B, after completing the HELLO tool a setting highlighted that digital media was an area of weakness. During the project, documented in the log and observations, the setting changed the use of what was currently available to make it more effective. The computer was moved to a quieter space and new speakers and CDs with games were purchased. The practitioner in Area B reported that:

'We moved the computer area into a quieter space in the corner so it helps the children focus and concentrate a bit more when they are on it. You know you need to hear the instructions from the games… but we have got new speakers as well and a new keyboard and you know the jolly phonics games which have helped them with the letter sounds and other games that encourage communication and language…we have encouraged staff to spend more one to one time and in small groups on the computer to show them model what to do on it'. (Area B)

Several ICT methods have been used in settings across the project which has had a direct impact upon children's CLL. Not only are settings using more devices, they are more confident and able to use them in a way that directly impacts upon CLL. Devices that have been suggested by practitioners to have impacted upon language include the use of tablets, digital cameras, digital picture frames, audio equipment and interactive white boards, for example there is evidence digital technology can be used for mark making, specific learning outcomes and speech:

'Mark making using the white interactive board, children took turns very well and communicated with each other' (Area A, log)

'Instead of having [tablets] in the room for them to access freely to do it more as a group focused activity, adult led with an outcome for the learning rather than them just being able to access the technology' (Area B)

'The digital picture frame… they are like oh look there's that child and there's that child; so there is a lot of language' (Area B)

In particular digital audio devices have been found to have a particularly positive impact upon some EAL children.

'Children learn their language through music and listening to the music on the headphones and carrying the music around with them and repeating it, and they have just flown with English.' (Area B)

Not only language skills, but there is also the ability to build on non-verbal communication skills such as turn taking and sharing.

'They have got to learn to turn take, be patient, it's been quite a good tool for us.' (Area A).

Digital technology has also been used to engage with parents. For instance social media, such as Facebook or programmes such as Tapestry have been implemented by settings to share with parents examples of what their children have been doing in nursery. One setting in Area B used the interactive whiteboard to showcase photos at the end of the day to engage more with parents and encourage conversations.

'Interactive whiteboard for the parents, parents stopped and talked and you just get them talking and hanging about a bit longer at the end of the day.' (Area B)

Digital media has also been used to improve practitioner reflective practice, for instance peer-to-peer observations were recorded in some settings, in order to help practitioners view their own practices. For instance one practitioner reported on watching herself back after interacting with a child that:

'I know myself when I've watched a video back with [Manager] and you see different things that you didn't see, like your communication and things like that so it's really helped.' (Area C)

However, there are still a plethora of practical issues regarding digital media use within the early years. Many settings due to their set up do not have the physical space and capacity for some of the more advanced digital media this is especially an issue for pack away settings. Similarly, cost is an issue for many settings; some settings generally do not have much money for this, which was especially true for charity based settings. Digital equipment can also be highly breakable in nature, which incurs further costs to settings. Because of the nature of some digital devices, there is also the extra time requirement of ensuring that the devices are fully charged and remain charged throughout the day.

"The environment that we are in just doesn't lend itself because we have to pack everything away. And it's the feasibility especially with the digital observations" (Area B)

"Our budget is like £250 for equipment for the whole year" (Area C)

An issue raised by several practitioners was a worry over children's lack of language development from using digital technology, more specifically tablets. This is due to their attention and focus on the device, with its lack of support for multiple users. Practitioners sometimes felt that children were already experts in tablet use, and they needed to be providing additional experiences that the children would not otherwise get at home.

"We are still debating that because we don't particularly want our children using a lot of computers when we know that's what they use all day at home, we need to be providing for them here the opportunities that they won't get at home" (Area C)

"We have taken away our multimedia technology because the children are actually meeting all of those areas because they are always on the mums iPhones and iPads and digital things at home so they are actually at the end of their early learning goal in understanding because of that reason, so they don't need it here" (Area A)

Even though tablets were not seen to be promoting opportunities for language and communication, other digital devices were. It was emphasised that there needed to be a greater purpose for learning, and not just using ICT for ICT's sake.

"We don't have computers for children anymore, we've replaced them with digital electrical organ,- like a guitar, you hit the buttons it does all different things and sounds and music … they are using more language to actually talk to each other….on the computer and I'm not sharing, and it's mine and everything, they are working together at the organ, you can get 4 children on it" (Area A)

"If you give a child an iPad they will sit on it for hours and they will not come off it, and I think there is nothing wrong with quality social interactions rather than having their face stuck in an iPad all day" (Area C)

The final issue that arose was around e-safety needing to be considered, especially with regards to having photos on display in electronic picture frames, and posting information on social networking sites. This has been resolved in several ways, firstly by ensuring the digital frames are only in the nursery rooms and not in reception, and by using closed groups on social networks, so that videos/photos are not shared with people who do not have the rights to access it.

Practitioner networking

The HELLO programme aimed to increase networking opportunities, both within practitioners' own nursery and with other settings. Within practitioners' own settings there was a significant 33.4% point increase in those who 'strongly agree' that they work with their colleagues to improve

practice (Figure 21)[21]. Practitioners were more likely to 'strongly agree' that they worked with colleagues from other settings to improve their practice after taking part in HELLO; a 16.9% point increase, however, this was not significant (Figure 22) [22]. After participating in the HELLO programme both graphs demonstrate that networking had increased, achieving an objective of the project.

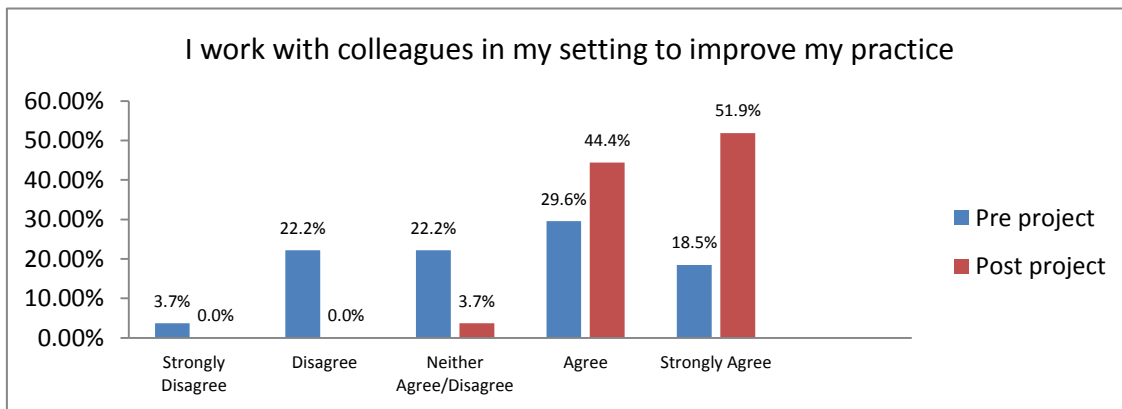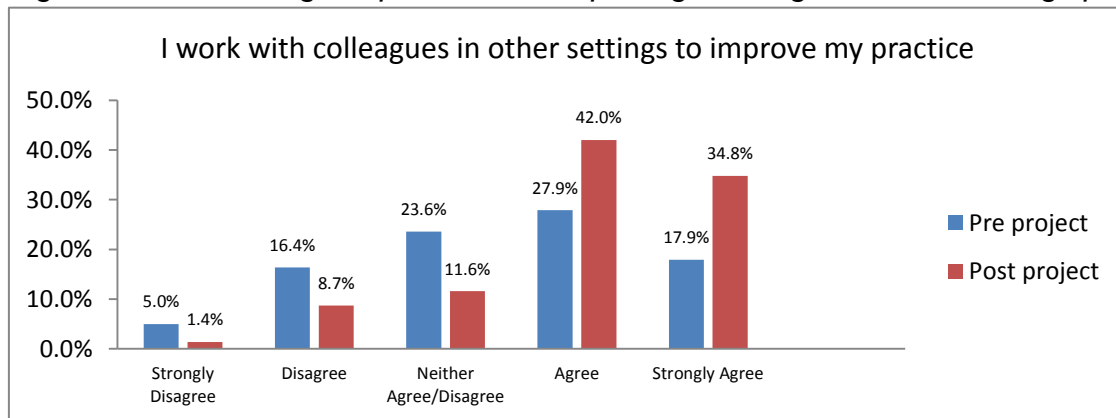*Figure 21: Percentage of practitioners reporting working with colleagues, pre and post HELLO*

Figure 22: Percentage of practitioners reporting working with other settings pre and post HELLO

Qualitative data to support practitioner networking

The qualitative data suggests practitioners are now more aware that they should be engaging in networking with other settings.

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[21] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were not significantly significant from pre-test scores (Z = -1.9, p >0.05).
[22] A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that post-test scores were statistically significantly higher than pre-test scores (Z = -2.5, p <0.05).

"We need to improve on working with people outside our setting and allowing others to offer help, support and guidance." (Survey Response)

However, even when settings find it difficult to network externally, they are networking within their own settings to share ideas between rooms, and between other local settings in their own nursery chains (if the nursery is part of a chain group).

"Apart from other [settings from my nursery chain] I do not make links with other settings to network or share best practice" (Survey Response)

"Staff meetings to cascade information about initiatives, moderation meetings around CLL targets; Released staff to be part of initiatives and training e.g. Lift off to Language; HELLO; ECERS." (Survey Response)

HELLO was also useful as it gave practitioners a focus to their networking; this ensured that they got the most out of their meeting.

"Generally positive, better when groups are smaller and have a particular purpose" (Survey Response)

More detailed information about practitioner networking can be found within the process evaluation report.

Post Survey Responses and Practitioner Reflections

This section of the report analyses the responses from the sixty seven participants who completed the post survey and reports on changes they believe they have seen within their setting in the last six months during completion of the HELLO project. These results are discussed separately to the rest of the report as they focus solely on reflection and not differences between personal beliefs at the start and end of the project.

Practitioners were asked to reflect on planning practices within the last six months, 55.9% of practitioners reported a small change in the way they plan CLL based activities and 32.2% reported a large change in their planning; only 11.9% reported no change over the six month project period. The qualitative survey data highlights that the changes in planning have been positive, especially in some settings that did not do much planning previously. These are all changes reported in the survey which have resulted whilst using HELLO:

"It wasn't really planned for [book use] we have started doing this now"

"We have changed the way we do our planning to fit in better with the children's needs"

"A section in each child's individual planning has been dedicated to communication, language and literacy."

"The children in need of intervention are taken as a small group for targeted work on a daily basis."

"Staff are more aware of the needs of the children and have had support from the SENCO with games and ideas for daily groups in toddlers and preschool rooms."

Another area that practitioners were asked to reflect on were the training provisions during the HELLO period. In the pre-survey practitioners reported they wanted more training to develop their confidence and understanding around early years CLL. This was followed up in the interviews and focus group discussions to collate thoughts on what training practitioners need, the three main areas were EAL, speech and language, and digital media.

'I think on the digital stuff would be good… get inspirational consultants in who are passionate about what they do is more meaningful than anything and to do it as a whole team and to do it alongside other teams who have different ideas.' (Area B)

'Staff are interested in creativity training, story rhymes and circle time training.' (Area B)

'As practitioners we only know so much and there's much more to it than what we are actually trained on.' (Area C)

In the interviews and focus group discussions, practitioners spoke about bespoke training, tailoring training to their setting's needs. During the project most practitioners agreed that they had access to relevant training which had enabled them to do their jobs. The qualitative survey data reported training had included Prevent, NVQ level 3 in language and communication, five to thrive and more general speech and language training. It is important to note that in some areas training was not specifically part of the HELLO project.

"Supportive team work, linking in with other agencies and projects, parent and partnership has increased due to confidence in practitioners after accessing training both in house and outside." *(Area C)*

Despite the fact that the majority of settings had access to training there were still a few who would like more training, the most notable area of request was in regards to communication and language:

"Since joining in 2014 I haven't received any training. I would like to progress in my job role but feel I need training." (Survey Response)

"I would like to see more training on communication, language and literacy, for all staff to access."(Survey Response)

'*It is really hard to find decent training.*' (Survey Response)

Conclusions

In conclusion, practitioners' confidence and understanding developed over the course of the project, as did their partnerships with parents. With significant improvements being seen in practitioners' confidence to identify key milestones, assess children's CLL and use activities with children that impact on CLL. After taking part in the project practitioners were also significantly more likely to report using more mark making to promote CLL within their setting. Partnerships with parents significantly improved, including improved practitioner confidence to talk to parents about the importance of CLL, reading stories, singing songs and mark making. Practitioners were also significantly more likely to understand how digital media could be used, and actually use digital media to improve CLL with children. Practitioners after taking part in HELLO were significantly more likely to work with colleagues in their own setting to improve their practices. However, it is important to remember this is only a small sample thus may not be representative of all practitioners.

The qualitative data presented shows a more holistic view of changes which occurred over the course of the project. For instance it highlights that there are still issues which need to be carefully considered with digital media; mostly around cost, training and ensuring that the technology is fit for purpose, whilst providing children with new experiences that are different to what they experience at home. The qualitative data presented a wealth of evidence to show that HELLO had increased practitioner awareness and knowledge of CLL and especially highlighted that networking between settings had vastly improved.

Recommendations

Due to the positive impact reported from the survey respondents, we recommend the following:

- Further roll out of the HELLO tool due to significant positive findings.
- To continue with the evaluation of the HELLO tool due to the low survey response and different implementation models across settings and areas.
- For the National Literacy Trust to provide ongoing support to help settings continue with their peer networking, in order to help with barriers such as time, money and focus.
- For more training to be provided in the area of speech and language, as well as digital technology use within the early years.