How can common SEND approaches and interventions be developed and embedded across a range of settings in the Rother and Rye area?

Executive summary

Two action learning sets of diverse Early Years (EY) settings sought to explore approaches and interventions intended to support children with special educational needs (SEND) whose requirements fell beneath the threshold for external agency intervention. They intended to discover if there was sufficient commonality and evidence for recommendations that could be applied systematically across the Rother area in East Sussex.

The practitioners employed a wide range of interventions intended to support learning and behaviour for learning. The action learning sets formed a professional community of learning that both challenged and supported the perspectives and intentions of individual practitioners, ranging from individual EY teachers to managers of several sites. The action learning cycle was conducted over two academic years. The participants maintained a reflective journal which was used in conjunction with set dialogue notes to form the majority of the content and findings in this report.

The findings of the report were that direct interventions with children were bespoke and rarely found commonality across settings. However it was possible to evidence processes regarding consistency of practice that arose from the research that would benefit EY SEND provision across the area. These processes were often low-cost in comparison to the impact.

The conclusion of the report proposes that consistency of practice through the application of data, professional dialogue, engagement of parents and the relationship with the new setting provide the best approach to SEND systems in Early Years settings. The report also notes that these processes are best supported through the creation of small-scale communities of professional learning, such as action learning sets. These focus provision, engage interest,

stabilise workload prioritization and foster professional practice in ways both anticipated and unanticipated by the participants.

It is hoped that, by sharing this report and the experiences of the participants professional learning can be accented more strongly towards an action learning based approach, to the benefit of children in settings across the area.

Research title.

How can common SEND approaches and interventions be developed and embedded across a range of settings in the Rother and Rye area?

Introduction.

In the current economic climate the education sector, in common with other public services, is experiencing the pressures of high performance expectations, widening demand and limited funding. In the context of Early Years (EY) provision the free hours entitlement, rising employment costs and reduced local authority capacity have created a situation where a cohort of children whose special educational needs (SEND) does not meet the threshold for external agency intervention are at risk of making a poor transition to school. There is a risk that the EY setting addresses the perceived need in a reactive and ad hoc manner. This can lead to the development of strategies that are effective on a day-to-day basis but that these are either not expanded as a systematic, setting-wide approach, or are not recorded in a manner that assesses impact and can be shared on transition.

Official figures indicate that Early Years SEND children are in-line with trend:

> *'There has been a steady increase over time in the percentage of pupils with SEN achieving a good level of development, in line with the increase for all pupils. In 2017/18, 24% of pupils with SEN achieved a good level of development; which is 1 percentage point higher than the figure for 2016/17 at 23%. There was also an increase of 1 percentage point in the percentage of pupils with no SEN who achieved a good level of development in 2017/18 to 77%, compared to 76% in 2016/17.'*[1]

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[1] Special educational needs: an analysis and summary of data sources

However, many practitioners report anecdotally that the changes in SEND screening and restrictions in external provision risk the creation of a cohort of children who have needs but fall beneath a threshold for external intervention and support. This then risks their transition from EY to school-based education.

The research project engaged a range of providers in exploring the strategies that worked for that cohort of sub-threshold SEND children. The intention was to be able to identify and disseminate the findings in such a manner that settings across the area would be able to benefit from the learning.

Contextual information.

The project was supported by the Laurel Trust, in association with Rother Teaching School Alliance, through the work of Early Years Excellence Hubs as a part of Rother and Rye Education Improvement Partnership. The project built on the work of the EY action learning set that operated on the same basis in the previous academic year, exploring effective strategies for school transition. The report was subjected to critical review by the University of Sussex.

At the outset the project included four school-based early years practitioners and eight pre-school early years practitioners. The settings included private and county-funded establishments, covering rural and urban areas within Rother and Rye EIP. The practitioners ranged from highly experienced managers with responsibility for multiple sites, through to relatively new practitioners in small settings. Not all of the participants were graduates and the majority had no prior experience of action learning.

The role of the EIP was to act as a trusted source of early years practitioners on behalf of the TSA. For three years the EIP has acted as the supporting framework for Early Years Excellence Hubs (EYEH), established by East Sussex County Council. One of the principal

responsibilities of the Hubs is to develop and share best practices in EY settings across the EIP. Rother TSA recognised that this made collaboration with the EIP a suitable fit as Laurel Trust supported research aligned with the moral and strategic purpose of the EYEH and provided a potential network through which to disseminate findings.

Rationale.

The hypothesis of the research question was that early years settings are experiencing the pressure of reducing external agency support. That requires them to be innovative in developing strategies to address special educational needs that sit beneath a threshold for external agency intervention. The practitioners engaged in the research were seeking to identify sustainable approaches applied in their setting and could be applicable in others and accessible to school-based contexts.

The challenge for the practitioners engaged in the research was to address the Early Learning Goals (2018). Research suggests that practitioners are sceptical about the potential impact of ELG - *'There were mixed views about whether children would be better prepared for Key Stage 1 as a result of the changes, and about whether the new ELGs were more or less challenging than before.'* [2] This may create a particular challenge where children have SEND that do not meet the threshold for external intervention, thereby demanding that the practitioners establish their own strategies for setting-based intervention. The recent Education Endowment Foundation EY Toolkit acknowledges the benefits of interventions that are multifaceted and aim to improve staff capacity

'Once early years provision is in place, improving the quality of provision, for example by training staff to improve the interaction between staff and children, appears to be more promising than increasing the quantity of provision (by

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[2] Early Years Foundation Stage Profile pilot | Projects

providing extra hours in the day), or changing the physical environment of early years settings. [3]

The majority of the interventions developed by the practitioners were related to play-based learning, parental engagement and the application of self-regulation strategies. The focus cohort of children exhibited a range of needs judged by the practitioner to be impairing learning progress. However they were unlikely to trigger significant external agency intervention. *'The available evidence suggests that play, carefully supported by adults, can help children to develop in both of these areas.*[4] This, perhaps, explains why the majority of the practitioner researchers chose play-based strategies as the basis for their setting-based interventions.

Self-regulation strategies encompasses a broad range of practitioner intervention. There is moderate evidence for them having a positive impact on progress. What benefit does occur may well be disproportionately in favour of the disadvantaged children

> *'There are some indications that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to begin nursery or reception with weaker self-regulation skills than their peers. As a result, embedding self-regulation strategies into early years teaching is likely to be particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.*[5]

The practitioners also quickly established the significance of parents in the strategies being employed. In doing so they also moved from the concept of simply engaging parents to involving them, a continuum identified in the work of Goodall and Montgomery[6] as where the

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[3] Early years interventions | Toolkit Strand
[4] Curriculum in the Early Years • Chartered College of Teaching
[5] Self-regulation strategies | EY Toolkit Strand
[6] Goodall and Montgomery (2014)

point of *'agency in relation to supporting children's learning is shared between parents and the school'* (pp10).

The research attempted to understand what the strategies and processes for setting-based SEND interventions could be and the extent to which the process of practitioner research in itself can support those developments. The majority of the practitioners engaged in the research had little or no previous experience of action learning. The research became as much about the benefits of practitioner research as it did the SEND interventions that the practitioners develop and apply.

It is hoped that the research leads to recommendations that support SEND systems and interventions, as well as guidance regarding the value of practitioner research in supporting the progress of children in early years.

Methodology.

The research was conducted using an action learning methodology. The key principle was that ownership of the research process be vested in the participants. Action learning provided a rigorous framework that supported and informed the investigation. The participants were divided into two geographically based action learning sets. It was originally intended that there would be three sets: one for a predominantly rural area, one for an urban area of deprivation and one for an urban area of greater affluence. During the formation phase the set for an urban area of deprivation was unable to progress beyond the expression of interest phase. Whereas East Sussex was (2015) in the second percentile in the deprivation score, 19.2% children in Rother grow up in low income families, compared to the East Sussex average of 18.6%, slightly above the national average. The settings were therefore realigned to include a slightly broader urban geographical range, drawing in practitioners from deprived wards in the area into one of the action learning sets.

The research was conducted over a single action learning cycle of five sessions, distributed over two academic years. It also included a preparation session in which the nature of action learning was explored in a guided fashion, and each set established its working parameters.

All of the practitioners were limited in the time available to engage in the action learning. This included time to conduct the enquiry in their setting and time to meet in the action learning sets. It proved difficult to mitigate against the constraints of time, especially in those settings where staffing was a struggle or for practitioners whose responsibilities included the management of one or more setting. It should be noted as evidence for the commitment of the practitioners that no practitioner missed more than one action learning set meeting and only one was unable to complete all of their agreed actions between set meetings.

The participants were all early years practitioners, directly engaged in the work of their setting. Half of the practitioners held leadership positions within their setting and one participant held a leadership position in across more than one setting. Four of the participants were school-based, while the others were drawn from a mixture of county council funded and private early years providers. The participants were all drawn from the geographical area supported by Rother Teaching School Alliance. All fell within the administrative boundaries of East Sussex County Council.

The participants were self-selecting in response to a proposal of engagement circulated jointly by Rother TSA and Rother & Rye Education Improvement Partnership. The EIP is a county supported cluster that includes three Early Years Excellence Hubs. Of those participants who expressed an interest in participating three had engaged in similar research during the previous academic year. The participants were then divided into two action learning sets.

It had been the original intention of the research to form three sets, however the two that were created provided a range of experience, broadly representative of the range of provision in the area and the cohort of children accessing early years provision. Three of the participants were

drawn from rural settings where issues of parental engagement and consistent attendance were particularly prominent in the local traveller community. Three of the participants drew the majority of their cohort from an urban ward of high social and economic deprivation. Four practitioners were in town centre settings with a mixed cohort of children. The participants were almost exactly divided into private and state funded provision. It should be noted that, reflecting the gender balance of the early years sector, only one of the participants was male.

Self selection was employed to formulate the action learning sets because it appeared to offer the greatest potential for sustained commitment from the participants. Faced with the challenge of conducting practitioner research with a busy working life it was felt best that the participants have an active interest from the outset and clearly understood the committed entailed in engaging with the research. That only two participants failed to complete the full action learning cycle and levels of attendance were high throughout the cycle may be seen as evidence that this selection process was appropriate.

Guidance for the format and activities of action learning was drawn primarily from Mike Pendle et al[7]. The action learning sets were self-selecting and autonomous. The participants recognised their mutual professional expertise and employed the set meetings as an opportunity to question, support and develop each line of enquiry. The learning took place within the overarching focus question but allowed for each participant to explore the issues in their own professional context. As practitioner researchers the participants were careful to adhere to the principle of informed consent within their setting.

Each of the sets determined a set of ground rules for their operation. The ground rules established the amount of air time for each practitioner, the nature of the questions and support from the rest of the set and the expectations regarding next step target setting. The urban set

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[7] Pendle, M et al (2011)

included practitioners who had engaged in action learning previously. It was notable that this shortened the extent of set-up time.

The focus of the practitioner research was inductive. As a methodology action learning offered a framework that was readily comprehensible to those participants who had not encountered it previously. It offered the reassurance of a collectively established framework of operation, and provided a mutually supportive context. To have then imposed an deductive supposition on the participants would have constricted their capacity to identify and employ strategies best suited to their setting that could then be correlated in the action learning sets in order to identify commonalities. All of the participants were aware of the overarching study question at the outset. Each then had the professional autonomy to identify a suitable cohort of children and to develop and deploy the strategies that may move towards a better understanding of commonalities in approach.

In order to best capture the findings from the action learning cycle a journal was drafted, shared with the participants, amended and then adopted by both action learning sets. The journal was employed by all of the participants both as an aid for reflection and a tool to support their part in the project as a whole. The journal specified the overarching key question of the research, ensuring that this remained a focus throughout the cycle. The participants were required by the journal to describe their setting in their own words and to define a setting-based issue that tied in with the key question. For example, one practitioner from a *'small community pre-school with six members of staff*[8] defined her setting-based focus as *'Paying particular attention to the three Prime Area of development, my focus is to support Child X to enjoy participating and engaging in activities that are not wholly of his choosing; encouraging him to have a positive attitude towards learning and to be 'ready to learn' when he transitions to school.'* This setting-based focus was explored through dialogue in the initial set meeting

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[8] Quoted from participant's learning journal.

and co-formulated with the other participants. The learning journal also included a checklist that required activities such as sharing the ethical guidelines and meeting the expectations of GDPR. The journal was then divided into repeating sections for each of the action learning set meetings, with space for reflective inter-sessional notes. Most participants kept the journal in an online format, two used the journal in a printed and handwritten format, and one diverged from the format altogether and employed documentation that was used by her setting to record actions and progress in regard to children. The (broadly) shared format of recording and reflection enabled common themes and chronological progression to be drawn out at the conclusion of the action learning cycle.

The framework of the research relied on certain assumptions for its operation. The first was that the participants were all experts in their field, able to apply a reflective approach to the development of strategies in their setting and sufficiently professionally robust to support and challenge one another in action learning set meetings. The research also assumed a willingness on behalf of the parents of the target children to engage in the strategies that were developed and employed, and that they had the capacity to feedback on their effectiveness. Finally the research assumed the need for a lead drawn from the TSA, with experience of facilitating action learning sets.

The five underlying principles of the research were drawn from the Academy of Social Sciences (AcSS) 2015 in-depth consultation with its member learned societies (including BERA).

a. Social science is fundamental to a democratic society, and should be inclusive of different interests, values, funders, methods and perspectives.

b. All social science should respect the privacy, autonomy, diversity, values and dignity of individuals, groups and communities.

c. All social science should be conducted with integrity throughout, employing the most appropriate methods for the research purpose.

d. All social scientists should act with regard to their social responsibilities in conducting and disseminating their research.

e. All social science should aim to maximise benefit and minimise harm.

From this operating principles were developed that were transparent to all participants through discussion and development in the initial action learning set meetings. The principles were shared with and made available to all responsible adults participating in the research. Such consensual participation demanded that participating adults in the setting and, where required, adults with parental responsibility for participating children were made aware of the research activity. The practitioner researchers did everything they could to ensure that all potential participants understood, as well as they are able, what was involved in a study: why their participation was necessary, what they would be asked to do, what would happen to the information they provided, how that information would be used and how and to whom it will be reported.

The practitioner researchers endorsed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC); the placing the best interests of the child as the primary consideration, taking into account the rights and duties of those who have legal responsibility for children, such as those who act in guardianship (parents, for example) or as 'responsible others' (that is, those who have responsibility for the welfare and wellbeing of the participants, such as professionals in the setting). This involved, where appropriate, gaining the consent of those responsible for children, such as a parent or guardian. The researchers respected the right of participants to withdraw from the research and to withdraw some or all of the content as it applied to them.

The researchers acknowledged safeguarding and privacy by: agreeing a framework for

professional confidentiality in the action learning set operation; ensuring the anonymity of children, adults and the setting by applying alternative appellations, and removing learning journal images that identify children, adults and settings specifically; and adhering to the safeguarding guidelines of each setting where research is conducted. The practitioners considered that a control group may be viewed as desirable but determined not to adopt this approach.

Data protection in the research was framed by the UK Data Protection Act (1998) and the GDPR that supersedes it, which confers the right to private citizens to have access to any personal data that is stored, and which relates to them.

The research was principally qualitative in nature. There were several reasons that justified this approach. Firstly, the nature of the children who were the focus cohort. They were, by definition, operating with multiple issues impairing their learning and social skills. It would have been highly problematic and reductive to attempt a quantitative definition of those issues and the small steps interventions that formed a part of the strategies developed and deployed as part of the action learning cycle. Secondly, the operation of an action learning set is one where the richness of dialogue becomes a natural feature of its operation, captured in part in the set facilitator's notes. The action learning journal, with its hurried observations and periodic reflections, forms the principal mechanism to capture thoughts, activities and interactions between the sessions. Both of these aspects tended to emphasise qualitative, rather than quantitative, data. Thirdly, while the fact of the action learning cycle falling across two academic years provided some opportunity for summative assessment of impact, the participants felt that it was potentially disingenuous to suggest, as an emphasis on quantitative data may have done, a direct correlation between the strategies employed and the outcomes achieved. Fourthly, sample sizes are too small to make viable claims to the significance of any quantitative findings. Rather, small scale qualitative findings are offered to the reader to

triangulate with their own experience and make generalisations for themselves if they find resonance with their own setting.

The research project encountered a number of limitations that influenced its activities and findings. The practitioners had very limited experience of action learning. One had encountered it as part of her degree programme, several years previously. Two had engaged in an action learning cycle supported by the Laurel Trust, in the previous academic year. None of the other practitioners had any experience of action learning as a methodology for professional development. This led to some reluctance to engage in the early set meetings, which was overcome by the conclusion of the cycle.

The inability of the action learning set from an area of urban deprivation to form and operate reflects an in-built limitation in the research methodology that was not considered at the outset but became apparent in the formation phase. The settings in the area that did not form an action learning set all experienced difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, had a high proportion of children with multiple needs and had low levels of parental engagement. The proactive nature of action learning, with its dependence on autonomous engagement by the practitioners presumes a degree of stability and capacity that was most likely to be lacking in the settings that, potentially, would have most benefited from the learning derived from the action learning cycle. This limitation was reflected later in the action learning cycle as, of the two practitioners who withdrew in mid-cycle, one was situated in a ward noted for its high levels of deprivation and the other, while geographically in the fringe of that area, drew significant numbers of its children from there. This is not to suggest that action learning of this nature was not valued or is not important for all settings, simply a recognition that this limitation may be more likely in areas of urban deprivation and that mitigation strategies should have been considered prior to commencing the research.

An unexpected limitation was the degree of challenge within the action learning sets. As proactive professionals, experiencing very similar pressures in their varied contexts there was a tendency for group identity to form quickly in the action learning set meetings. While this had the benefit of encouraging mutual support and sharing of best practice, it acted as a limiting factor on the willingness of such mutually respectful practitioners to challenge the preconceptions and planned actions of one another.

Findings and results[9].

Content analysis of the action learning journals identified eight themes in the findings of which four were dominant in their impact. An open first reading was used to establish broad themes across the journals. These were then checked against the facilitator notes to ensure that they had been the subject of dialogue in the set meetings. The content analysis consisted of identifying the frequency of reference in the learning journal, correlating that with the set facilitator notes of dialogue in the action learning set meetings and the themes of each participant's agreed action steps. Frequency was determined on the basis of consistent referencing in each stage of the cycle and in the reflective comments. Where a learning journal referred to a similar theme but employed different terminology to another participant this was accepted on the basis that it expressed a comparable intent.

The emerging themes, in descending order of dominance, were:

1. Consistency of practice through the application of data.

2. Professional dialogue.

3. Relationship with the new setting.

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[9] All quotations in this section are derived from the participants' learning journals.

4. Engagement of parents[10].

5. External learning environments.

6. Funding.

7. Small steps CPD.

8. Deployment of IT.

The four dominant themes were consistency of practice through the application of data, professional dialogue, engagement of parents and the relationship with the new setting. Each of these themes occurred at least twice in more than fifty percent of the learning journals, occupied a significant degree of the action learning set meeting discussion and were referenced in agreed action steps. The remaining themes tended to be either more specific to individual settings and cohorts, or significant for a limited time within the action learning cycle. None of the features operated in isolation and in the four main themes especially there was overlap that reflected the multifaceted nature of professional practice.

<u>Consistency of practice through the application of data.</u>

The most frequently noted aspect of this theme was the importance of recording information that supports next steps in interventions and value of strategies. Without developments being noted, recorded and shared it was not possible to assert that there was consistency of practice in more than a broad brush sense. By emphasising the importance of accumulating sufficient accurate evidence of the effectiveness of the strategies employed several of the participants found it easier to distinguish the strategies that were effective with the target cohort. This saved time and avoided duplication. In order to achieve this they often discovered that existing

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[10] The term 'parent' is used throughout to indicate biological, adoptive and other carers with key responsibility for the child.

support was converted into a more systematic format. For example, one journal recorded *'For the next activity to test children's knowledge of core signs, throughout the/a child's session I will use every sign both verbally and just the sign to see if they can recall it.'* These approaches were often low-tec and sustainable in nature, and could be something as simple as using a shared folder to retain and apply on-going information and interventions across staff involved. One participant observed that this supported her as a manager in achieving a whole setting agreement about what effective practice would look like in regard to the deployed strategies, thereby benefiting children beyond the target cohort. However another participant identified in her journal that the unguided accumulation of small step data made it difficult for some practitioners to distinguish patterns of progress. This suggests that, in order to be more than a paper exercise, consistency of recorded practice in the setting requires the manager to provide staff with benchmarks that record and celebrate positive impact where it occurs. This may reflect multiple aspects of EY practice: that several staff may be in operation in the environment at any one time, that EY settings often have a range of part and full time staff, and that the children access the setting with varying frequency and at differing times.

Linked with achieving consistency of practice in the setting is the quality and application of data. Several of the participants felt that there was significant benefit derived from sharing issues with group of practitioners in the set and drawing from their experience to generate new activities to support learning. However, to be effective in the action learning set and in the EY setting the data needed to be definable, sharable and relevant. One participant recorded early in her journal, after the first set meeting, that developing interventions that sustain progress from the starting point required her to re-examine how data was applied in the setting. This was echoed by other participants who reflected that a focus on particular aspects of learning, even when multiple needs appeared to call for more, was important in order not to diffuse efforts. Several of the participants recorded that the greatest progress was achieved when the range of strategies could be evidenced and was kept focused. This also enabled the sharing

successful outcomes with other staff in order to ensure more consistent practice. Using data gathering and record keeping to assess effectiveness and share strategies employed by different staff reinforced the benefits of consistent practice: *'During staff meeting talked to staff about why we [are] doing this and the benefits. Staff all on board and ready to put it in place.'* One participant noted that the advantages of the application of data was that it was particularly successful where a sub-SEND referral child needed very regular reinforcement of activities but also sufficient variety to ensure continued engagement.

Professional dialogue.

The main theme of professional dialogue incorporated three elements: dialogue as a development strategy for staff within the setting, evidence-supported dialogue to challenge features that do not support progress within the setting, and dialogue with the school to which the child will transition. The first element is related to the impact of engaging in the action learning. The other two elements are drawn from a closer focus on the consistent application of data to practice.

In the later action learning set sessions several of the participants discussed the impact of the action learning set conversations on their own child-focused dialogue in the setting. The action learning set session format of active listening and questions that open thinking about different strategies proved to be productive and encouraged the participants to adopt a coaching model applied to the integration and development of other staff. Having discovered the professional benefits of respecting and exploring fields of expertise the participants wanted to apply similar techniques in their setting.

The garnering of small steps data provided immediate evidence of the adverse impact of staff absence on progress of focus group children. This contrasted with non-cohort children where the impact was harder to assess because it was not gathered with the same small steps frequency. Having acquired this insight two of the setting managers recorded that they felt

more empowered to challenge staff absence and evidence of inconsistent practice in the setting.

<u>Relationship with new setting.</u>

All of the settings had strategies for information sharing with schools in place. Engagement in the practitioner research lead several of the participants to review those strategies. The action learning focus cohort made clear the potential for regression when a child enters a new setting, especially where distance prevents on-going dialogue. One participant from a rural setting noted that a focus child transitioning to a school in an adjacent county virtually disappeared in terms of being able to share effective practice. This contrasted with those participants with more geographically immediate schools who were able to share with staff from new setting evidenced effective strategies before the transition took place. For example, one practitioner recorded

> *'I have met with X's new teacher and shared 'what works' well for her and where support may be needed in the hope that she will receive continued support that builds on her interests.'*

Even for those school-based settings participating in the project felt that engagement in the project had increased their awareness of the importance of accurate and detailed strategies being carefully shared with the relevant professionals in the following year, with school-based participant deciding to retain intervention groups and strategies created as part of the project post-transition.

The sustained dialogue with key staff in the setting that the children are transitioning to was felt to be most useful where it focused on key strategies that, as a result of the project, the setting had evidence for successful impact. One participant noted that, because of the project, this was the first time that the setting decided to bring parents into the discussion with the new

setting and another noted that a parent stated *'if my older child had had this much support in his transition then I don't think he would have struggled as much.'*

<u>Engagement of parents.</u>

The majority of the participants referred in set meetings or in their reflective journals Importance of parental engagement. It was felt that the engagement of parents had been enhanced because of the identification of a focus cohort of children for the project. This encouraged more regular and targeted dialogue improved the understanding of the child's needs in the setting and at home. On occasions parents disclosed for the first time to the participant behaviours experienced at home. The participant speculated in the following action learning meeting that this may have been because she had shared the project's ethics statement and protocols with parents, giving them the confidence to then hold a conversation in which they felt quite vulnerable. As professionals, she suggested, the setting had taken it for granted that parents understood that such conversations were both helpful and confidential; whereas this experience suggested otherwise. It also became clear that parents required support in learning strategies that reinforced the setting-based interventions. *'I am encouraged by this [parent expression of interest] and I am encouraged that this will be a way to open up further conversations in the future.'*

Because the action learning project operated on a cycle of small step action steps several participants noted that they adopted a strategy of the early sharing of strategies with parents to apply in home circumstances. The action learning cycle helped to create a sense of a developmental and experimental approach to supporting the focus cohort children, thereby removing some of the pressure for the setting to arrive at a given solution before sharing it with the parents. *'I opted to discuss face to face with mum regarding Outdoor Classroom visits rather than writing a letter'.* participants also record that getting more regular feedback from

parents supported them assessing the effectiveness of strategies and reinforcing or adapting as required.

> *'It was a useful conversation as I was also able to identify things that X enjoys at home, and can use to support purposeful play' and, in another journal, the benefit of on-going conversations 'rather than providing them [parents] with a letter that may be lost or discarded.'*

Based on this experience two settings adopted the practice of bringing parents into setting to observe strategies in action, others created an individually specific pack of activities for home use in holiday periods. One participant decided to take parents to the library so that the parents of the focus children could obtain library cards for their children. This led to action learning set discussion considering how the impact of the pack could be judged. Workshops for parents achieved a mixed response with some settings having few or no parents attending. Greater success was achieved by sharing strategies through the setting Facebook page, especially where this could be linked to additional resources.

<u>Minor themes.</u>

The remaining themes tended to be more specific to only one or two of the practitioners participating in the project.

Two of the settings had a particular focus on the application of IT. In one case this was employed in the setting to enhance progress in mark making and letter formation. This applied only to the focus children. In the other case the benefits extended beyond the focus children as the setting expanded its deployment of social media and video to share key strategies each week online.

Funding was recorded as an issue in the reflective journals of three participants. In all three cases a similar trend was noted even though the issues were different: the purchase of new

kit, the deployment of other adults in the setting and funding professional development. The trend was that the project provided better evidence and a clearer rationale for the discussion with senior leaders about the issue.

Likewise professional development was also a theme for three settings across the two action learning groups. In all cases the participants recorded the need to train staff in small doses to deploy strategies effectively. Small steps CPD was intended to both share strategies and celebrate successful outcomes. The participants felt that, as a result of the project they were now recognising the importance of CPD to bring strategies into consistent and confident use across the setting.

In the strategies employed by the practitioners, two stressed the value of external learning environments in supporting the learning of the children in the focus cohort.

What have we learnt?[11]

<u>Intended outcomes.</u>

1.   Better alignment around the needs of the child.

The setting practice with regard to SEND improved because of a closer alignment of adults around the child to support their learning *'This also highlights the need to be working together as [a] team with other professionals and how vital this is to meet the child's need.'* Another participant recorded that this required an increased leadership focus, *'I have been observing this [interaction levels] weekly as some practitioners were not recognising our agreement about what constitutes quality interaction.'*

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[11] Quotations are taken directly from participants learning journals.

The research and strategies developed through it had a beneficial impact on individual focus children. Some learning journals noted the impact on speech and language development.

> *'Child A - is using the telephones in yr1 and is having speech and language intervention. He is improving and understandable 70% of the day.'*; and *'The impact on my focus child has been evident in her speech development. She began to use more language freely during play interests. Her speech went from mainly single words and on occasions 2 word sentences to 5-7 word sentences on occasions.'*

2.   Improved behaviour for learning.

While others recorded the beneficial impact on behaviour for learning, *'Children have shown eagerness and willingness to participate in these activities.'* and, from a different participant, *'much fewer incidents at nursery, approximately 60% reduction from Feb to June.'* In summarising the impact one participant wrote

> *'The intended outcomes have been met with children either making significant progress and no longer at risk of delay in communication and language, or making significant progress but still requiring support to ensure that they meet a good level of development.'*

Several learning journals recorded a beneficial impact beyond the focus cohort. *'Following the general use throughout the setting with all children X is becoming more willing to participate in less desirable activities.'*; in a second journal,

> *'We shall continue to monitor the use of this [use of IT to improve letter formation], and are eager to buy enough stylus for every iPad to have one. We are also eager to roll it out into the whole group name writing session'*;

and, in another journal,

> *'I also took on ideas learnt from other's airtime and discussion during the action learning. That would benefit other children in the setting (eg: learning to carry a tray, emotion faces - looking in the mirror to see expressed emotion).'*

In considering the impact on a focus child another participant recorded that *'we have started small group work with children who are struggling to establish friendships with the setting as it was so successful in this [focus child's] case, a method we had not considered before.'*

3.   Improved setting practice.

Other journals also observed a beneficial impact on setting practice. One participant recorded that *'We are quickly able to put interventions into place and are aware of those children who do not require immediate help.'* A different journal concluded that

> *'The setting I manage was recently inspected and graded Outstanding. I shared the action research project with her [the inspector], and the impact it had had on myself, the team, the child and the setting - of which the inspector was highly complimentary.'*

Unintended outcomes.

1.   Changes in practice.

A number of unintended positive outcomes emerged, principally relating to the professional impact of the development of reflective practice.

In learning journals and action set meetings the participants seemed especially appreciative of the benefits derived from sharing practice and experience. This enabled, for example, professional practice to be cross-referenced where there appeared to be common issues.

> '*Following another member of the group sharing that the child whom they are focusing on displays anxiety and anxious behaviours, I talked about the kind of anxious behaviours that X displays too. This wasn't something that I had ever delved into, despite noticing, but it really made me reflect.*'

A different participant recorded a similar unintended benefit. Engagement in the research encouraged individual and shared reflection. She noted the benefits of this experience and then applied it to her leadership within the setting. This led to more effective team operation: '*Deeper reflective thinking among the staff team, which I would like to continue in the future.*'

2.   Improved transition.

Several participants felt that an intended benefit was a greater investment in bespoke transition. This may have arisen from a desire to ensure that the bespoke interventions were not lost in the process of transition or a recognition that improved professional dialogue across settings would benefit the children and parents.

> '*For each child who was previously referred to ISEND or had received targeted support from ISEND, a transition meeting was set up with the pre-school SENCO, primary school SENCO, EYFS lead, parents and ISEND. This was something that we had not done before, but it was well received by all.*'

Another practitioner also observed that

'*I would like to ensure that we continue to work closely with the children in reception once they have left us. I feel this would benefit them hugely, adding familiarity to their transition and continued support.*'

That conclusion was echoed in another learning journal where the participant stated

'The biggest unintended impact on our setting has been the feeling that we need to continue to be a voice for the children even once they have transitioned to school, this project has been great in allowing us to see how much impact such a strong focus on one area of need can have on a child and this support may continue to be required beyond their last day with us. We need to continue to be children's voices as the relationship built up from their time with us is so important, whether this be meeting with the SENCO, the class teacher or visiting the child in school.'

3.   Better professional connections.

Several action learning journals described the unintended benefit that came from the professional community established through the set meetings - the dialogue that helped professional practice *'the consensus tended to be quality over quantity'* and, from another participant, *'action learning has been hugely influential on my confidence as a practitioner.'*

Conclusion and recommendations.

With the caveat that this report is formed from small scale practitioner research we can derive some unambiguous conclusions regarding the potential to adopt common SEND interventions and processes across the area.

The first conclusion is that focused interventions have a broader impact. The interventions employed by the practitioners ranged from the deployment of IT in the form of tablets, specific

strategies for use in outdoor learning areas, to a more effective use of Makaton. Each intervention was bespoke to the cohort or individual child. None of the participants felt able to recommend that their intervention be adopted as a wholesale recommendation across the area. However, some interventions did prove to apply beneficially across the setting. In one case Makaton was expanded into a whole setting approach; in another micro-interventions practiced on a daily basis of action, monitor and impact was expanded to include a wider range of children and will operate in the following year; and in another case the use of iPads and software in the formation of letters and words has proved to have benefits when applied outside the target cohort. In no case did the participant record that an intervention proved to be solely beneficial for the target child or children. This suggests that individual or small cohort interventions, well-managed, have a tidal effect in that what raises one raises all.

The second conclusion is that commonality is to be found in the processes, more than interventions. The processes that present themselves as being applicable across the area fall into three categories:

1. Moving from parental engagement towards parental participation enhances the progress of children. The process of developing strategies, implementing and reviewing them in an action learning context encouraged a role for parents that moved from the setting aiming to engage them to the setting desiring their participation. Where, with very good intentions, the method of communication was by letter or open sessions the level of parental engagement was low or non-existent. In the action learning set dialogue many of the participants concurred with those participants who expressed frustration at sessions intended to support parents where only a scant handful attended. It was the experience of participants that directly focused actions, intended to foster a participatory approach, had the greatest impact even though it applied to a limited number of children. So, for example, a setting was able to draw

mutual benefit from discussing learning strategies in play with a parent because they (the parents) felt empowered to share what worked at home and, in another case, co-develop approaches and materials to be used at home during the holidays. A similar benefit was experienced when a setting shifted its transition strategies to actively supporting parental dialogue at the point of transition for the setting. It is the conclusion of this report that parental engagement is best obtained through the use of social media and online approaches, such a promoting the Makaton sign of the week or videoing a play strategy for parents to try at home; while parental participation is best achieved through a more time intensive focus on face to face dialogue in the context of co-development and assessment impact.

2. Small step cycles of identification, intervention and reflection are sustainable and have the potential to provide systemic benefits. The action learning cycle provided a time frame greater than the 'in the moment' granularity of day to day activities, where progress may occur but on an ad hoc and often unrecorded manner, while at the same time being a shorter time frame than that of annual action and review. It is the conclusion of this report that the five point action and reflection cycle enables practitioners to assess progress and provide sufficient time to gain an understanding of the impact of any one strategy. It also constrained the capacity to take on new features in a manner that did not adversely affect workload.

3. Professional development and communication, operating at a small-scale, have lasting benefits. In the unintended benefits the majority of the participants expressed a belief that, by creating a small-scale community of professional learning, they had benefited professionally. In several cases this was mirrored in the setting, with a more explicit professional dialogue about specific steps and the encouragement of a more experiential approach to professional practice. It is the conclusion of this report that

encouraging small-scale communities of professional learning within or between settings is financially sustainable and brings a professional curiosity that benefits more than the intended cohort.

Recommendations for area leaders, county council representatives and strategic leaders.

Consideration should be given to encouraging cross-setting professional learning groups. The experience of the practitioners in this research is that engagement increased professional confidence, developed practice in the setting and supported the formulation of bespoke strategies for individual children and families.

Encouragement could take the form of small scale funding to offset the cost of releasing a member of staff from each setting. It may also be undertaken in training action learning facilitators to guide professional learning groups and collate their findings. Based on the resources created for this research it may be advisable to create support pack for nascent professional learning groups and, perhaps, encourage those practitioners who have already experienced its benefits to share their enthusiasm with new recruits.

Recommendations for setting managers.

This research found that best practice was fostered when the setting focused on a limited number of aspects to develop with a focus child or cohort. There were multiple beneficial effects of improving one or two areas. Staff confidence improved because the activities appeared achievable. The aspirations for improvement were easily described to parents. The impact on workload was minimised.

Forming practitioner research groups encouraged professional development in a sustainable and non-threatening manner. Where the practitioners in a group are engaged in professional research all expertise and experience is equally valued. The lack of judgment encourages

risk-free experimentation. Several practitioners referred to rediscovering a love of their work and a passion for the progress of the children.

The researcher practitioners also discovered that the experiential nature of their activity encouraged a participatory approach with parents, improving home-setting communication and supporting the application of new strategies at home as well as in the setting.

Recommendations for Early Years practitioners.

The practitioners in this report all described the benefits of stepping outside the day-to-day process of 'doing' the role. By participating in a collective process of reflection they created a new and supportive professional network. They benefited from different perspectives and felt valued by their peers.

Dissemination.

It is intended that this report will be of benefit to settings across the area. This may be in the form of supporting the activities of Early Years Excellence Hub leads or informing the practice of individual settings. Dissemination will be structured through a broad spectrum of forums and media. The full report will be offered to East Sussex County Council, with an executive summary available for distribution through county online channels. A short video will be produced, where the participants share the impact of their engagement and the rationale behind the main conclusions of the report. This will be supported by associated training material for establishing action learning sets as a forum for professional reflection and dialogue. Linked to the full report is an offer of providing a face to face briefing at county-wide events such as Primary Area Board meetings, EIP Strategic meetings and EYEH meetings.

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