University of Southampton

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Communication and Language Development in Young Children: A case-study evaluation of training for early years practitioners

by

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ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF LAW, ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

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COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN YOUNG CHILDREN: A CASE-STUDY EVALUATION OF TRAINING FOR EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS

By Kirsty Elizabeth Ward

A small scale, case-study evaluation was carried out on a pilot training programme for early years practitioners. The programme used was the 'Communicating Matters' materials, published by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES 2006), which was designed to support the development of practitioners' understanding and skills in relation to children's speech, language and communication. Effective skills in the area of language and communication are considered critical to academic achievement and later life chances.

  The evaluation aimed to highlight issues of programme implementation and practitioner learning. The objectives of the study were related to identifying whether practitioners had gained knowledge about key areas of language and communication development and whether they were able to reflect on and identify how they would implement knowledge and skills gained from the programme. In addition, the evaluation sought to understand the process of implementation and identify issues to be considered in future delivery. A mixed methods approach to the evaluation was used to obtain data through questionnaire feedback from participants and interview data from programme trainers.

  Results indicated that practitioners had benefitted from the programme, at least in the short-term. Participants reported improved knowledge about the development of speech, language and communication and many identified key changes that they planned to make to their behaviour, in addition to strategies that they intended to use to support children. Further longer-term investigation is required in order to make more comprehensive claims about the success of the programme with respect to the retention and application of learning and outcomes for children. The implementation of the programme was examined and difficulties with the length and expectation of the training programme were identified along with other issues related to professional development for early years practitioners.

Declaration of Authorship

I, Kirsty Ward, declare that the thesis entitled 'Communication and Language Development in Young Children: A case-study evaluation of training for early years practitioners' and the work presented in the thesis are both my own, and have been generated by me as a result of my own original research. I confirm that:

- this work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
- where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
- where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
- where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
- I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
- where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
- none of this work has been published before submission.

Signed:

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Date:

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Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to acknowledge and than those involved most directly with the 'Communicating Matters' programme, especially the trainers who supported the data collection and the participants whose time was given to completing the questionnaires.

Secondly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Ian Bryant for his advice, support and constructive feedback during the completion of this work and in particular thank him for always ensuring that I always went away feeling positive from our meetings. Furthermore, I am particularly grateful to colleagues in the Educational Psychology Service including Julia Powell, Hilary Robbins and Phil Stringer who in various ways have helped develop my thinking, acted as critical friends, provided advice and most importantly have renewed my enthusiasm and challenged my self-doubt when needed.

Thirdly, my thanks need to go to my family for their support during the completion of this thesis (and beyond). I would like to take this opportunity to thank my parents for their support during the completion of my doctorate course but also for their on-going encouragement throughout my educational career -as without that I would not have got to this point in the first place. I am also grateful to my parents-in law, Jane and Ted Joisce, for providing childcare whilst I completed the writing up of the work and to Ted for proof-reading the original draft. I certainly need to thank my husband, Neil, for his constant emotional and practical support over the past few years and for helping me to create time and space to complete this thesis.

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Values Statement

The completion of this evaluation has represented a significant personal journey for me where a number of issues have arisen worthy of thought and reflection. The issues often presented tensions and ethical considerations to me as an evaluator and frustrations that needed to be acknowledged, managed and tolerated.

One such issue was related to the level of control that I was able to have as an evaluator. The extent to which I was able to exert control over the situation was variable and sometimes very limited. Having to accept that there were elements of the programme that were always going to be beyond my control was, to a certain extent, personally challenging. However, on reflection I understood the need to question whether I would ever be able to gain the control I might desire over a given situation and whether in an evaluative context it is indeed appropriate (or helpful) to try and attempt to create this level of control. This led me to consider the question about how much control I did need over a situation (in order to satisfy myself and the constraints of the evaluation design) and whether indeed it was right to try to control the programme implementation in order to gain such control –where this might potentially impact in some way on the programme implementation.

As an evaluator, I think I became focused on trying to quantify some form of change in the participants (knowledge, attitudes and behaviour) as a result of the programme. Having had to adapt the initial design of the evaluation which would have hopefully achieved this through collecting recordings of adult-child dialogue, I tried to achieve this data through some form of pre- and post-programme measures. The construction and results of these were not particularly satisfying (in terms of the design of a data collection tool and the information it provided). Indeed, it probably did not contribute significantly to the eventual findings. Given the formative nature of the evaluation I was trying to carry out, and its purpose of looking at implementation issues for the programme, it may have been more productive and informative to have studied the associated personal narratives that accompanied the programme development and delivery. Considering in this way how those involved in the programme experienced it may have yielded a greater depth and authenticity in terms of the data content and may have been more appropriate given the size of the eventual sample.

On further reflection, I think the way in which I developed the evaluation design represented a personal tension for me about needing to have some form of quantitative measure of change. There are probably two key factors that influenced this need. Firstly, I think my personal background in psychology meant that I was somewhat drawn back to a more positivist approach to research, despite struggling to make the design fit the given context. Secondly, this view has likely been further reinforced in the context of working in an environment where the over-riding interest is in the outcomes and perceived 'value for money' of projects and programmes. However this desire for 'hard data' and evidence of quantifiable behaviour change is often present in the context of very complicated social and organisational environments.

Whilst clearly I need to be aware of and pay respect to the advantages and limitations of a given methodology, I think as a researcher I also need to be able to more confidently consider a range of approaches and justify why a certain approach might be the most appropriate to the presenting context and questions of an evaluation. Considering more critically the approach needed will hopefully yield more useful information to those commissioning the study and to those involved in a given programme and provide more satisfying outcomes as an evaluator.

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Abbreviations

CLL	Communication, Language and Literacy
CPD	Continuing professional development
CWDC	Children's Workforce Development Council
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
ECM	Every Child Matters
EECU	Early Education and Childcare Unit
EPPE	The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
LA	Local Authority
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
SATs	Standard Attainment Tests
SLCN	Speech, language and communication needs

Introduction: context and aims of the study

The importance of language and communication skills, for both children and adults, is widely recognised by educationalists. The ability to communicate effectively and express oneself typically underpins other areas of children's development, including social, emotional and cognitive aspects of learning. Furthermore, such abilities are fundamental life skills in both social and employment contexts. They are relied upon on a daily basis.

There appears to be increasing concern amongst early childhood educators about the development of the language and communication skills of many of our youngest children. Moreover, this area of development may not have been given the emphasis it deserves in the education of children and young people in recent years.

A report published by *I CAN,* a national charity focusing on promoting children's communication skills (I CAN, 2006), emphasises the importance of communication and the impact of weak skills in this area. Entitled 'The Cost to the Nation of Children's Poor Communication' the report identifies what it describes as three of the contemporary issues related to children's language and communication (p.3). These are listed below and given further explanation:

1. ***The growing recognition of the scale of children's poor communication***

   Research by Law et al. (2000) suggests that about 10% of children have complex or persistent speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). In addition, there appears to be growing concern about the number of children with more generally delayed communication skills. Research suggests this is particularly the case in some areas of deprivation (e.g. Locke *et al.* 2002) and a sudy carried out in Stoke on Trent in 2001 indicated that in some areas up to 70% of children had a language delay on entry to nursery (Stoke Speaks Out, 2008)

2. ***The increased awareness of the need for early intervention***

   Recent reviews of the literature suggest that outcomes for children are best when intervention is put in place as early as possible (e.g. Letts and Hall, 2003;

The Bercow Review, DCSF 2008). As a consequence, this means that early identification is also essential.

3. **The importance of skills development for the entire children's workforce**

The children's workforce includes all those that work with children across all age-ranges. A significant proportion of early years practitioners, who work with the youngest children, report a lack of knowledge and expertise in the area of speech, language and communication. There is a need to ensure that the skills of the workforce (particularly those working in the early years sector and in schools) are improved so that all children are identified and supported appropriately and at the earliest opportunity.

Given the evidence that has emerged describing the extent of children's language and communication difficulties (e.g. Locke *et al.* 2002), and given the related impact that weak skills can have on other areas of development, there appears to be good reason to focus educational policy on this area. The possible causes cited for the perceived deterioration of children's language skills are many, varied on the whole circumstantial (including reduced family interaction, increased television viewing and forward-facing pushchairs); and it is likely that not one single cause can be identified. However, further discussion of the potential causes for language and communication difficulties is beyond the remit of this thesis -its purpose is to focus more specifically on the prevention and improvement of such difficulties.

Much of the initial concern about children's poor language skills was reported by teachers and other practitioners as anecdotal evidence; research is now emerging that supports their view, particularly in areas of socio-economic disadvantage (e.g. Locke *et al.* 2002). The I CAN report cited above suggests that in some areas more than 50% of children enter school with what are described as transient language and communication difficulties. Transient in this case means that given the right support and conditions for effective language and communication development, children with early identified difficulties may go on to catch up with their peers (I CAN, 2006). For this group, the importance of early identification and intervention is significant; such difficulties given the right support can be ameliorated to a large extent, and as a result

are less likely to have a significant long-term impact. Children in this group are often distinguished from others who experience more persistent and long-term difficulties in the area of speech, language and communication, who form approximately 10% of the child population as identified by Law *et al.* (2000). These children are typically identified by assessment from speech and language therapy services and often benefit from more specific and longer-term support. The importance of recognition and intervention for children with more complex and persistent difficulties is also crucial for them to receive the right support early in their educational careers.

The link between the development of language and communication skills and children's later achievement has become well-documented (e.g. Rosetti, 1996; Catts and Kamhi, 1999), although until recently, probably not given the status it deserves. The I CAN report referred to previously (I CAN, 2006) identifies educational attainment as a key area where an individual is disadvantaged as a consequence of poor oral language skills. It outlines the link between spoken language and the development of reading and writing skills (e.g. Snow and Powell, 2004) and later academic success, positive self-esteem and life chances (Aram *et al.* 1984). The relative neglect of communication skills has been highlighted as an issue in schools by government commissioned reviews (e.g. Rose, 2006; DCSF, 2008a). The Rose Report (Rose, 2006) was principally commissioned to focus on the teaching of early reading. However, it also focuses on communication more widely and quotes Ofsted inspection evidence that:

'Too little attention has been given to teaching the full National Curriculum programme of study for speaking and listening and the range of contexts provided for speaking and listening remains too limited' (p.16)

The more recent Bercow Review (DCSF, 2008a) was commissioned specifically to focus on children's language and communication development, with an emphasis on looking at how agencies work together to support children with such difficulties and good practice in early intervention and educational provision.

Until quite recently, educational policy has predominantly focused on school-aged children. However, according to Taggart (2004), the focus on raising attainment in

literacy (a current Labour Government priority) has meant that the knowledge, skills and dispositions with which children enter their formal schooling are being seen as increasingly important. As a result, she suggests, the 'educational spotlight' has turned towards the early years in a way that has not been seen previously. The focus on early years has been recently reinforced with the introduction of the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2008b). This provides a framework of learning and development for children from birth to five years. It identifies 'Communication, Language and Literacy' as one of the six core learning and development requirements advising that:

'Children's learning and competence in communicating, speaking and listening, being read to and beginning to read and write must be supported and extended. They must be provided with opportunity and encouragement to use their skills in a range of situations and for a range of purposes, and be supported in developing in confidence and disposition to do so.' (p.13)

As a result of seemingly increased practitioner concerns and with the emerging research evidence related to the link between language and deprivation (e.g. Locke *et al.* 2002) and learning (e.g. Aram *et al.* 1984), the development of language and communication skills in children has seen a renewed emphasis on the education agenda. Furthermore, it is now recognised as being at the heart of the early years curriculum and a focus for the teaching of all young children through everything that they do. Mroz and Hall (2003) propose that it is 'of paramount importance' that early years practitioners have sound knowledge in this area so that they are able to support children's development. Therefore, the improvement of practitioner knowledge and skills has become a focus of more recent early years policy and workforce development.

One might understandably wonder why there has been an emphasis on the early years workforce, rather than parents, given that many young children spend a significant proportion of their time in the home environment. There have been a range of initiatives aimed at parents in parallel with the focus on the skills of early years practitioners. Such initiatives, which aim to give children a better start to their educational career, are available to and accessed by many parents through, for

example, involvement with speech and language therapy services and SureStart Children's Centres. Primarily, such programmes have been focused in specific areas of the country (often areas of deprivation which are seen as in greater need) or have been designed for certain groups of children in the population (for example those with early identified and specific SLCN). In some respects the focus on improving the skills of parents has mirrored that of early years practitioners. However, there are many reasons why parents may not access such initiatives and ultimately, parents cannot be compelled to participate.

In contrast, there is an increasing requirement for early years practitioners to participate in training and the further development of their practice. This is clearly a positive move, given that children are typically spending an increasing proportion of their time in early years settings (Sylva and Pugh, 2005) –an additional reason for focussing intervention on practitioners. The term 'setting' is used in this study to include all forms of provision for children up to 5-years of age including reception classes, nurseries, pre-schools and childminders. The use of childcare provision by parents is being supported by Government policy that encourages parents to return to work and initiatives that promote the educational benefits of early education (e.g. increasing the number of free hours of preschool provision for 3-year-olds (DfES, 2006a) and introducing free places for 2-year-olds in areas of deprivation (DCSF, 2009)). Therefore the job of bringing up the youngest children is being shared much more widely than in previous decades.

As a result of the Government's aspiration for there to be fewer children who are raised in poverty, there has been an emphasis on enabling (and indeed encouraging) the parents of young children to return to work. As a consequence, there has been the need for greater availability of childcare places for the youngest children and therefore an increase in the number of people working in the early years sector. In addition, there has been the emergence of research that identifies that high quality early education can improve the later educational outcomes for children (e.g. The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project, Sylva *et al.* 2003). Therefore attendance at nursery or preschool is considered to have a positive impact on children's development and later academic achievement. However, the emphasis

made in the outcomes of this research is about the importance of the *quality* of the provision and this relies primarily on the expertise of the staff working in it.

The relationship between these factors is significant here and represented in figure 1.1 below. With the increasing demand for places in day-care provision, there is clearly the need for more childcare practitioners in order to meet the needs of working parents. Such practitioners need to be skilled in working with the youngest children, so as to provide high quality experiences for them to thrive in the absence of their primary carer. This includes supporting their language and communication development as an essential skill in its own right and a prerequisite to successful development and educational achievement in other areas. Making sure that provision is of high quality in turn ensures that children achieve the best possible outcomes both in the short- and long-term.

The development of the skills of adults who work with children (typically referred to as the 'Children's Workforce') have become high on the current Government agenda. For the purpose of this evaluation the children's workforce can be defined as:

'Everyone working with children, whatever the sector they are in, whatever the age-range they are working with, whether employed by a public, private or voluntary organisation.'(DfES 2006b, p6)

With reference to the early years sector more specifically, the term used throughout this document is 'early years practitioner'. Early years practitioners can be considered to be members of the children's workforce defined above, but more specifically the term is used to refer to adults working with children within the Early Years Foundation Stage (from birth to five years old). This includes, for example, practitioners working in nursery and reception classes, playgroups, day-nurseries and childminders. The term encompasses a wide range of individuals who may have very different qualifications, experiences, roles and responsibilities.

In response to the identified need to improve the skills of the early years practitioners (e.g. Mroz, 2002, 2006; Rose 2006), one action from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES -now the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF)) was to commission the development of a number of pre-prepared training packages to

support continuing professional development (CPD). These were circulated to Local Authorities (LAs) with the expectation that they will be delivered to early years

Importance of language and communication development

Increased capacity in early years provision -more practitioners

Importance of high quality early years provision

Improved workforce knowledge and skills

(in relation to language and communication)

Improved outcomes for children
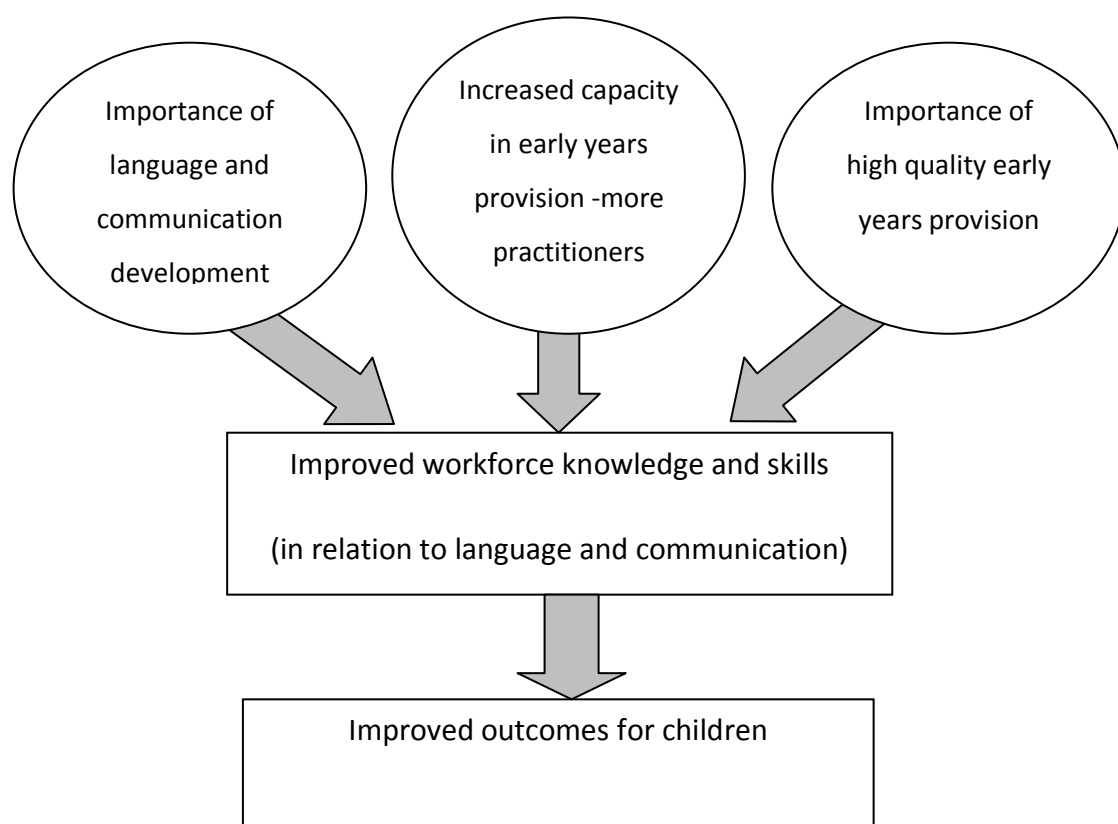
Figure 1.1: Key themes in early years related to this evaluation

practitioners at a local level. 'Communicating Matters' (DfES, 2006c) was one such package that was published with a view to supporting the development of a broad range of foundation stage practitioners (but primarily those working with children between the ages of three and five) in the area of speech, language and communication. Given that the majority of LAs were already providing some form of training in language and communication skills to the early years sector, decisions needed to be made about to how to best integrate local and national approaches and provide high quality professional development opportunities relevant to all practitioners.

The three broad aims of the 'Communicating Matters' Programme are described in the training materials as:

1. To deepen practitioners' understanding of children's communication and language, particularly between the ages of three and five years.

2. To deepen practitioners' understanding of how their own communicative behaviour affects children's use and display of communicative behaviours.

3. To help practitioners reflect on and develop their practice to promote children's communication and language more effectively.

This evaluation came about through the implementation of the 'Communicating Matters' training materials as a pilot programme. The Early Education and Childcare Unit (EECU) in the Local Authority (LA) were responsible for the implementation of the training, with the Early Years Teacher Advisory team leading on the initiative. However, there was a clear expectation that the programme would be delivered with other key partners (e.g. speech and language therapists, area inclusion coordinators, ethnic minority achievement service). A multi-agency steering group was convened to guide the planning and implementation process for the training and to set up a pilot programme. It was agreed by the group that there should be an evaluation of the pilot programme to determine its effectiveness and to inform and support future delivery of the materials. This is the focus of the study undertaken here.

The broad objective of setting up a pilot programme was to trial the materials so as to inform their future development, with a view to delivering them to a wider audience across the county. As an outcome of the steering group process, four training courses were planned and delivered and these formed the focus of this case study. Each training course had its own trainers, participants and location and hence could have been considered as an individual case. However, it was decided to examine the four courses together as they were being delivered concurrently and in combination would provide more participants to contribute to the evaluation data. The context of this case study evaluation is represented diagrammatically in figure 1.2 below.

The evaluation cannot be carried out without some consideration of its purpose, which enables appropriate objectives to be developed. In order to evaluate a training programme, it is helpful to consider more generally how evaluation is defined and

National Policy

('Communicating Matters'
Training Materials)

Local Policy

(Existing SLCN and other
training)

Pilot Programme

Steering group

Case Study Evaluation

Training Programme 1

(Participants

Trainers

Local context)

Training Programme 2

(Participants

Trainers

Local context)

Training Programme 3

(Participants

Trainers

Local context)

Training Programme 4

(Participants

Trainers

Local context)

Practitioner Outcomes

Improved Outcomes for Children

Cross-county Training Programme

Future training models

Local and National Policy

Figure 1.2: Context for the evaluation of 'Communicating Matters'

what an evaluation might attempt to find out. Rossi *et al.* (2004) define programme evaluation as:

'A social science activity directed at collecting, analysing, interpreting and communicating information about the workings and effectiveness of social programs' *(p.2)*

Rossi and colleagues continue by suggesting that a number of elements of social programmes might be investigated through evaluation, including conceptualisation, design, implementation, administration, outcomes and efficiency.

Scriven (2003) suggests evaluation can be described as 'the process of determining the merit, worth or significance of things'. With respect to programme evaluation more specifically, Guskey (2000) elaborates on Scriven's definition by emphasising the distinction between 'merit' and 'worth', referring to the 'worth' of a programme as being related to how important the programme is to an organisation's particular aims or the importance of a programme to an individual as a professional development activity. In contrast, the merit of a programme, he proposes, relates to the nature of the programme and how it 'performs' relative to other similar programmes.

With respect to this being an evaluative study, the broadest aim could be described as: 'The process of determining the merit, worth or significance of the 'Communicating Matters' programme for early years practitioners'. More precisely, the evaluation attempts to determine the worth of the programme with respect to the experiences of participants and the views of the trainers and to provide information for future trainers and those commissioning the programme and allocating further resources. It attempts to consider aspects of implementation and administration as well as the initial outcomes of the programme. In order to construct a feasible framework by which to evaluate the programme, the focus and purposes of the study need to be more clearly and specifically defined and these are described below:

As a result of participating in the 'Communicating Matters' training, the objectives of this evaluation are to determine whether practitioners report:

- *improved knowledge and understanding of children's language development and related strategies*

- *intended changes to their own behaviour and use of strategies in relation to language and communication development*

- *increased reflective practice and changes to their practice in relation to their interactions with young children*

A further objective of the evaluation is to gather information more generally related to the delivery of 'Communicating Matters' in a local context in order to understand:

- *what can be learned from the delivery of 'Communicating Matters' in order to inform the future training of early years practitioners in this area*

- *the factors that contribute to the process of implementation and evaluation of a nationally devised training programme at a local level*

Successful evaluation in an applied context can be a challenging for a number of reasons; much has been written in the evaluation literature about working in dynamic situations and the complexities of negotiating with stakeholders and commissioners (e.g. Bamberger *et al.* 2006, Rossi *et al.* 2004). This leads all too often to unplanned and unforeseen changes to the research design and as a result may compromise the reliability of data and the validity of findings. Rossi and colleagues identify the tension that frequently exists between the 'requirements of systematic enquiry' and organisational issues, including the need for those involved with social programmes to deliver their services with minimal disruption. Evaluation is by necessity an iterative process, with procedure interacting with context and vice versa. The design of an evaluation typically requires a number of refinements from that initially proposed, usually due to limitations that arise from the dynamic nature of the context. Similarly, the programme may change over time based on initial (although possibly tentative) findings from an evaluation –demanding a different focus or approach to further evaluation. The evaluation described in the following chapters was fraught with such implementation issues which impacted on the outcomes, and these will be addressed alongside the findings.

With respect to the author's position as the evaluator, it seems pertinent to outline in more detail the wider role in the initiative and more generally within the organization responsible for delivering it. Initially the author was invited to be part of the 'Communicating Matters' steering group in her role as an educational psychologist (with a specialist post for early years). The steering group was composed of a number of multi-agency representatives who were being asked to contribute to the training programme; of which the author was one. As part of the author's job, she is often involved in collaborative work with different groups of people who work in the early years sector. Most frequently this is with members of the EECU (who were responsible for delivering the project in this instance). Some of this work is research based, particularly with respect to evaluation -which is often considered as part of an educational psychologist's role.

It seemed important to the author and to others in the steering group that the initial phase of training was evaluated, so that more could be learned about the effectiveness of the training and how a pre-prepared government commissioned package could best be delivered in a local context. Much of the training delivered previously in the authority had been developed specifically to meet identified local needs by the various professionals who supported early years settings. Some of this training might meet the needs across the Local Authority; other training might be specifically designed to meet the needs of an individual setting. Furthermore, it seemed important to learn lessons from the delivery of the 'Communicating Matters' materials given that training packages covering other topics were already in preparation and would likely be disseminated to local authorities in the future. The evaluation of the programme was something that the author considered she could contribute to the initiative. The steering group were keen for the evaluation to take place and agreed to the author taking the lead in this area, with the assurance of support from others in the group.

The following chapters are intended to describe the details of the evaluation. This will include:

1. A review of relevant literature in the field, highlighting the perceived need for the programme.

2. A description of the evaluation process which was designed for the context under investigation.

3. Detailed results of the evaluation.

4. Discussion of the results with respect to the evaluation objectives.

5. Consideration of the implications of the results in relation to the local situation and the wider context.

An additional element of the report focuses on some of the challenges and dilemmas faced in the process of carrying out the evaluation and the impact that they had on the process, outcomes and the researcher.

The evaluation was a small-scale case-study of a pilot training programme and therefore it has a number of limitations worthy of identification at this point. The study seeks to address formative aims; of interest in the evaluation were the implementation process and reported experiences of and benefits to the participants. It was beyond the scope of this study to encompass a longer-term follow up of changes to participant behaviour as this was considered more appropriate for further research as a consequence of this initial evaluation. Furthermore, it was not the intention of the data to support the making of causal explanations; instead, the aim was to understand a specific activity in the context within which it occurred.

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In order to gain an overview of recent research in the areas of speech, language and communication development and the training needs of practitioners and situate them in the wider educational context, a review of the literature was carried out. The literature search focused primarily on three key areas:

- The significance of speech, language and communication development to outcomes for children (and adults)

- The importance of high quality practice in early years settings in supporting speech, language and communication development

- The need for the continuing professional development of early years practitioners in order to support children's development

Each section will provide an overview of recent research and policy in the field and identify how it relates to the current evaluation.

A further section of the literature review will focus on the evaluation process. It will highlight some of the typical issues encountered in programme evaluation and which are relevant to this study and describe the case-study approach used in this evaluation.

2.2 The importance of speech, language and communication

Language is used on a daily basis to communicate for any number of different purposes. Humans are essentially social animals and the ability to communicate is central to our everyday lives. Communication starts from birth; even the youngest babies typically respond to the human voice and they increasingly show interest in people talking to them. As a child develops, they become more involved in communicative exchanges and language begins to emerge. This gives the child increasing control over their environment as they become ever more able to express themselves and make their needs known. At this stage they also begin to use language as a powerful tool for learning and for developing social relationships. As language continues to develop, it becomes the primary tool for thinking and memory Vygotsky

(1934) (translated by Kozulin, 1986), enabling a child to communicate not only about the present but about the past and future. Vygotsky emphasises the importance of what he describes as 'private speech'; children in their preschool years develop the ability to use their own speech to direct their learning and behaviour. Initially, this talk is spoken 'out loud' and later internalised as language becomes a key tool in learning and problem-solving processes. In emphasising the importance of language development Macrory (2001) quotes Pugh (1996) who states that:

'Language is vital during early childhood, as it provides the most powerful means of communication, and helps to enhance the formation of articulate, reflective and imaginative personalities' (p.11)

Effective language and communication skills are increasingly being identified as indicators of success in school. For example Rosetti (1996), claims that a child's early communication skills are one of the best predictors of their later cognitive skills and school performance. However, not only does language have importance on the level of personal achievement by influencing the social and academic performance of individuals, it also impacts more widely on our developing societies and economic productivity. The value of having a literate workforce was described in an Ernst and Young report (1993) cited by Locke *et al.* (2002); this highlighted links between labour productivity and oral communication (in addition to skills in literacy and numeracy).

Furthermore, it is now widely accepted that there is a significant link between the development of oracy and literacy. Locke *et al.* (2002) emphasise that the relationship between language and literacy is by no means clear and that there is still much to learn, but suggest that:

'...it is generally agreed by psycholinguists, developmental psychologists and educationalists that early spoken language skills underlie subsequent reading and writing skills.' (p.4)

Goodman and Goodman (1979) propose that the link between the two processes (acquisition of language and literacy) is due to them sharing the same underlying structures. They emphasise the interaction between the two systems and how they are used to support each other as children become more competent with their literacy

skills. Catts and Kamhi (1999) suggest that delayed language development can have a detrimental effect on the development of early literacy skills, and therefore we can assume that if children are unable to express their ideas verbally, then they will have considerable difficulties in transferring them to a written form.

The Labour Government, since coming to power in 1997, has placed an increasing emphasis on improving standards of literacy in schools. As a result of this commitment, the National Literacy Strategy was introduced to primary schools a year later, giving clear guidance on the teaching of reading and writing for all children. The emphasis on improving literacy has not subsided in recent years, although to some extent it has been absorbed into the emphasis on wider positive outcomes for all children, as part of the 'Every Child Matters' (ECM) agenda. However, the development of speaking and listening has possibly become the most neglected strand of the English National Curriculum with respect to the focus on children's progress and attainment.

One explanation for this could be that national tests for 7 and 11-years olds focus on reading and writing and these are common measures used to compare schools' performance. As a result of schools wanting to demonstrate their effectiveness through SATs results, a culture of 'teaching to the test' has developed. A recent survey by Civitas in 2008 indicated that nearly 80% of secondary school teachers found that children on entry to secondary school demonstrated lower ability than their end of primary school SATs tests indicated. The likely reason given for this was that primary schools were teaching to the test. With a significant amount of time being spent by children working towards the end of key stage assessments, other areas of development can be squeezed off the curriculum. Furthermore, if the focus on literacy skills is made prematurely in a child's development, there is the possibility that the development of language could be sidelined at an early stage in a child's educational career. If teachers fail to recognise the fundamental link between language and literacy, there is an even greater chance that children's development in the area of language and communication will be diminished.

Sir Jim Rose was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (Rose, 2006) to carry out a review of early reading research to determine the most effective ways of developing early reading skills. In his review, he by no means underestimates

the importance of language in the learning process, highlighting the interactive and cross-curricular nature of both language and literacy skills. He refers to a range of evidence from inspectors and other sources that suggests that schools need to give more attention to developing speaking and listening skills across the curriculum and emphasises the importance of developing language and literacy skills, suggesting that:

'Without the ability to communicate effectively in speech and through reading and writing, children and young people are seriously disadvantaged for life.' (p.14)

A reasonable assumption would be that a continued focus on raising attainment in literacy will not be effective in the absence of a focus on the prerequisite language skills required. If it is the case that many young children are struggling with their language development; focusing on reading and writing without tackling language development is likely to prove ineffective with respect to results and what's more, detrimental to the motivation of the children involved.

Ineffective teaching in schools is often cited as a common argument for poor standards in literacy (e.g. Solity *et al.*, 2000). Whilst this might be the case for some children, Locke and colleagues (2002) present an alternative argument. They suggest that poor academic achievement may be the result of delayed language skills in a sizable proportion of the school population. In other words, recent government policy and guidance on the teaching of literacy might have been focusing in the wrong area. In addition to trying to raise the quality of teaching of literacy, there also needs to be better understanding and teaching of language and communication.

The focus of the agenda to improve the emphasis on language and communication development has been initially on schools. However, the development of language begins much earlier than when children reach school and so it makes sense to also focus on the earlier stages of child development and how children are supported to acquire language skills at home and in early years settings.

In a survey carried out by the Basic Skills Agency (2002) school staff reported that they thought that about half of children who started school did not have the necessary language skills required to access the curriculum. There appears to be plenty of anecdotal evidence from professionals and practitioners working in the early year's

sector and in schools that supports the notion that the language and communication skills of children are deteriorating (e.g. Shepherd, 2005). However, only relatively recently has research been carried out and more robust evidence begun to emerge about the nature and extent of children's early difficulties. One widely accredited study by Locke *et al.* (2002) has provided evidence that there is a particular population of children who are typically under-performing with respect to their language skills. Locke and colleagues studied 240 children who were attending nursery schools in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. They administered a language assessment (Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals Assessment Preschool (CELF-P)) and an assessment of cognitive abilities (British Ability Scales (BAS) II Early Years) in order to compare participants' spoken language skills to their cognitive abilities.

They found in their sample, that when language age-equivalent scores were compared to the chronological age of the children, the vast majority of them were performing below the expected level. In fact, they reported that more than half of their sample could have been diagnosed as having a language delay (from moderate to severe). The cognitive abilities of the children involved were assessed in order to determine whether such a high number of children with depressed language scores could be accounted for by the fact that their cognitive abilities were also below the expected range. However, the cognitive profile of the group of children was broadly representative of the national average. In other words, the poor language skills of the children could not be simply accounted for by poor cognitive skills in the majority of cases.

Locke and colleagues in the discussion of their findings, claim that:

'The data from this study support existing evidence for a link between low socio-economic status and language delay. If these data are representative of the wider population, as we believe they are, they show that a significant proportion of children from areas of economic deprivation must be at risk, at the very least, of being slow to develop written language and are thus likely to fail to make adequate overall educational progress' (p.12)

The Cost to the Nation of Children's Poor Communication report (I CAN, 2006) and the Bercow review (DCSF, 2008a) suggest that up to 50% of children in some areas of socio-economic disadvantage have speech and language skills that are significantly lower than expected for their age. Lees and Urwin (1997) argue that children who enter formal education at age five with speech, language and communication difficulties are disadvantaged from the start, both socially and educationally.

Whether or not a decline in language skill is evident, Law *et al.* (2000) identify that a delay in language development is the most common childhood disability, with Lindsay et al. (2002) reporting that up to 10% of children may have long-term and persistent speech, language and communication needs. Research has also shown that where children are identified as having speech and language impairments in their first year of formal schooling (at age 5 ½), academic performance in their teenage years is likely to be significantly lower than average (Stothard *et al.*, 1998). With speech, language and communication difficulties potentially affecting such a high number of children, and with the related impact on their wider educational performance, the focus on intervention and support in this area is understandably a high priority for educators and increasingly government policy-makers.

As a result of the concerns about young children's language development, the last few years have seen a growth in interest from the early years community about how to best develop young children's language and communication skills. It is widely acknowledged that early identification and intervention in children's speech, language and communication difficulties is of importance (e.g. The Bercow Review DCSF, 2008).

Anderson and Van der Gaag (2000) report that the main source of referral to speech and language therapists was health visitors, who made 80% of requests (based on a sample of six sites in the UK). Many parents first raised concerns about a child's speech and language development with a health visitor. However, there has been a recent decline in the number of developmental checks that are universally carried out by health visitors (based on recommendations from the 'Health for All Children' report (Hall and Elliman, 2003)). As a consequence of fewer developmental checks, reduced opportunities for identification are available through this route. As a result, it has become of increasing importance that adults working with young children in early

years settings are knowledgeable about speech, language and communication development and skilled at identifying when this development is not progressing as might be expected, so as provide help and support at the earliest opportunity. Letts and Hall (2003) contend that through early intervention, language development can be enhanced for children who might be at risk of delayed development (such as those identified in areas of socio-economic deprivation). They also cite Law (2000) when they claim that early intervention can be effective in many cases of language impairment.

The interest in language and communication skills has developed alongside the recognition of the importance of the early years as a stage of development and a huge expansion of the provision of early education and childcare. The expansion in the early years sector, with more children attending pre-school and day-care settings, is significant in this context because it coincides with the period during which young children will most rapidly develop their language skills. Furthermore, this is also the time during which it is likely to become apparent if children are falling behind in their development and therefore risk being put at a disadvantage on entering school. The preschool years can be seen as critical to a child's language and communication development, and consequently their longer-term educational outcomes. With more children spending greater amounts of time in early years provision, the role of such settings and the skills of the adults who are involved in them cannot be underestimated.

2.3 Childcare provision and the role of early education

The rapid expansion of childcare provision between 1997 and 2004 saw places nearly double (Sylva and Pugh 2005), with the greatest increase being in the provision of full day-care. This expansion, which appears to be continuing, has been driven by the current Labour government to fit in with two different and potentially conflicting agendas.

Firstly, there has been a commitment from the government to reduce the number of children living in poverty and therefore there has been a focus on enabling and encouraging parents to return to work after the birth of a child. In order to support this, the Government have pledged to increase the availability and flexibility of childcare in order to ensure parents have access to provision they need.

Secondly, recent longitudinal research has identified positive outcomes for children that receive early educational experiences in group settings. The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study (Sylva *et al.* 2004) concluded that children who had attended a pre-school setting were performing better in reading and mathematics by the end of Key Stage 1 than those who had little or no pre-school experience. In relation to this, the Government have promised to increase the number of hours that 3- and 4-year-olds are able to have free in nursery settings and to offer free places to 2-year-olds in the future and particularly in areas of social and economic deprivation.

As a result of the growth in early years provision there has been an associated growth in the number of practitioners working in this sector. As a consequence of the increasing number of practitioners working with young children, the emerging research evidence emphasising the need for high quality provision and the Every Child Matters agenda calling for a more skilled children's workforce, there has been a focus on the training and skills of early years practitioners. Related to this, the EPPE research reported that the quality of the pre-school setting was positively related to 'intellectual and cognitive' and 'social and behavioural' development in children. The quality of the setting was measured using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R) developed by Harms, Clifford and Cryer, (1998).This scale included items on: space and furnishings; personal care routines; language and reasoning; activities; interaction; programme structure, and parents and staff. The higher the setting scored on this scale, the better the outcomes for the child were likely to be. Most significantly, with respect to practitioner skills, it was reported that the settings which had favourable proportions of appropriately trained staff, were more likely to be of higher-quality.

Sylva and Pugh (2005) highlight the tensions between the two drivers; providing high quality education with well-trained practitioners, whilst offering parents affordable and flexible childcare whilst they go out to work. Overwhelmingly, practitioners working with the youngest children get paid very low salaries, move between jobs frequently and may have relatively few qualifications. Hence the most affordable day-care provision may have the least qualified staff (and as a result may be of lower quality) but this may be the only provision available to parents returning to work on relatively low pay themselves.

Given the increase in the number of young children in childcare and nursery settings and the increase in the number of practitioners working in such settings, there has been more specific concern expressed regarding what practitioners should know about young children's language and literacy development (e.g. Macrory 2001). Macrory suggests that we:

'… perhaps needs to consider more carefully the current context in which young children are growing up, one in which we are witnessing a significant expansion in provision for them. While this is a welcome development, it is vital to consider what kind of early years experiences are the most appropriate, and, by implication, what kind of training should be offered to early years workers, including what they might need to know and understand about the development of language.' (p.35)

Mroz (2006) highlights concerns about practitioner's own perceptions that they do not have the necessary knowledge and understanding, and have not received adequate training in the areas of speech, language and communication. This study was based on interviews of early years practitioners and extended earlier work carried out by the same researcher. Mroz et al. (2002) had identified that there was a lack of initial training and opportunities for post-qualification training of early years teachers in language and communication development, with 70% indicating that they had not received any training prior to qualification and two-thirds indicating that they had received nothing since.

An Ofsted report based on a survey of 144 foundation stage settings (Ofsted 2007) reinforced concerns about the quality of provision in relation to the development of communication, language and literacy for children between three and five years. They found that speaking and listening skills were weak in a third of the settings that they visited. Dockrell *et al.* (2004) suggest that often there is a high level of adult talk in early years settings which can be overly directive and unresponsive to children's needs. As a result, children are not always given the opportunity to use and practice spoken language in early years settings as often as they might.

Rose (2006), in his acknowledgement of the crucial link between language and literacy development highlights the connection with the training of teachers and practitioners in raising the quality of classroom talk by maintaining that:

'How to raise the profile and quality of the kinds of classroom talk 'likely to exert the greatest leverage on children's learning and understanding' is an important question that has considerable implications for training practitioners and teachers.' (p.17)

Rose continues to describe what should be considered desirable content for the training for early years practitioners and emphasises the importance that should be placed on the area of communication, language and literacy (CLL) in the early years curriculum. He suggests that an understanding of how children develop language and how their acquisition of language can be strengthened and enriched should be made 'crystal clear' through 'carefully structured training'. He also emphasises the observation of children's language development to ensure that 'obstacles to progress are tackled early'. With respect to the skills needed to support children's language and communication development, Locke et al. (2002) suggest that nursery staff need more guidance in this area. They suggest that until there is a much wider knowledge-base, with staff confident in the skills necessary to assess, monitor and promote communication skills along with the motivation and opportunities to do so, the needs of a great many children will go undetected.

In light of the concerns raised about practitioner understanding of speech and language development, the DfES with Sure Start and the Primary National Strategy commissioned a team to put together materials that could be used to support practitioner development. 'Communicating Matters' (DfES, 2006c) was the outcome of the work which was headed by Nigel Hall, a leading academic in the field of language and literacy at Manchester Metropolitan University. The resulting training package was designed with the aim of improving practitioners' knowledge of early language and communication and to support them to develop their skills in interaction with young children (primarily between the ages of 3- and 5-years). These training materials were disseminated to Local Authorities with the advice that it should be delivered to practitioners working in foundation stage settings, using multi-agency teams of trainers. The delivery of the training was not a statutory requirement for authorities,

but considered 'good practice' with respect to providing content appropriate for developing practitioner skills in this area.

2.4 The professional development of early years practitioners

The continuing professional development of teachers has been considered as area of importance for many years now, with the emergence of a range of models to support this. The professional development of early years practitioners has been much more recently under the spotlight, particularly for those not qualified as teachers. There is a clear commitment from the current government, through the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC), to raise the quality of early years provision by improving the knowledge and skills of those working in the sector. The CWDC makes clear the link between workforce qualifications and outcomes for children:

'To improve outcomes for children the government is committed to raising the proportion of the early years workforce with relevant and appropriate qualifications to work with babies, toddlers and young children' (CWDC, 2009)

The focus on developing practitioner skills includes both initial training of practitioners and continuing professional development (CPD). There is a clear emphasis from the CWDC on training more graduate-level practitioners to work in the early years sector. However, there is already a large workforce in place and development of the skills of these individuals is also considered a high priority. This includes identifying and providing appropriate CPD opportunities for practitioners as part of their on-going development. 'Communicating Matters' was designed primarily to fit this purpose.

In order to examine professional development in more detail, it is important to understand how it might be defined. Guskey (2000) provides a very broad definition of professional development as:

'Those processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students.' (p.16)

Guskey continues by outlining the defining characteristics of such development; that it needs to be *intentional, ongoing and systematic.* He describes it as an intentional

endeavour, in that there are clearly defined purposes and goals to the activity; on-going in that reflective practice becomes integral to everyday opportunities and systematic, such that it is a process of change over an extended period of time and which involves all levels of an organisation.

The meaning of professional development to practitioners can be very different to the definition provided here and there is often a view amongst them that it is related to specific 'one-off' training events, which may be relatively short-lived. With respect to many educators, Guskey (2000) asserts that there is still too often:

'The perception of professional development as a series of unrelated, short-term workshops and presentations with little follow-up or guidance for implementation.' (p.15)

He suggests that this may be maintained and reinforced by the requirement of a specific number of hours of CPD that might be demanded of practitioners. Guskey continues by suggesting that it puts the need for engagement in CPD in terms of 'How can I get my hours?' rather than 'What do I need to do to improve my practice?' and promotes the reliance on one-off events rather than on-going or continuous development.

After initial training routes, a variety of which can be followed for early years practitioners, 'one off' training events as Guskey describes, remain one of the most common forms of continuing professional development in the early years sector. Despite there being much research that suggests that other models might be more effective, the discrete training model continues to dominate -although often now with some modification. The model has developed to typically include a number of training sessions, usually linked by practitioner tasks and opportunities for reflection and feedback. This may not necessarily be an inappropriate model for practitioners and it is usually the model in demand from them; however the quality and effectiveness of the training needs to be considered with respect to enhancing early years practice and consequently improving outcomes for children.

Garet et al. (2001) identify three core features of professional development that they suggest have 'significant positive effects' on teachers self-reported increases in

knowledge and skills and changes in classroom practice. They describe these features as:

- *A focus on content knowledge* –improving teacher knowledge about the subject-matter being addressed

- *Opportunities for active learning* –engaging teachers in meaningful discussion, planning and practice and providing opportunities to observe others and be observed

- *Coherence with other learning activities* –promoting an understanding of how the activity fits into wider developments, building on and developing previous knowledge and recognising how it is aligned with current standards and frameworks for learning

Garet and colleagues contrast two different forms of professional development: *traditional approaches*; which include courses, workshops and conferences and *reform approaches*; which include study groups, mentoring and coaching. They propose that traditional approaches are criticised for not necessarily providing the participants with enough time, activities and content that are needed to enable meaningful and sustained changes to practice. Reform approaches, they suggest, are more likely to take place over longer periods of time, across a wider range of activities and in collaboration with others. However, they go on to argue that it is not necessarily important to focus on the type of professional development opportunity alone, but more important to focus on the duration of activity, opportunities for collective participation and the core features contained within the activity, as described above.

In relation to training, one of the traditional CPD approaches, Joyce and Showers (1995) identify several elements that should be included for it to be effective which are:

- Exploration of theory

- Demonstration or modelling of skills

- Simulated practice

- Feedback about performance

- Coaching in the workplace

Furthermore, Guskey (1998) highlights the importance of recognising that all workshops and presentations must be accompanied by appropriate follow-up activities to ensure that learning is applied and consolidated.

In addition to identifying key elements that should be contained within a training programme, Joyce and Showers (1995) also emphasise that there needs to be clear objectives and learning outcomes for the training. They suggest that such objectives are typically designed to raise awareness, improve knowledge and develop the skills of participants. Guskey (2000) suggests that such objectives are most typically developed by the training presenters in collaboration with those responsible for planning and facilitating the training. The training can then be evaluated against such objectives through the collection, analysis and interpretation of relevant data.

Guskey (2000) describes what he identifies as a 'major shortcoming' of training; that it cannot readily be adapted to meet the needs of different individuals who may be at different levels of awareness, knowledge or skills when they come to the training. Therefore, for some participants, the training may simply reinforce what they already know, for others it may be targeted at too high a level of demand. This is often an issue with respect to early years practitioners due to the diverse initial training routes that may be followed and range of previous experience. Some practitioners may be graduates with teaching qualifications, some may have followed NVQ routes, and others may have followed different training pathways with alternative qualifications. Hence, to devise and deliver a professional development programme to suit the needs of such a diverse group and based on a training model can be challenging.

With respect to the implementation of CPD programmes, Guskey (2000) describes site-based and district-wide designs as the most common models. Site-based programmes are aimed at all of the practitioners working in a given setting, for example all of the teachers in a school. Often such CPD is developed to meet an identified need for a particular group of educators. District-wide programmes are typically based in a central venue, to which one or more practitioners from a number of settings would

travel. Guskey (2000) highlights the limited success of many district-wide designs primarily because they fail to address the specific issues related to a particular educational setting and also because there is usually limited follow-up support to ensure that skills are put into practice. However, he suggests that there are advantages of such approaches, which include:

- Developing a wider vision of improvement across an area, rather than an often narrow focus which might be determined by an individual school and not necessarily of interest or relevance to other settings

- The wider sharing of knowledge, expertise and ideas and opportunities for discussion with peers outside of the immediate setting

- Development opportunities that can be targeted at individuals working in a particular role (e.g. all managers and supervisors) so that there can be collaboration across settings at a similar professional level.

In contrast, the relative advantages of a site-based design, identified by Guskey (2000), are that a more individual intervention or programme can be negotiated by programme leaders and site managers, which will be based more closely on the identified needs of a particular group of practitioners. Furthermore, follow-up support can be more readily arranged as all participants are based in one location.

2.5 Programme evaluation: Issues and considerations

Before embarking on the detail of how the 'Communicating Matters' materials will be evaluated, there needs to be some consideration of the purpose of evaluation more generally in order to situate the current study in the wider context of evaluative enquiry. To enable this to be done, it is helpful to consider what evaluation is and what it strives to do with respect to educational programmes. In addition, it is helpful to acknowledge some of the issues and difficulties that may arise in the process.

As described in the previous chapter, Scriven (2003) defines evaluation to be the process of determining the merit, worth or significance of something. Guskey (2000) develops Scriven's definition, by further elaborating the difference between merit and worth. He argues that worth can be considered with respect to how relevant a

programme is to an organisation's aims and purposes and additionally, whether it is of benefit to particular individuals. Merit, however, can be considered in relation to the properties of a programme and whether it performs against pre-determined standards or criteria. He states that a programme can have merit without worth (and vice versa) such that:

'A program or activity may have great merit and yet may be of little worth to the organisation simply because it does not coincide with identified needs or is not aligned with the organisation's mission.' (p.43)

Guskey (2000) asserts that evaluation must be formal and systematic, going beyond the value judgements that might be made on an everyday or ad hoc basis. He suggests that there need to be carefully identified reasons for carrying out an evaluation, and with respect to programme evaluation these should clearly link to the programme aims.

Often evaluation studies address one or both of two broad issues and are hence referred to as being formative or summative in nature (Scriven, 1967). Scriven identifies formative evaluation as that intended to inform the future development of a programme; for the primary purpose of programme improvement. It typically happens as the programme is carried out. Rossi et al. (2004) suggest that the information from such an evaluation may focus on the need for the programme, the suitability of the programme design, the implementation process and its impact or efficiency. In essence, formative evaluation aims to address issues of whether the activity is implemented as was originally intended. In contrast, Scriven (1967) describes summative evaluation; where the aim is to provide information about the programme's performance, for example to justify the effective use of resources and efficiency of the programme. Guskey (2000) suggests that too often in educational evaluation, the role of formative evaluation is neglected.

There has been much development of evaluative enquiry from the early positivist paradigms which typically involved what were considered as more traditional experimental designs. Early evaluators frequently attempted to fit their evaluation design into a scientific research paradigm (e.g. Campbell 1969). At a simplistic level,

such designs essentially involved participants being assigned to one of two groups; intervention was carried out on one group and the changes measured using some form of pre- and post-test measurement, the second group formed a comparison or control group. The nature of this design lends itself to the collection of quantitative data and by having a control group, probable causation can be inferred if the intervention is successful and providing other variables can be accounted for. This framework has since received much criticism for taking little of no account of the processes of intervention or programme delivery and therefore potentially ignoring a significant element of programme implementation which can affect outcomes.

Although it may be easier and apparently more valid to make causal claims from experimental designs, there is the risk of missing a large amount of detail and information about the delivery process, which might be interesting and useful to the evaluation in its own right. Rossi *et al.* 2004 suggest that a rigid experimental process allows little scope for revealing unpredictable or unexpected outcomes of a programme and therefore might be susceptible to finding programmes ineffective when they may not have been (or at least they may have been partially successful). Often a great deal of learning takes place from understanding the processes of programme implementation and delivery -whether or not they are considered to be successful. Furthermore, the traditional approach is often impractical and unethical in social contexts. Setting up a control group in real-world situations can be problematic, not only in being able to account for all variables, but also in denying an intervention to a certain group in order to create a group for comparison.

In contrast to the earliest positivist approaches, a range of alternative evaluation models began to emerge (e.g. Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 1986; Rossi *et al.,* 1985). Fundamental to these was the acknowledgement that social interventions do not happen in a vacuum; there are highly complex political, social and individual processes that contribute to a given situation, which will influence any intervention that takes place. Such factors cannot simply be ignored, but need to be accounted for if the outcomes of a given programme are to be properly understood. There was the increasing recognition of the dynamic nature of programmes and hence the difficulty of rigid designs, which were difficult to apply to real-life situations. Patton (1986)

comments on the well-documented and widely recognised difficulties with establishing causality in programme evaluation, writing that:

'One need know very little about research to know that it is not possible to establish causality in any final and absolute sense when dealing with the complexities of real programs in which treatments and outcomes are never quite pure, single and uncontaminated.' (p.151)

Furthermore, the 'politics' of evaluation has been increasingly acknowledged in the evaluation literature (e.g. Weiss, 1993), as the main focus of evaluation studies has usually been on interventions designed to alleviate what were considered social problems. As a result there was often a political interest in their outcomes. Another factor that has become even more relevant is the importance of stakeholders, who were seen as having an increased contribution to the design and process of evaluation with respect to their views of and actions in the programme under scrutiny. Rossi *et al.* (2004) define stakeholders to be *'individuals, groups or organisations that have a significant interest in how well a programme functions'* (p.18). If political and contextual issues are going to be taken into consideration, the research format has to be flexible enough to allow for this, which can jeopardise rigid 'scientific' designs.

Constructivist approaches are often referred to as being alternatives to the more traditional ones. Pawson and Tilley (1997) describe the emergence of such approaches as transferring the 'gaze from outputs to processes'; whilst Cronbach (1982) suggested that evaluation should focus more on meeting the required outcomes of programme decision-makers and stakeholders, so that it would provide the most useful information that could be gathered given the constraints of a situation, rather than adhering rigidly to specific research standards. Much of the evaluation work carried out in complex, real-life situations is unable to be designed in a highly controlled, 'experimental' manner. Evaluators, therefore, have had to manage and account for intervening factors in the best way they can, so as to make the evaluation as valid (or authentic) as possible in the presenting situation. The methods used and data collected in such constructivist research designs tended to be principally qualitative in nature and therefore the distinction between paradigms was often made with respect to methods employed to gather data.

Pawson and Tilley (1997) refer to the need to find some sort of middle ground in evaluation, where some of the positive aspects of opposing paradigms are used. Some propose a mixed methods approach as this middle ground between the purist positivist and constructivist stance. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) suggest that a mixed methods paradigm can be considered somewhere mid-way along a continuum between qualitative and quantitative methods or alternatively as a distinct, third category. From a philosophical standpoint, it is argued that mixed methods approaches are situated within a pragmatist position. Denscombe (2007) describes a problem-driven approach as the basis for pragmatism, with the need for knowledge to be based on practical outcomes and judged by its usefulness. He argues for an approach designed to address issues in practical ways, drawing on paradigms that are deemed appropriate to the problem being investigated. With respect to the research design, he suggests that it should be driven by the question being asked, with data collected in whichever way best suits this. Hence it can be argued that a mixed methods approach brings together what have typically been considered as philosophically opposite paradigms and which have traditionally been viewed (and are still viewed by some) as incompatible. However, Denscombe does not suggest that this approach can be viewed as 'anything goes' when it comes to design and data collection, warning that:

'To qualify as a mixed methods strategy, the research needs to have a clear and explicit rationale for using contrasting methods. The mixed methods approach should not be adopted without considering whether there will be particular benefits to be gained.' (p.109)

Whilst some with clear research stances that ally them to one or other of the purist positions may maintain a belief that the two paradigms are incompatible, much research carried out in real world context consists of mixed methods of data collection and of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Scriven (2005) notes that often the type of evaluation framework used is driven by current fashions or trends. At present there is a strong emphasis on outcome-focused and impact evaluation. He warns that this approach can be potentially flawed as such a focus can ignore other important aspects of the programme. For example, it may not address any side-effects and other unintended outcomes that may be equally

important and worthy of note or further investigation. In the present climate of educational research, there is a focus on trying to define the impact of training programmes or other educational interventions in order to justify the often high cost of implementing such strategies and in order to justify public spending. However, the difficulties with trying to define and accurately measure the impact -let alone prove causality -are widely acknowledged and are relevant here.

In relation to the evaluation of educational professional development in particular, Guskey (2000) identifies three 'major mistakes' that have been inherent in the past.

1). That many evaluations have not been evaluations at all, rather they have simply been accounts of what has happened, how many times it happened, or how long for. If we refer back to the definition of evaluation, this sort of information does not tell us about the merit or worth of the professional development opportunity, and how it has added value to educators' practice.

2). Often the evaluation does not go deep enough into the changes to knowledge, skills or practice that occur as a result of the opportunity. They only consider whether participants enjoyed the experience and whether their initial reactions to it were positive.

3). They often consider only short-term effects of the experience. Some changes to practice may take time to develop and refine and may not be immediately evident from initial evaluation; equally, there may be short-term effects that might not be embedded into practice on a longer-term basis.

In summary, the missing elements of evaluation typically relate to the longer-term effects of the process -how practitioners use the knowledge and skills developed and reflect on and apply aspects of the development opportunity in practice. These effects are often the most difficult to measure and these were not addressed in the evaluation described here. The rationale for this decision will be discussed further in later sections.

Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (1994), propose a four-level approach to the evaluation of training programmes. They suggest that evaluation begins at the level of the initial

reaction to the training programme, suggesting that this is an important first element in gathering feedback about the satisfaction experienced by the participants on the training course. They propose that if participants do not respond positively to the training itself, they are likely to have lower motivation to apply the contents of the training in the workplace.

The second level of evaluation that is described in this approach is to ascertain the amount of learning that has taken place. This might be in relation to improvement in skills and knowledge and/or changes in attitudes, depending on the training focus.

As a result of learning taking place, the next level is designed to assess the outcome that learning has had on behaviour; aiming to identify changes in the behaviour of the participant in the workplace, as a result of participating in the training. Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (1994) highlight a number of difficulties that might impact on change in behaviour, including the extent to which support is received through the workplace environment, lack of motivation or resistance to change and the difficulties of incorporating new skills into a person's existing repertoire.

Lastly, the 'results' of the training form the final level of the evaluation. The results of the training programme are described as changes that are related to the aims and objectives of the programme. For example, in the 'Communicating Matters' programme, the required results were to improve practitioners' understanding of language and communication, their own language behaviour and their reflective practice. Such changes can be difficult to measure and to specifically attribute to the programme itself, as there are usually a number of potentially intervening factors.

Building on this type of staged model, Guskey (2000) proposes a five-level model for programme evaluation. Level 1 is similar to Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's. It aims to measure the initial reactions of participants in the development opportunity. He suggests that questions addressed at this level should include whether participants perceived themselves as having benefitted from the experience and whether it made sense and was useful to them. It should also address questions about the location and environmental factors relevant to the training situation.

Level 2 of Guskey's model addresses the issue of the participants' learning. More specifically, it asks the question of whether the participants acquire the knowledge and skills that the experience was designed to target.

The third level of Guskey's model addresses the role of the organisation in professional development; it aims to identify how the organisation supports and facilitates the implementation of skills and changes to practice as a result of the activity.

Level 4 of the framework looks to see if acquired knowledge and skills are retained and applied in context and finally, in level 5, Guskey proposes that student outcomes are assessed in order to measure change. This model goes further than the Kirkpatricks' with respect to explicitly including the assessment of student outcomes, although these could be considered to be included in level four of Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's model as the overarching aims of a programme. For example, in the case of the 'Communicating Matters' programme, the aims are related to practitioner outcomes, but an overarching aim would clearly be related to an improvement in children's achievement in the area of communication.

With respect to the evaluation literature reviewed here, this study aims to address primarily formative questions, as of interest in this case was the way in which the programme was delivered, received by participants and might be modified for the future. Rossi et al. (2004) suggest that formative evaluation is most appropriate when new programmes are being developed, as they suggest that to focus on the impact or efficiency of programmes in their earliest stages can be premature. This is because programmes are likely to be unpredictable in their early stages and prone to changes. Rossi et al. continue to suggest that formative evaluation is appropriate in order to:

'clarify the needs of the target population, improve programme operations and enhance the quality of programme delivery' (p.39).

Clearly evaluations are most effective and credible if they address all of the levels identified by Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (1994) and Guskey (2000). However, many evaluations struggle to address all of the levels in such a framework in real-life contexts, where constraints may limit the evaluation design and implementation. Nonetheless, having such a framework supports the decision-making process which is

involved in considering what levels can and should be addressed through the evaluation process. This particular study was designed to elicit participant reactions, to identify knowledge acquired and learning that took place and to identify intended behaviour change as a result of the programme (primarily the first three levels of the Kirkpatricks' and Guskey's framework). It was beyond the scope of the evaluation to allow for longer-term follow-up, however initial data collection took place across a number of months as modules were spaced out across this time period (see timeline in later chapter, table 4.1).

2.6 Rationale for a case-study approach

This particular evaluation was developed as a case study. Such an approach was considered to be appropriate due to the nature of the situation under investigation; a small-scale pilot training programme for early years practitioners. Robson (2002) describes case study as:

'... a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence.'(p.5)

As the pilot programme was intended to be a small-scale programme for which comparison groups were not available, a case study approach was considered to be most relevant for determining the usefulness of the materials and understanding any related delivery issues. The intention was to discover from the case study what and how practitioners learned from the training experience and to inform how future development opportunities might be provided through a local model of delivery of the 'Communicating Matters' materials.

Robson (2002) suggests that a case study approach can be more worthwhile than trying to develop a strategy that attempts to replicate, although without rigour, a more traditional 'experimental' design. Yin (1994) describes case study research as being appropriate when it would be difficult, if not impossible to 'separate the phenomenon's variables from their context'. This is relevant here, in that a controlled experimental design was not necessarily appropriate in the context under investigation. This was because the focus of research was to understand the

programme implementation and benefits for the participants, rather than to compare it to other interventions or no intervention at all. The approach was also deemed appropriate because the findings from the case were not intended to be generalised to entire populations or a wide range of circumstances. Rather the broad aim was to better understand the identified case, to determine what could be learned from it and to elicit knowledge that might be useful in the future (either directly or indirectly) to other similar small-scale case studies or training situations.

Given that the case-study method can be applied to diverse situations using a range of research strategies, there are obviously different kinds of research approaches. Stenhouse (1985) identifies four types: ethnographic, evaluative, educational and action research. Clearly the case study described here is designed to be evaluative. Stenhouse suggests that either a single case or a number of cases can be investigated in detail in order to provide information to stakeholders or other decision-makers that will support them in judging the merit or worth of policies or programmes.

Yin (1994) suggests that case studies are best used when 'how' or 'why' questions are the focus of investigation, where there is little control over the event or situation and when there is a real-life context for the investigation. With respect to this study, there are two broad 'how' questions that are being addressed which relate to the research questions described earlier. These are:

- How did the programme support practitioner learning and reflection in relation to the language and communication development of young children?

- How can we learn from the planning, implementation and evaluation of 'Communicating Matters' in order to improve future training opportunities for early years practitioners?

Adelman *et.al* (1980) suggest a number of possible advantages of case study research including that in their view the data gathered from case study research is 'strong in reality'. They suggest that the approach has strength in the attention that can be given to the subtlety and complexity of a situation and that case studies begin in a world of action and contribute to it with the more immediate use and implementation of findings. This fits well with formative evaluation, focusing on whether the activity

happens as was originally intended (as described in more detail in the previous chapter). With reference to how case study research can be used for evaluation, Yin (1994) describes a number of different applications of case studies to evaluation including:

1. Explaining causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for other approaches. The explanations would link how programmes are implemented with the outcomes of the programme.

2. Describing an intervention and the real-life context in which it occurred.

3. To illustrate particular topics within an evaluation, with description of specific situations and events.

This particular study does not aim to address the first purpose suggested by Yin -it is not intended to make causal links or explanations. Its purpose is better described by the second and third applications outlined above.

Merriam (1998) identifies characteristics of case studies which she divides into three groups: particularistic, descriptive and heuristic. She cites a more detailed list of characteristics originally identified by Olson (1982), which she then sub-divides under the headings previously identified. Those characteristics that are relevant to this particular study are listed below with some further description about them where appropriate:

Particularistic

The case study:

- suggests to the reader what to do or what not to do in a similar situation

- can examine a specific instance but illuminate a general problem

- may or may not be influenced by the author's bias

The intention of this study was to understand how the delivery of 'Communicating Matters' worked in practice and how that might impact on delivery in the future; to learn lessons about what went well and what might be changed (also discussed earlier

in this section). Findings in this context are likely to have some relevance to other contexts, although will not necessarily be directly transferable. The study will certainly be influenced by the evaluator's involvement in the case, given the context in which the training was delivered. As an evaluator, there is inherently involvement in negotiation with stakeholders (in this case trainers and project leaders) and such relationships impact on the objectivity which can be applied. This involvement cannot be ignored, but attempts can be made to minimise its affect or at least acknowledge that it might exist. Reflections on evaluator involvement will be considered in a later chapter.

Descriptive

The case study

- illustrates the complexities of a situation –the fact that not one but many factors contributed to it

- has the advantage of hindsight yet can be relevant in the present

- shows the influence of personalities on the issue

- shows the influence of the passage of time on the issue –deadlines, change of legislators, cessation of funding, and so on

- includes vivid material –quotations, interviews, newspaper articles and so on

- presents information in a wide variety of ways ...and from the viewpoints of different groups

The context in which this evaluation was carried out was complex from the outset and the case was influenced by people, timescales, participants and resources. The intention was to provide as rich a picture as possible of the case, taking into account the numerous constraints present (including the frequently changing context). This was to be achieved by collecting information from more than one source and using more than one strategy, so that any inferences and conclusions might be validated by more than one set of data where possible. This particular study was carried out over a relatively short period of time, and therefore does not attempt to represent detailed

information gathered over a long period, nor does it take into account a very wide range of people as the project was relatively short-lived and such a method would not have been appropriate.

Heuristic

The case study:

- explains the reasons for a problem, the background of a situations, what happened and why

- explains why an innovation worked or failed to work

- evaluates, summarizes, and draws practice conclusions, thus increasing its potential applicability

As previously highlighted, the intention of the case-study as an evaluation was to understand why the programme progressed as it did and what factors supported or impeded the delivery and initial outcomes. Reflection on the process as well as the outcomes of the study was considered important and is described in a later chapter. This was important in understanding why what happened did so. The heuristic characteristics of the case study approach very much fit in with broader evaluation approaches and therefore this study aims to address these through analysis and interpretation of the findings.

Much is written about applied research, 'real-world' research and 'realistic' evaluation (e.g. Bamberger *et al.,* 2006; Robson, 2002, Rossi *et al.,* 2004), which demonstrates the often difficult and 'messy' circumstances under which it is usually carried out. This was relevant in this situation being described, as by the very nature of the programme, the design and implementation was unlikely to be straight-forward. There were numerous factors which could not be controlled by the evaluator or research design in the real-world context, including the use of different trainers and having different groups following the programme. It is a constant reminder that we are dealing with people who will make separate decisions and conditional judgements about their own situations. The impact on the results of such factors is that data collection may often

be inaccurate and incomplete and consequently the validity of the results is then affected.

A case study approach lends itself to a mixed methods design, as described earlier in this section. In such a situation, both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods can be applied. It is well documented and agreed that the data collected in case studies can be quantitative and/or qualitative in nature in order to get the most appropriate data for the given situation. For example, Merriam (1998) writes that:

'Unlike experimental, survey or historical research, case study does not claim any particular methods of data collection or data analysis. Any and all methods of data gathering, from testing to interviewing, can be used in case study.' (p.28)

The data collected was based on an analysis and consequent understanding of the materials, including the programme aims and key messages that were expected to be delivered. Methods were developed to fit with a case-study evaluation and that would be appropriate to the context in which the training was delivered. This is further described below.

2.7 Summary

Through the review of the literature, the importance of language development to the educational and future outcomes for children and young people has been highlighted. As a result, the need to identify and support children from an early age and to develop their skills in speech, language and communication cannot be underestimated. As a consequence of children spending significant amounts of time in early years provision, practitioners working in this sector are in a good position to promote language and communication skills. They are also in a good position to identify and support children who might be following different pathways to acquiring speech, language and communication skills. However, the review of literature has highlighted the perceived lack of skills within the early years workforce and reports of limited opportunity to access CPD which focuses on speech, language and communication.

Whilst continuing professional development for teachers has long been on the agenda, the early years sector has not received the same emphasis until lately. Although there are a range of approaches that can be used for CPD, Government initiatives have been

focused primarily on training approaches. 'Communicating Matters' was commissioned and designed to be used as a training programme to be delivered to early years practitioners who are working with children between 3- and 5-years. Whilst the materials can be evaluated in relation to meeting the criteria identified for effective training, the delivery of the materials and the way they are received by practitioners needs to be further understood in the specific context where they will be delivered. This is necessary if they are to be used with a wider range of practitioners as a key professional development activity; hence the evaluation described here was required.

The design of this evaluation attempts to take into account many of the issues raised by the literature review, whilst not necessarily being able to address them all in a small-scale study. A case-study evaluation approach was chosen to address the essentially formative aims as described above. A formative approach was considered appropriate in this case, as the principal purpose of the evaluation was to understand more about the pilot training programme and inform the future development and delivery of it. Mixed methods of data collection were considered to be the most appropriate, to enable a range of data to be collected; some that could provided quickly by participants and analysed using simple statistical techniques and some that could provide more individualistic and descriptive information about the programme in order to add a level of richness to the findings. The study aims to provide credible information about how the programme met participants' needs, how knowledge and skills were received by participants and how it might be applied in early years settings. In addition, the views of the trainers and understanding of the context of the delivery will also provide useful information to enhance and validate the information gathered from participants.

The 'Communicating Matters' materials

3.1 Aims of the materials

As a result of identifying various issues from the literature, it is helpful to consider whether and how the 'Communicating Matters' materials address them. This includes identifying the aims of the materials, how the materials fit with the criteria for effective training and the mode of delivery.

The 'Communicating Matters' programme identifies three aims which are:

1. To deepen practitioners' understanding of children's communication and language, particularly between the ages of three and five years.

2. To deepen practitioners' understanding of how their own communicative behaviour affects children's use and display of communicative behaviours.

3. To help practitioners reflect on and develop their practice to promote children's communication and language more effectively.

The materials were reported to be designed to support practitioners' development through practical activities which include observation, reflection and analysis. There are three modules included in the training package (see Table 3.1 below)

3.2 Content of the materials

With respect to Garet *et al*s. (2001) categorisation of CPD activities as 'traditional' or 'reform' approaches, 'Communicating Matters' fits within the traditional group. However, the materials attempt to address many of the typical criticisms of such approaches. Based on criteria identified by Joyce and Showers (1995) and Garet, *et al.* (2001) the 'Communicating Matters' materials were broadly analysed to determine which aspects they took account of and how they were addressed.

Duration

The materials were designed as three modules, each consisting of two days of training (see table 3.1 below). The intention was that there was time between day 1 and 2 of each module in which to complete a between-module task or assessment activity. The materials did not specify the interval between the two days of each module, nor the

overall length of time that the complete six days should take to deliver. This was left to the discretion of the trainers to determine for their own situations.

	Title	Duration
Module 1	Introduction to communication and language in early years settings	2 days
Module 2	Management and organisation of communication and language in early years settings	2 days
Module 3	Exploring different pathways to communication, language and English	2 days

Table 3.1: The 'Communicating Matters' Modules

Collective participation

There was no clear guidance in the published materials that referred to collective participation in the training. The materials could be delivered to the entire staff from a setting (site-based) or to a range of practitioners over a defined area (district-wide). In this case, the training was delivered on a district-wide basis and collective participation was promoted by encouraging settings that were attending the training to send two practitioners together. This, it was hoped, would foster communication between the practitioners about the issues raised in the training and support further reflection and dialogue when back in their settings. In addition, it was hoped that practitioners would feel better able to feed back information and model skills to others working in the setting if they had attended together and could share the responsibility for doing this (as well as providing each other with mutual support). It was considered that two people feeding back to a group would be more powerful than one person.

Focus on content /exploration of theory

'Communicating Matters' clearly addresses a range of issues related to the subject of speech, language and communication. Sections on child development and underpinning theory, how children use language, the adult role in communication, and children following different pathways to developing language and communication are

included. A number of strategies to support language and communication are introduced and aspects of the communicative environment are considered. It could be argued that the materials provide relatively in-depth focus on theory and related content.

Demonstration and modelling of skills / promoting active learning

A number of the activities included in the training materials allow opportunities for discussion between practitioners. This is supported by video clips which serve to demonstrate practice in the area and which are analysed by participants in relation to children's development and adult behaviour. Tasks are provided for participants to complete, which are analysed with other practitioners and trainers in the second part of each module. Participants are not directly observed by trainers; rather the training promotes self-analysis and reflection.

Fostering coherence

In terms of how the materials relate to the wider early years agenda, this seems to be the area where the published training materials are most deficient. They were printed before the publication of the Early Years Foundation Stage materials and therefore links to these must be made by trainers as appropriate. Furthermore, it is difficult for training materials published for use across the country to take into account local contexts and development foci. Therefore, further reliance on trainers to be able to make links and establish coherence for participants is required. However there are no explicit directions to trainers to include links with other materials and initiatives.

Simulated practice

This area was not covered by the training materials as such. Instead, participants were given opportunities to develop and reflect on their practice through the tasks which were provided and were completed in their settings.

Feedback about performance

Feedback about performance came through the analysis of tasks completed between sessions. Therefore, the majority of the feedback was based on the practitioner's own analysis of their performance and self-reflection. However, there was opportunity for

discussion with other participants and trainers, which could provide feedback to the individual.

Coaching in the workplace

There was no guidance in the materials about how the training might be followed up in the workplace. Therefore the coaching element was not accounted for in the training when it took place.

In summary, the materials adhere to many of the criteria identified with respect to what is considered effective for training programmes. This suggests that there is relevant and appropriate content for delivery, but cannot account for how the training will be delivered once the personal characteristics and biases of trainers and participants are brought to the situation. One of the most obvious difficulties that might be predicted with delivering the materials is that they were not designed by the trainers disseminating them and they were not necessarily based on a needs analysis of the participants (rather they were based on the perceived needs of the early years workforce as a whole). Therefore the content might not meet the specific needs of the participants in the local context, despite having many of the characteristics considered appropriate to training for professional development.

The Case Study Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The following section aims to describe the details of the case being evaluated in this study. This includes the participants involved, the timescale of the study and ethical considerations. It also intends to outline decisions made about the type of data collected and the implementation of the method.

4.2 Defining the case

Yin (1994) describes the potential difficulty in defining a case where it is more than an individual, such as an event or particular activity. He suggests that such phenomena are not easily defined, particularly with respect to identifying the 'beginning' and 'end' points of a case. When referring to the evaluation of a programme, he suggests that there may be differences in views about the programme definition (depending on who might be defining it) and there might be elements of a programme that existed before its implementation which can result in blurred boundaries. However, Yin suggests that it is important to attempt to define the case under investigation and identify some of the boundaries and constraints.

With respect to the 'Communicating Matters' programme, there were four training venues each with its own location, set of trainers and participants. Whilst each training event could have been considered and evaluated as a separate case study, all training courses were regarded to be part of the same pilot programme and therefore analysed and evaluated as a whole. This was considered appropriate because each module was being delivered at the various sites within a short space of time and the intention of the evaluation was not specifically to provide information from one site in order to inform another. Instead, the evaluation's intention was to look at the first series of training as a whole with a view to informing future courses. Therefore, the 'case' in this study was defined to be the first group of training events, focusing on the initial cohort of early years practitioners who were taking part and the respective tutors who were delivering the programme. The training involved three modules, all of which were included in the case. These were not necessarily all of the same length for each course, nor did they contain completely identical content (the reasons for this are

discussed further in section 5.7). There was some flexibility given to trainers about what they included in the training, although a core of content was included across all courses based on the published training materials.

4.3 Data collection methods

A mixed methods approach to data collection was applied to this study (as described in the previous chapter). Denscombe (2007) identifies three characteristic features of mixed methods research:

1. **The use of quantitative and qualitative approaches within a single research project**

A distinction needs to be drawn here between *methods* considered to be quantitative (e.g. surveys) or qualitative (e.g. interviews) and *data* that is quantitative or qualitative. This study uses both quantitative and qualitative methods and data. Quantitative data was collected through questionnaires by using rating scales and by converting open-ended responses to quantitative data using thematic analysis. Qualitative data was collected through interviews.

2. **An explicit focus on the link between approaches**

Triangulation is a key technique used within a mixed methods study to bring together the different approaches and data sets. Data was collected from both participants and trainers in order to triangulate responses where possible and appropriate. This can enhance the validity of the conclusions that might be drawn from the data collected.

3. **An emphasis on practical approaches to research problems**

Denscombe refers to the mixed methods approach as being 'problem-driven', where providing the answers to the problem are the principal concerns of the research. Therefore, the data collection methods are designed to meet this requirement rather than to fit in with a particular philosophical stance. In this particular case, approaches needed to be chosen that would support relatively unobtrusive data collection, so that it didn't distract from the main focus of the training. Furthermore, it was considered important (by the training group) that the data collection methods should not add

significantly (in terms of work required and time taken to complete) to the additional tasks that participants had been asked to complete as part of the training.

As the four training cohorts were considered as a single case, the data from each venue was combined for the purposes of analysis. This was considered appropriate because the research questions were based on understanding the characteristics of the training programme more generally, rather than creating knowledge about the issues related to specific sites. There is an underlying assumption in this decision that all participants received a comparatively similar content during their training experience. All trainers were provided with and trained to use the 'Communicating Matters' materials and therefore the core content provided to each of the training cohorts should have been largely similar. However, trainers would clearly choose to deliver the materials in their own style and the validity of the data relies on the trainers' fidelity to the materials.

4.4 Context

The wider context of the study is outlined in the introduction and represented in figure 1.2. The sites that were chosen for the pilot training programme were in four areas of the county. These areas were pre-selected by the steering group organising the project and were based in communities that are known to rate highly in the county on the indices of deprivation. This decision was guided by the assumption (based on research, e.g. Locke *et al*, 2002) that children in these areas are most likely to be at risk of poorer outcomes with respect to their language and communication development.

4.5 Timescale

The development of the project started in the summer term of 2006 following the National launch of the 'Communicating Matters' materials. The training took place across an academic year with most courses running a module in each term. Table 4.1 below illustrates the timescale over which the project took place.

4.6 Participants

Participants working in early years settings (including pre-schools, day-nurseries and school reception classes) in the target area were all invited to attend the training. Therefore selection of potential participants was based solely on identified

geographical areas. Information inviting practitioners to attend the training was sent to all head teachers or managers, depending on the type of setting. Settings were all asked to send two practitioners to the training. Participation in the training was not

Year	Term (Months)	Activities
2006	Spring (Jan -April)	Initial steering group meeting
	Summer (May-July)	Further steering group meetings (2)
	Autumn (Sept –Dec)	Familiarisation meetings for potential trainers Initial information to settings Steering group meeting
2007	Spring (Jan-April)	Training for trainers (3 sessions) Steering group meeting
	Summer(May-July)	Training group meetings (2) Module 1 training (all venues)
	Autumn (Sept-Dec)	Module 2 training (all venues) Module 3 training (one venue)
2008	Spring (Jan-April)	Module 3 training (3 venues) Evaluation and feedback meeting

Table 4.1: Timeline for the implementation of the 'Communicating Matters' pilot programme

compulsory and settings were encouraged, rather than obliged, to nominate practitioners to attend. As a result, participants may have been specifically asked by their managers to attend the training or they may have expressed a wish to attend having been made aware of the opportunity. This clearly raises issues about the

selection process, with respect to participant motivation and commitment to attending the course. For example, participants are likely to be more motivated to engage in the programme if they have chosen to participate, rather than if they have been nominated to attend by a manager (e.g. Guskey 2000). There may be a number of other factors that will have influenced participants' decisions to enrol for the training including: support from a manager, availability of cover, accessibility of the course venue and course times, in addition to personal interest and motivation.

There were a total of 36 participants registered at the beginning of the 'Communicating Matters' training. Not all participants attended all of the training sessions and by module 3 only 30 of the 36 participants were attending. Participants were all female, representing the current dominance of the early years sector by women.

All participants were working with children in the Early Years Foundation Stage (children from birth to five-years-old). As a result of practitioners being invited from a range of settings, they could be qualified teachers, nursery nurses, classroom assistants and pre-school and nursery managers, supervisors and assistants. With such a wide range of roles represented, participants also possessed a wide range of qualifications, including qualified teacher status and NVQs amongst other qualifications. Some participants may have had no formal qualifications but attended locally held courses as part of their professional development. The range of CPD opportunities that had been previously attended by participants (with respect to language and communication) was also very varied and included general training related to the Foundation Stage Curriculum and specific training, for example related to children with Autistic Spectrum Conditions. Some practitioners (5) reported having attended no previous language and communication related training.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed at the beginning of the training programme about the evaluation and the purpose of it (see appendix 1). Responses to the questionnaires were treated and retained in a confidential manner and where appropriate coded so as to maintain anonymity. Participants' were given the option of withdrawing from the study described here if they chose to by indicating this to the trainer. Participants may

have also chosen to opt out of the evaluation by choosing not to complete the questionnaires.

4.8 Design of data collection tools

The decision about what data to collect was based on the identification of the key content and messages contained within the 'Communicating Matters' materials. The aims identified in the materials (and outlined in section 2.7) were considered too broad from which to develop meaningful data collection tools and therefore more detailed and module specific training objectives were identified in consultation with teacher advisors and other practitioners involved in the programme. These were defined as follows:

Module 1: To improve practitioners' knowledge and understanding of children's language and communication development between 0 and 5 years old

To improve the understanding and analysis of practitioners' own language behaviour and how this behaviour can impact on children's communication

To develop practitioners' use of story-telling with young children as a means to support language and communication development

Module 2: To improve practitioners' understanding about how young children can use talk for different purposes and with different partners

To improve practitioners' understanding about how stories can be used to develop language skills

Module 3: To extend practitioners' knowledge about how to support young children learning English as an additional language

To extend practitioners' knowledge about how to support young children who might be experiencing delays and/or difficulties with developing communication skills

The decision to use questionnaires as one approach to the data collection was based on a number of factors including the number of participants that could be sampled and the ease of access for the participants. Robson (2002) identifies factors in making decisions about using questionnaires in some detail, suggesting that that focused, pre-structured data collection techniques such as questionnaires can be used under certain circumstances. These are outlined below with a brief comment about the rationale for using the approach in the current evaluation:

1. **Where previous work gives you the confidence to adopt a well-defined conceptual structure:**

   Questionnaires are widely used in the evaluation of training contexts and therefore were deemed appropriate for this situation. Participants are familiar with this type of data collection and are therefore likely to be confident in completing such questionnaires. An assumption was made that participants would have the necessary literacy skills to complete questionnaires, as they would be no more demanding in terms of literacy content than that of the training itself.

2. **Specific well-focused research questions:**

   A number of research questions were defined at the outset of the study, specific to the context under investigation (see introduction). These related to both the process and the initial outcomes of the programme and were considered appropriate to investigation through questionnaire responses. Questionnaires were considered appropriate in relation to helping to understand practitioners' views about the programme and to determine how they planned to use the knowledge and skills gained from participating in their settings.

3. **Where there is a tight and well-known sampling strategy:**

> A sampling strategy was not needed as such. Due to the size of the sample, responses were sought from all practitioners attending the training. In this sense there was a clearly defined group who formed the sample; all participants were included unless they declined to participate.

A clear advantage of using questionnaires as a data collection method is that the evaluator can ensure that the same questions are asked of each respondent and all respondents have the opportunity to answer all of the questions.

The questionnaires in this study were developed using statements with associated rating scales and open-ended questions. Statements with rating scales were typically used at the beginning of the questionnaire in order to allow participants to make some relatively quick responses related to key themes. In some respects, this format also focuses participants on some of the key ideas about which the evaluation is seeking information prior to asking open-ended questions. Cohen et al. (2000) identify that:

'Rating scales are used widely in research, and rightly so, for they combine the opportunity for a flexible response with the ability to determine frequencies, correlations and other forms of quantitative analysis. They afford the researcher the freedom to fuse measurement with opinion, quantity with quality.' (p.253)

The questionnaires used were designed to encourage practitioners to self-report on their own knowledge and understanding. This was considered appropriate as the nature of the training material encouraged self-reflection and it was considered more 'user friendly' than presenting participants with a structured assessment or checklist activities. The way in which questionnaires were designed and the rationale for this will be discussed further with respect to each module evaluated in later sections.

Likert scales were used in this instance to elicit an intensity of response, rather than a yes/no answer. This allowed the participants to rate their response according to how strongly they held a given belief or the extent to which they were confident in their knowledge. Likert scales involve the option to give a response along a range (often identified by statements and/or numbers) to a question or statement. A seven-point

scale was chosen so that participants had a relatively wide range of options and therefore degree of flexibility with their responses and hence to allow more sensitivity to the change in response before and after the module.

A number of more general limitations of rating scales are identified by Cohen *et al*. (2000) and some of these are outlined below with respect to the scales used in this study:

- Although points on the scale were presented visually as being at equal intervals, there can be no assumption that there is equality between the different ratings that respondents might record on the scale. For example, with respect to the numerical scales used in this study: it cannot be assumed that if respondent's rating on a statement changes from a 2 to a 1, that it represents the same degree of change as if a respondent's rating changes from a 4 to a 3.

- Participants are not able to make any other comments about the statement and therefore the scales might miss important information that participants wanted to share or comments that they wanted to make. Hopefully, some of this information might be gathered through the open-ended questions and other data collected.

- Respondents might naturally prefer not to respond at either of the extreme ends of the scale. Although a seven-point scale was used in this case -in the hope of providing a relatively good degree of flexibility to responses -it could be that a proportion of the participants would have only considered using the middle five points. This means that if they initially rated a statement as either 2 or 6, they may have been reluctant to use a 1 or 7, even if they had shifted their feelings in the given direction.

- Finally, rating scales may be more prone to respondents falsifying their scores and we cannot be sure about the extent to which participants were careful to provide accurate data.

The use of open-ended questions was considered appropriate in this evaluation in order to gather a more in-depth understanding of participant views and perceptions.

The approach was used in an attempt to counterbalance the difficulty highlighted above -where participants are constricted to providing a rating and are unable to elaborate their view. Cohen *et al.* (2000) suggest that such qualitative data is also more likely to capture 'authenticity, richness, depth of response, honesty and candour', all of which add to the validity of data. For the questions provided, there could be a wide range of responses and each of these was considered to be of equal value. Despite the more time-consuming analysis such questions usually require, the sample size was such that this was possible and desirable. As Cohen *et al.* describe; the responses to open-ended questions:

'...might contain the 'gems' of information that might otherwise have not been caught in the questionnaire'. (p.255)

They also refer to the potential to provide the respondent with greater ownership of their feedback, and therefore the data, when there is the opportunity to provide this sort of response.

A content analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions was carried out. This method has been defined as:

'Any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages' (Holsti, 1969, p.14).

Krippendorff (1980) suggests that although this method uses qualitative data (text), it is considered a quantitative method as text is grouped and quantified into identified themes. Common themes emerging from the responses to open-ended questions were identified through induction -rather than through the use of pre-determined categories. A key question raised through the use of this method is 'What counts as a theme?' Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that a theme 'captures something important about the data in relation to the research question' and that this is represented by some sort of patterned response (in this case from those completing the questionnaires). Usually, Braun and Clarke suggest, there will be a number of instances of a theme across the data set, however they go on to note that just because a theme is frequently occurring, it does not necessarily make it more important or relevant in relation to the research findings.

Finally, semi-structured interviews with trainers were completed following the delivery of all three modules of the training. They were chosen as a method of data collection to elicit more detailed information, in the knowledge that the sample size for trainers would be much smaller than the participant sample. Cohen *et al.* (2000) propose that interviews:

'...enable participants –be they interviewers or interviewees –to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own points of view.' (p.267)

A principal purpose of using interviews following the training delivery was to be able to further understand some of the issues related to the implementation and effectiveness of the training and to use trainers' views to support or contrast those of the participants.

4.9 Data collection for module 1

At the start of the two-day training, participants were provided with two copies of the questionnaire, one of which they were asked to complete and one which they were asked to retain until the end of the second day of training (see appendix 2). The copies of the questionnaire were marked with the same number so that they could be matched after the training, whilst maintaining anonymity when the responses were completed.

The statements provided on the questionnaire were created in discussion with the early years teacher advisors and other practitioners who were due to be tutoring the course. They were designed to elicit knowledge or views about what were considered the key elements of the course content (outlined above) and what were considered to be important aspects of communication development or practitioner knowledge. The statements were also intended to reflect key messages that it was hoped would be taken away by practitioners and applied in their practice back in their setting. They were not designed to elicit complex ideas or skills, rather easily applied knowledge or strategies. Similarly, the statements were also designed to reflect some common misconceptions that it was hoped the training would challenge and change. In this sense, the statements were subjective in nature -they were based on the

interpretations made of the training content by the group creating the statements and therefore they will have been subject to the preconceptions of this group. The language used in the statements was discussed by the group in an effort to reduce the likelihood that participants would have difficulties with understanding the statements. Unfortunately there was no available opportunity to pilot the questionnaire as the training itself was a pilot programme.

The questionnaire administered consisted of 8 statements intended to prompt participants to self-assess their knowledge or elicit beliefs about children's language and communication development. More specifically, statements were developed to ascertain practitioners' views (at a simplistic level) about:

- Their knowledge of children's development in the area of language and communication
- The extent to which adult-led activities promote conversations
- The effect of context on children's communication
- The effect that adult communication can have on children's communication
- The use of adult questions to promote children's communication
- The adult's role in extending children's conversations
- The adult's role in developing story-telling
- The extent to which conversations should be adult-led

The 7-point rating scale used prompted the rating of responses on the continuum *'strongly disagree'* to *'strongly agree'*.

The intention of using a repeated rating scale in this case was to allow for the comparison of responses before and after the module in order to ascertain whether views and knowledge had changed. Ratings were repeated at the end of day 2 and participant's responses were matched and compared to ascertain whether there was a change in their responses following the training sessions.

At the end of day 2 of the first module, participants were also asked to complete an additional questionnaire (see appendix 3). This asked them to respond to three questions by completing a rating scale (again based on a 7-point Likert scale) to determine:

- How relevant the training was to their needs (from not at all relevant to very relevant)

- What they thought about the overall content of the training (from not at all good to very good)

- How easy the strategies identified on the training would be to implement (from not at all easily to very easily)

Finally three open-ended questions were used to provide the participants with the opportunity to comment on what they had found most useful about the module, what changes to their practice they might make as a result of the module and whether they had any improvement suggestions for future training.

4.10 Data collection for module 2

A written activity, which was part of the module content, was used to gather information about participants' responses to the second module of the training. This was chosen to elicit information about how they thought that they would change their behaviour as a result of the training they had received to this point.

Participants were asked to complete an activity sheet which involved them noting down responses to the question 'How might I change my language behaviour in the future?' They were asked to do this individually before discussion with other participants. They were then able to note down any additional thoughts, following discussion. In addition, they were also asked to comment on whether they thought they might encounter difficulties when attempting to implement changes (see appendix 4). This activity was treated in the same way as the open-ended questionnaires and responses were subject to thematic analysis.

At the end of the module and similar to module 1, participants were asked to complete three questions using rating scales followed by two open-ended questions about their experiences of the training, its relevance and usefulness (see appendix 5). The third open-ended question, which was presented in module 1, was not included in this module as it very closely resembled a question in the activity.

4.11 Data collection for module 3

For this module, the intention of the data collection was to understand whether participants further developed their understanding and practice with respect to working with children following different pathways to speech, language and communication development.

Identical questionnaires were given to practitioners before and after the module so that responses could be compared pre- and post-training input (see appendix 6). The questionnaire included:

- A statement with a seven-point rating scale to determine levels of practitioner confidence to identify children with delays or difficulties with their language development.

- A statement with a seven-point rating scale to determine to what extent practitioners felt they knew how to support children with delays or difficulties with their language development.

- An open-ended question to determine what strategies they would use to support children with delays or difficulties with their language development.

- A statement with a seven-point rating scale to determine levels of practitioner confidence to identify children with English as an additional language.

- An open-ended question to determine what strategies they would use to support children with English as an additional language.

An assumption was made in the analysis of the information gathered through these questionnaires, that practitioners would continue to use the skills identified before the training in their practice and that participants did not necessarily record them again in their post-session responses.

At the end of the module, similar to the previous modules, three questions with associated rating scales and three open-ended questions were provided (see appendix 7). This was to enable practitioners to reflect on the relevance and usefulness of the

training and how they might implement strategies, as well as to provide an opportunity for them to comment on suggestions for improvement.

4.12 Interviews with trainers

Semi-structured interviews were designed to be carried out with trainers following the training delivery (see appendix 8). This was to allow some degree of triangulation with the participant data gathered and also to highlight any contrasting or alternative issues identified from the trainers' perspectives. Key areas for questioning were identified in relation to:

- Planning and preparation for the training

- The materials used

- Aspects of the training that went well or not so well

- Impact on practice in settings

- Modifications for future training

The interviews were transcribed and analysed in order to identify themes that fitted with the responses already identified from participants. Therefore the thematic analysis was carried out with the intention of looking for specific themes (rather than inductively as for participant responses). The transcripts were also analysed for any additional themes which were specifically related to the trainers' perspectives.

4.13 Issues of reliability and validity

With respect to validity, Cohen *et al.* (2000) quote Gronlund (1981) suggesting that validity should be seen as a matter of degree rather than absolute state. On the basis of what is a small-scale case study evaluation, we cannot argue a high level of external validity. Validity is certainly compromised from the outset by the size of the sample and the nature of the research design. It is not the intention of this study to be able to make highly generalisable claims as a result of the data analysis. The purpose was to be able to learn some lessons about the delivery of this particular intervention, that may or may not be applicable to other similar situations, but that might be of interest to others planning and carrying out comparable programmes. Hence the internal

validity is of importance in this case; any finding and related implications that are identified need to be borne out from the data gathered.

In an effort to improve the validity of the findings, it was intended to triangulate results using different forms of data including the ratings, responses to open-ended questions and interviews.

Bamburger et al. (2006) refer to triangulation as:

'drawing on information from different data sources as well as other methods including using different methods of inquiry and different investigators'.

Therefore it was hoped to improve the validity of the data collected from rating statements by using information gathered through open-ended questions and also to improve the data gathered from participants by using information obtained from the trainers. Although the sample size was relatively small, a number of data sources were employed to more generally improve the confidence in the data gathered and hence the validity with which findings can be reported.

4.14 Summary

The methods which were employed in this evaluation were considered to be fit for purpose although certainly not ideal due to the constraints of the situation imposed before the start of the evaluation and as it progressed. The methods described have been modified from the original design developed for the study, due primarily to the context in which the evaluation took place. The decisions made about changes to the design will be described in more detail in a later chapter.

A mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods and data were used in an attempt to meet the evaluation aims and obtain data that could be analysed using statistical techniques but in addition that could add a level of detail and description about the personal experiences of those involved. The results of this analysis are described in the following section.

Results from participant and trainer feedback

5.1 Introduction

The data obtained from participants is set out according to the individual training modules to which it corresponds. One set of data was combined to represent feedback from all three modules, which is detailed at the end of the individual module analyses. Data obtained from tutors is then described and analysed in a subsequent section, with reference to previous sections as appropriate.

Quantitative data that was gathered directly from participants is described and analysed in each section using appropriate statistical methods given the sample sizes. Qualitative information gathered through open questions and related written responses were subject to thematic analysis, in order to support or expand the quantitative data or to identify further points of importance. Specific examples of the comments provided by participants and tutors are included to highlight key points of significance; to reinforce and expand key themes identified and to highlight any unusual responses which may be of interest and worthy of further exploration or comment.

The quantity and type of data that was available for analysis is summarised in table 5.1 below. Responses were not available from all participants.

5.2 Module 1 participant data

5.2.1 Pre- and Post-module questionnaire responses

The responses to eight different statements presented in the questionnaire (see Appendix 2) were analysed to determine to what extent participants agreed or disagreed with the statement and whether their responses changed significantly after involvement in the module 1 training sessions. Ratings were based on a 7-point Likert scale, where a rating of 1 indicated '*strongly disagree'* and a rating of 7 indicated '*strongly agree'*.

	Data collected	Type	Number of responses
Module 1	Pre- and post-module ratings (8 statements)	QUAN	26
	Post-module feedback questionnaire including: Ratings (3 statements) Open-ended questions (2)	QUAN QUAL	26
Module 2	Activity Sheets	QUAL	28
	Post-module feedback questionnaire including: Ratings (3 statements) Open-ended questions (1)	QUAN QUAL	28
Module 3	Pre- and post-module ratings (3 statements) Pre- and post-module strategies	QUAN QUAL	20
	Post-module feedback questionnaire including: Ratings (3 statements) Open-ended questions (2)	QUAN QUAL	6
All modules	Trainer interviews	QUAL	2

Table 5.1: Summary of quantity and type of data collected and analysed

A total of 26 matched responses were available for analysis -where data was received from participants both pre- and post-training. Not all of the data was utilised, as there were a number of responses from participants where either the pre- or post-training response was missing.

A non-parametric test for the analysis of this data was chosen because the data collected from the questionnaire ratings was not found to be normally distributed (based on analysis using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, see appendix 9). Therefore, the assumption of normally distributed data underlying the use of a parametric test for comparison of means could not be met. As a result, a comparison of the pre- and post-training mean scores for each statement was carried out using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test (Wilcoxon, 1945). This particular test was chosen for its suitability to situations where there are two sets of related data that need comparison in order to identify significant differences between the means for each set (see appendix 10).

The means calculated for each of the questionnaire statements before and after training and the related results are shown in table 5.2 and also represented in figure 5.1 below. Significant differences between ratings before and after module 1 of the training were found for six out of the eight statements, with no significant difference being found for statements 2 and 3.

Statement	Pre-	Post-	Difference	Z score	Significance (2-tailed)
1	4.81	5.69	0.88	-3.74	p<0.01
2	3.00	2.62	0.38	-1.86	p>0.05 (not significant)
3	2.85	2.62	0.23	-1.38	p>0.05 (not significant)
4	4.69	5.23	0.54	-2.72	p<0.01
5	4.00	2.08	1.92	-4.34	p<0.01
6	2.62	1.46	1.16	-3.59	p<0.01
7	4.58	5.54	0.96	-3.50	p<0.01
8	3.15	1.88	1.27	-3.90	p<0.01

Table 5.2: **Summary of mean ratings, difference and significance for pre- and post-module 1 training statements**
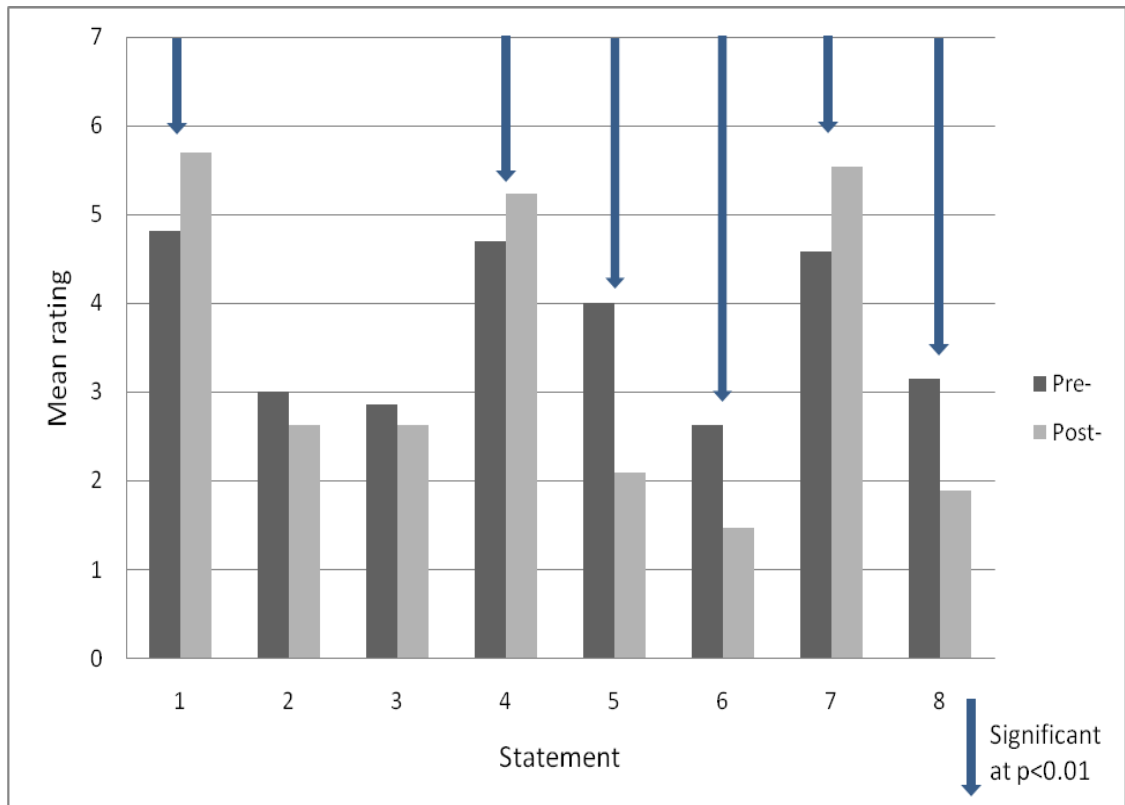
Figure 5.1: Summary of mean ratings for pre- and post-module 1 training statements (with significant differences highlighted)

Prior to considering each statement in turn, it is worth briefly highlighting some of the limitations of the use of these scales in terms of the ways that they can be interpreted in the context of this study. We cannot assume that the responses made to the statements are likely to lead to a change in practice by the participants, only that there is a change at the time of completion in their knowledge, understanding or perceived confidence in relation to the statement. However, a change in one of these areas is required in order that practice might change in the future and hence they could be considered as indicators of possible behaviour change. Where practitioners were asked to rate their understanding of a particular area, it might be that they consider themselves to have good understanding prior to the training, but this may be proved inaccurate with respect to the training content. Therefore, by the end of the course, participants may have a different understanding of a given idea, which they may (or may not) perceive as better than before. These limitations are considered in more detail in the later discussion section.

Each statement that was presented to participants is described below, followed by a brief explanation about the findings obtained for the statement.

1. **I have a good understanding of young children's language and communication development**

The significant result for this statement suggests that the majority of participants felt their knowledge about children's language and communication development was improved as a result of the module. This was supported in the training content through activities requiring them to identify levels of development in relation to different strands of speech, language and communication. It was an important outcome of the course that participation led to improved levels of knowledge and understanding about communication and language development. This was not only to support practitioners to make more informed observations and judgements about typical development but also in order that practitioners felt better able and more confident to identify children who were having difficulties in this area.

2. **Children's conversations are better when the adult plans the activity**

This statement was included because one of the foci of module 1 was related to the importance of child-initiated and child-led conversations that based on the interests of the child, rather than adult planned and led activities. There was a view amongst the trainers that practitioners tended to be over directive in their approach to activities and conversations. Therefore, it was hoped that practitioners, as a result of participation in the training, would be more likely develop opportunities for conversations around the child's own interests. The difference between mean ratings for this question was not significant. However, the pre-training rating was not especially high, with most participants rating the statement towards the lower, 'disagree' end of the scale. Therefore, they might already acknowledge that a child-led approach is more effective in eliciting talk from children and the training may not have affected their judgement to any great extent in relation to this. Although practitioners may think their conversations are child-led, this may not be the case in practice.

3. **A child is likely to use about the same amount of talk at home as they do in their early years setting**

This statement was included to see if practitioners thought that children could use different amounts of talk depending on the context they were in. The training spent some time focusing on the differences that can occur between children's language at home and in another setting, with some children talking significantly more in one situation rather than the other. The non-significant difference found, suggests that the training did not considerably impact on views in this area. Given that the majority of practitioners started the training by rating the statement towards the 'disagree' end of the scale; it would appear that this was something that practitioners were already aware of prior to starting the module. Further input did not appear to make views stronger in the relevant direction.

4. **I know the best ways to talk to children so that I get the most talk from them**

This statement required a degree of 'self-assessment' of perceived current skills and confidence in relation to whether the practitioner felt that they had a good understanding of the best ways to talk to children and in turn elicit talk from them. Clearly there is the potential for respondents to over- or under-estimate their skills in this area both before and after the module. It was hoped that as a result of the module, practitioners would feel that they were much clearer about ways in which they can best elicit talk from a young child, by beginning to reflect on adult behaviour that can impact on child language. This appeared to happen, as the ratings post-training were significantly different, with movement towards the 'agreement' end of the scale, which indicates increased knowledge from practitioners.

5. **Using lots of questions is a good way to encourage children's language**

There was a significant difference representing nearly two-points on the rating scale in relation to whether using lots of questions was a good way to encourage children to talk. The hypothesis of many of the trainers was that practitioners tended to often use a lot of questions with children and that many perceived that this was a good way to promote language development. However, it was a theme of the training that this strategy did not often produce the desired result of improving children's talk; that instead it was likely to 'close down' communicative exchanges, particularly if closed

questions were used or children felt under pressure. Clearly this was a message that practitioners took away from the module and will then try to apply in their conversations with young children in their settings.

6. **In conversations with children, it is best to try to 'fill in the gaps,' rather than leave long pauses**

Again, this statement produced a significant difference in respondent ratings from before and after the module. It was included because one of the aims of the training was to encourage practitioners to reflect on the extent to which they dominated the conversation with children and tended not to leave enough space for children to think about and formulate what they wanted to say. Although the pre-module mean was relatively low (on the disagree end of the scale), participants tended to disagree more strongly with the statement after the training. Hence, it could be hoped that they increased their awareness of the need to leave time for children and monitor their own dominance of the conversation.

7. **I know about ways to encourage children to tell their own stories**

A key focus of the first module was on story-telling. Trainers hypothesised that participants would feel confident to read stories to children, but were less likely to encourage children to do their own story-telling. The significant difference between mean ratings before and after the module for this statement indicates that the respondents considered that they had more knowledge about ways to support children's story-telling having participated in the module.

8. **Adults need to 'take the lead' in conversations to encourage language development**

The final statement on the scale was included to determine to what extent practitioners thought that they needed to lead the conversation with children. Although before the module respondents tended to disagree to some extent with the proposal in the statement; views became much more extreme (further towards the disagree end of the scale) after the module. This suggests that participants considered themselves less likely to take the lead in conversations after the module and were

possibly more aware of the potential negative effect of their dominance in a conversation on a child's involvement.

As suggested previously, the statements presented to participants before and after the training can be viewed as indicators of change in knowledge, skills or behaviour. They are helpful to highlight whether key messages from the first module were received by participants and hence whether the training met its aims on a simplistic level.

5.2.2 End of module 1: participant questionnaire feedback

The end of module feedback was collected using a two-part questionnaire that contained rating scales and open-ended questions. 26 completed questionnaires were received and analysed. The participants were asked to rate their experience of the training on a seven-point Likert scale in relation to three statements:

- How relevant the training was to their current role (where 1 = not at all relevant and 7 = very relevant)

- The overall content of the training (where 1 = not at all good and 7 = very good)

- How easily the ideas from the training would be to implement (where 1 = not at all easily and 7 = very easily)

The average rating for each statement was calculated to determine the general perception of the training from the participant's point of view (see table 5.3.below).

Statement	Mean rating	Range
Relevance of training	5.9	3-7
Content of training	5.5	3-7
Ease of implementation	5.5	3-7

Table 5.3: Mean and range of end of module 1 ratings

These ratings suggest that the first module of the training was generally well-received, with the majority of participants indicating ratings towards the upper end of the scale.

These views can only be taken as indicators of satisfaction with the training. However, in that respect, the participants attending module 1 can be said to have found the training relevant to their roles, with appropriate content. They also report that implementation should be relatively easy.

Three open-ended questions were posed to respondents which asked about the most useful aspects of the training, the changes practitioners intended to make a result of the training and improvement suggestions related to the training materials and their delivery.

Content analysis of responses to these questions was carried out, which identified a number of themes related to the three areas. A decision to combine the responses for improvement suggestions from each module was made because the comments provided at the end of each module overwhelmingly referred to more general issues related to the whole course, rather than module-specific responses.

Participant's views about the most useful aspects of the first module are represented graphically below. Five key themes were identified from their responses (numbers in brackets represent the number of responses in each theme from the 26 questionnaires analysed):

- Developing story-telling (10)

- Knowledge of speech, language and communication development (7)

- Focusing on adult-child interaction (7)

- Sharing ideas with other practitioners (4)

- Reflecting on practice (3)

Key themes identified are illustrated in figure 5.2 and expanded below with examples of the comments to illustrate the types of response provided.

The most commonly reported theme was related to developing storytelling with children, with 10 out of the 26 respondents identifying that this was an area that they had felt useful. This may have been due to the practical nature of this section of the

training, where participants were provided with ideas to develop children's storytelling in their settings.
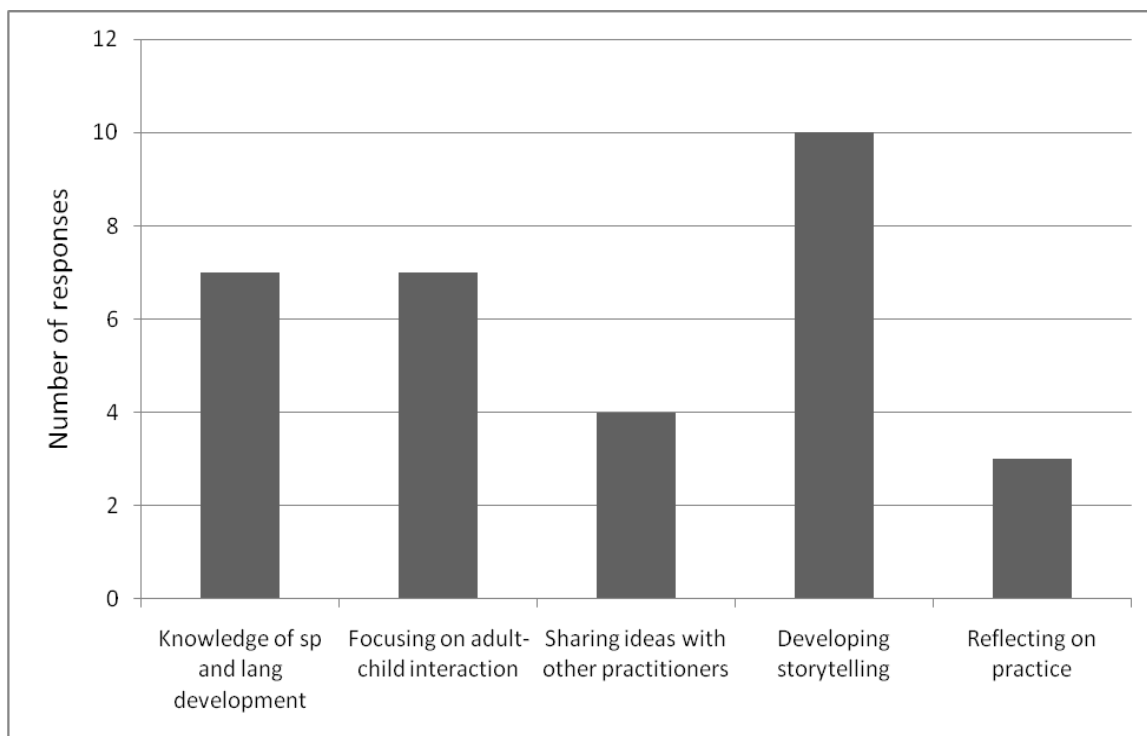
Figure 5.2: Summary of key themes reported as the most useful aspects of module 1

A number of participants referred directly to a strategy that they might implement – the story-telling chair. Comments included:

'Story-telling ideas e.g. chair'

'Ideas for how to develop story-telling'

'Learning about children telling their own stories'

Focusing on adult-child interaction was another theme which was identified in more than a quarter of responses. A number of comments in this theme reflected that practitioners found that the opportunity to reflect on adult behaviour had been helpful in understanding adult-child interactions. The opportunity to carry out a between-module task related to analysing participant's own interactions (by recording adult-child conversations) was also noted as a significant element by some of those who carried it out:

'Drawing attention to how I actually communicate with children –the first task was an eye-opener!'

'The first task really helped to make me think about and focus on how and when etc. I speak and communicate with the children and how the children communicate with each other -fascinating!'

'Changing how we talk to children.'

With a similar number of responses to the previous, a theme emerged about participants' improved knowledge and understanding of language and communication development. Comments indicated that the module had supported them to better understand the terminology related to the area, the ages and stages at which children should be developing certain skills and to analyze language through observation with reference to the relevant strands of development. Comments included:

'I found what the speech and language therapist said was the most relevant and I learnt about what children should be saying at what age.'

'Watching different videos, particularly the little girl with sound and without sound (verbal/non-verbal).'

'Looking carefully at the strands of language'

In the second open-ended question, participants were asked to consider what changes to their practice they might make as a result of having attended the module. The following themes were identified from their responses (also represented in figure 5.3 below):

- Developing story-telling (12)

- Reducing questions (9)

- Providing more opportunities for children to talk (6)

- Developing observations (4)

- Allowing more time for children to think and talk (3)
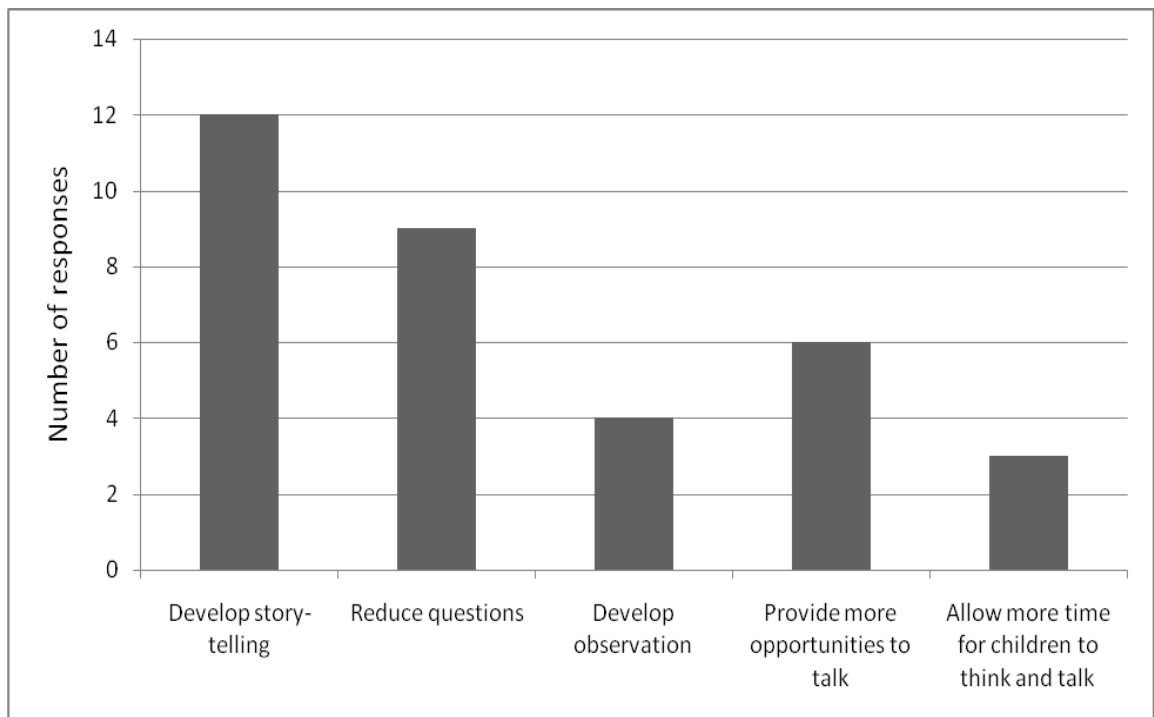
Figure 5.3: Summary of key themes reported as changes to practice as a result of module 1

Not surprisingly, given the responses to the previous question about usefulness, the most common theme for change to practice was related to developing storytelling in settings. Nearly half (12) of respondents indicated some intention to change their practice in relation to storytelling. Again, the idea of using a story-telling chair was mentioned in several comments. Other respondents comented more generally about providing story-telling opportunities and encouraging chidlren to tell their own stories more often, for example:

'Give children more time to tell their own stories'

'Vary story time. Introduce more opportunities for children to tell stories, use story sacks more often'

'Introduce some new ideas i.e. the story chair to encourage children's independent communication'

Another theme that emerged from more than a quarter of comments was about reducing the number of questions that were asked of children. Respondents indicated that they would ask fewer questions of the children, in the understanding that this

would encourage their conversations. This would also serve to make conversations more realistic and interactive in terms of the balance between adult and child talk as there appeared to be an acknowledgement that in genuine conversations, far fewer questions are typically used than the numbers that tend to be posed in an educational setting. Also there was acknowledgement that because children may not immediately respond to one question, it is often followed up by another, rather than the adult waiting longer. For example, comments included:

'Less questioning, give more opportunities for speaking'

'Make talking to children, a real conversation rather than too many questions'

'Encouraging more thinking time and not trying to fill the silences with more questions'

'Don't ask any more questions that I already know the answers to!'

A third theme identified regarding providing more opportunities for children to talk was indicated by comments about creating time and places to talk in settings. Comments included:

'Spaces and places to talk'

'Look at routines and timetables to allow more flexibility and time for opportunities for more spontaneous / extended communication between children and adults'

We are introducing a renewed emphasis on talking and listening –developing expectations for talking and listening'

There were no particularly unusual or unexpected responses to the open-ended questions for the first module. Feedback was predominantly positive with one comment, which although not featuring in any category, summarizes and reinforces the positivity of the data in relation to the most useful aspects of the training:

'Being given ideas that are simple to understand and hopefully easy to implement.'

This was complemented by another comment that suggested, when asked about intended changes to practice, that there were:

'Lots of practical ideas to introduce into the classroom'

The data collected through the open-ended questions in module 1 support many of the changes in response to the repeated ratings gathered from the same set of practitioners. For example, comments were related to improved knowledge about speech and language development, better understanding of adult-child interaction and how adults can promote children's language and ideas about developing story-telling. This provides support for the evaluation objectives related to practitioner knowledge, skills and behaviour.

5.3 Module 2 participant data

5.3.1 Within-session activity analysis

Responses were examined from 28 activity sheets. These were content-analysed to identify themes related to how participants reported they would change their practice and the factors that might affect implementation. By this point in the training, practitioners should have completed one or more of the between-session tasks which encouraged them to examine their own language behaviour in addition to receiving input from trainers and group activities as part of the sessions.

In relation to the first element of the activity, about how practitioners would change their practice, the following themes were identified:

- Leaving longer pauses for children to respond (24)

- Asking open-ended questions of children (11)

- Encouraging children to ask questions (10)

- Allowing children to take the lead in conversations (9)

- Encouraging discussion about stories (8)

- Reducing the amount of adult talk (6)

- Reducing adult initiated questions (6)

Figure 5.4 summarises the percentage of respondents who made comments related to the themes identified.

There were five particular themes that emerged where more than 10 participants made comments identified as being related to a particular theme and these are considered in more detail below:
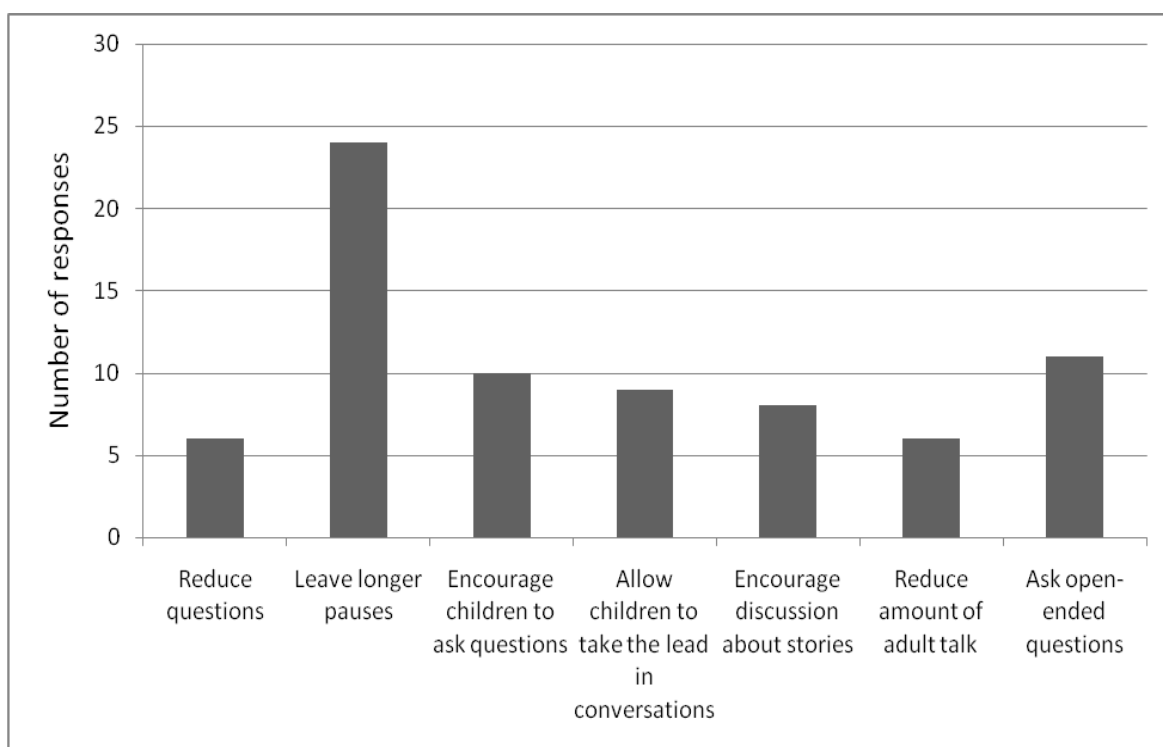
Figure 5.4: Summary of key themes identified in relation to reported changes to practice by participants in module 2

1. **Leaving longer pauses**

By far the most common way in which participants reported that they were going to change their behaviour was by leaving longer pauses in conversations. 24 of the 28 participants made some sort of comment associated with this theme, which reflects the importance of the theme in relation to the training aims –practitioners becoming more aware of their own language behaviour. Comments included:

'Leave more time for children to answer questions'

'Leave more gaps in discussions so children can have more thinking time'

'Slow down; allow every child time to respond'

'Give children more thinking time –don't jump in, silence is fine'

2. Asking more open-ended questions

11 of the respondents indicated that they would use open-ended questions when talking with children. This was an interesting finding, given that in the previous module, a key theme identified from responses was to reduce the number of questions posed.

Participant's comments included:

'Plan open-ended questions after a quality story to encourage development of thinking skills'

'Stop asking routine questions that are often responded to with one-word answers'

'To ask fewer questions to children -if they are questions, they should be open-ended'

The final comment here indicates the link (and possible tension) between two themes, that of asking fewer questions and asking more open-ended questions. The issue that many of the participants seemed to have grasped was that of the 'quality' and timing of the questions that were being asked of children in their settings was of importance.

3. Encouraging children to ask questions

These comments appear to be associated with handing more responsibility for asking the questions to the children in the setting, rather than the adult taking the main role of questioner. Comments included:

'When reading a story, encourage children to ask questions about the story, let the children answer each other's questions'

'Model questions, encourage children to come up with questions of their own'

'I would also like to encourage the children to ask more questions about what they see and hear'

A number of comments included the need to model questions to children alongside encouraging them to become more confident at asking their own questions.

4. Allowing children to take the lead in conversations

Handing over responsibility for taking the lead was another popular theme that emerged from the analysis of responses. Again there was acknowledgement that adults sometimes needed to be prepared to leave enough time for children to formulate and verbalise their own ideas. Comments included:

'Learn to sit back and wait for the children to come forth with conversations'

'To listen more to the children and let them discuss ideas without feeling the need to interrupt and direct'

'Encourage children to communicate with each other, without adult affirmations'

For participants who made comments about allowing children to have more of the control in conversations, there seemed to be a real acknowledgement of the importance of handing over greater control of conversation to young children, and as an adult, sitting back and listening more.

5. Encourage discussion about stories

Related to the commitment from many practitioners about developing their story-time, there were comments related to the discussion that can be elicited from reading stories. Practitioners appeared keen to try to promote more discussion around stories and prompt children to ask and answer questions related to what they had heard.

'After story-time (reading a story) allow time for children to ask questions or discuss what has happened in the story'

'Plan open-ended questions after a quality story to encourage development of thinking skills'

'I would ask different questions at the end of a story so the children could participate'

A number of responses to the activity were non-specific and quite vague about how the practitioner might change their behaviour, for example:

'Use language to encourage children'

'Expand their imaginative skills'

'Giving children a wider experience of language in a variety of ways'

The activity was successful in prompting participants to consider changes they might make to their practice and if behaviour change is to occur, it is more likely to occur if practitioners are able to identify and describe clearly what they are trying to do.

Participants were also asked, as part of the activity, to consider whether they thought there might be difficulties when putting strategies into place. This was in order that some of the potential difficulties could be identified and discussed with the group, along with possible ways to overcome them. The difficulties identified were analysed for recurring themes which included:

- Time

- Resources

- Changing their own behaviour

- Staffing

- Space

- Staff training

There were also a number of other responses which did not clearly fit into the identified themes which formed 15% of the sample (see figure 5.5).

Time to implement strategies was the most frequent theme identified by participants. This included time to put certain strategies in place and having the time to listen to children's ideas and conversation, rather than trying to move on to the next thing. Comments in relation to this theme included:

'The changes would not be difficult but it would take time to implement some of the changes'

'Time! Always feeling that we need to move on –listening to what children say but not allowing time to build on their comments –particularly when there are 21 other children wanting to share their ideas

'Gradual process for children, keep trying, it is not instant'
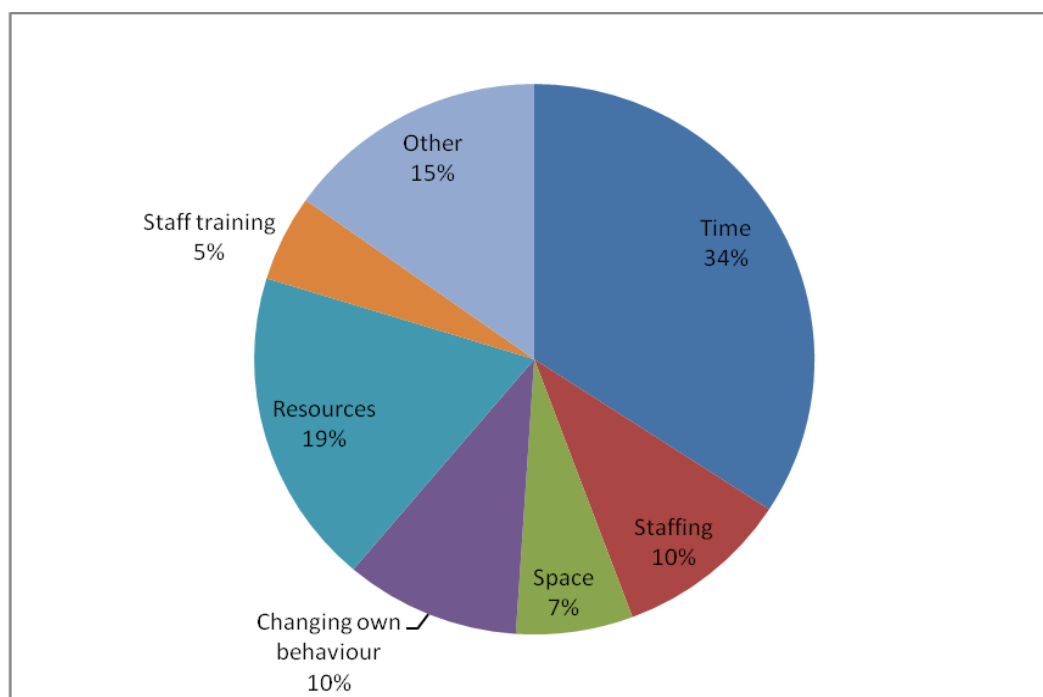
Figure 5.5: Perceived difficulties in changing practice and implementing strategies

About a fifth of responses indicated that resources might be a barrier to implementation which included having puppets, story-sacks and other story-related props available and also access to technological resources including Dictaphones and tape recorders. 10% of participants commented on the fact that staffing issues (a lack of staff) was a potential difficulty and a further 10% suggested that it may not be very easy to change their own behaviour, and that it might be something that they would need to work at. Some responses indicated difficulties with finding space in a school or pre-school that was conducive of having quality conversations. Further responses suggested that other staff in a setting would benefit from training in order to implement changes effectively.

Comments which were categorised under the 'other' heading included for example, remarks about the age range of children and the difficulties with modifying the curriculum:

'To be more play-based is easier for preschool rather than school where expectations are perhaps higher'

'The age range of children involved could make discussion between children difficult'

5.3.2 End of module 2: participant questionnaire feedback

In the same way as at the end of module 1, participants were asked to rate the sessions based on the relevance, content and ease implementation on a 7-point scale (as described previously). The mean ratings from 28 responses were calculated to determine overall satisfaction with the second module (see table 5.4 below).

Statement	Mean rating	Range
Relevance of training	6.0	3-7
Content of training	5.9	4-7
Ease of implementation	5.3	3-7

Table 5.4: Mean and range of end of module 2 ratings

The ratings given by participants at the end of the second module were again very positive and at the upper end of the scale presented. The relevance and content of the training can again, be considered as appropriate to meeting the participants needs. The ease of implementation of the strategies was viewed somewhat less highly than the other areas of the training and to the previous module. However, these differences are relatively small.

As for the previous module, participants were asked an open-ended question about what aspect of the training they found useful. The responses were analysed and five key themes were identified (and illustrated in figure 5.6 below):

- Discussion with other practitioners (12)

- Opportunities to reflect on their own communication (10)

- Knowledge of language development (3)

- Developing story-telling (5)

- Highlighting the need to use more pauses and allow children thinking time (4)
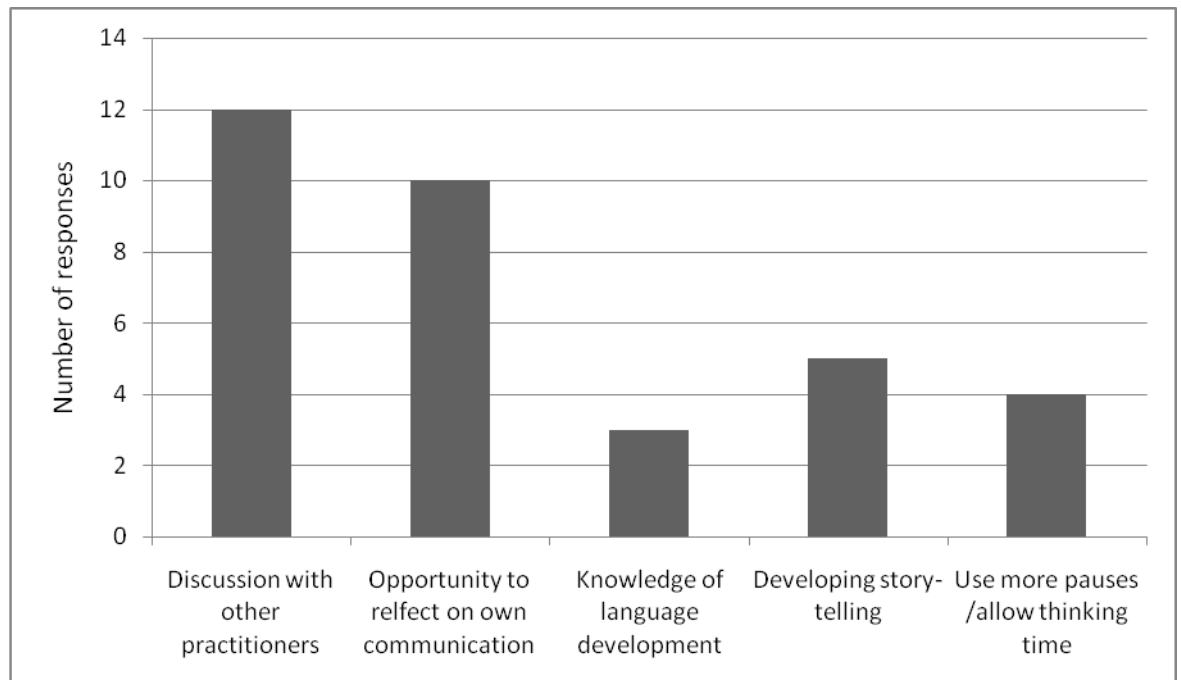
Figure 5.6: Summary of key themes reported as the most useful aspects of module 2

The most frequently reported comments about the usefulness of the training were related to the opportunity to discuss issues with other practitioners. 12 of participants reported that they found the opportunity to talk to others was useful. Comments included:

'Discussion with others was helpful in new ways of thinking or approaching situations.'

'Sharing experiences with other practitioners.'

'Watching the examples in DVDs and then discussing them in groups.'

This was interesting given that the responses did not refer directly to the training content, rather the opportunity to talk with other practitioners. The comments suggested that participants valued discussion with others as part of group activities and also more general discussion with others. This was increased from the number of

respondents that reported discussion with others as one of the most useful aspects of module 1 and may reflect the developing relationships between practitioners as the modules had progressed, therefore opening up more opportunities to develop their thinking with others.

The other theme that emerged as one of the most popular was related to the opportunity for participants to reflect on their own communication. 10 respondents reported that they found this aspect of the training most useful with comments including:

'To really stop, think and analyse the kind of language and ways of speaking with children.'

'The chance to challenge your own ways of communicating with children'

'Thinking about how much I speak and getting a better balance of children's talk vs. mine'

'Having time to think about how we speak to children and what we say'

There were a couple of comments on this section of the questionnaire that suggested the ideas from the module 2 content were interesting, but more difficult to implement (than module 1). This reinforced the lower ratings on the related scale.

5.4 Module 3 participant data

5.4.1 Pre- and post-module questionnaire responses

Participants were asked to rate their knowledge and skills in relation to three statements at the beginning and end of module 3. Matched responses from 20 participants were collected and analyzed. For each of the statements which requested a rating, practitioners were asked to rate their confidence or knowledge on a 7-point Likert scale (where 1= strongly disagree and 7= strongly agree). Ratings were subject to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for normality (see appendix 11) and consequently the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, for the same reasons as the data analysed for module 1 (see appendix 12).

Statement	Pre-	Post-	Difference	Z-score	Significance (2-tailed)
I feel confident about recognising children who may be experiencing delays / difficulties with communication and language development	5.3	5.9	0.6	-2.68	p<0.01

Table 5.5: Means and significance of ratings for confidence in identifying children with delays or difficulties before and after module 3

The first statement that participants were asked to respond to was related to whether they felt confident to recognise children who may be experiencing delays or difficulties with their language and communication development.

Pre- and post module ratings showed a significant difference (see table 5.5), indicating that following the third module of the training, participants felt more confident to recognise children who might not be developing language and communication along typical pathways.

The second statement that participants were asked to respond to was related to the first in that it referred to children who had language and communication difficulties and asked participants whether they knew about ways to support children who had difficulties with their language and communication.

	Pre-	Post-	Difference	Z-score	Significance (2-tailed)
I know about ways to support children who may be experiencing delays / difficulties with communication and language development	5.1	6.1	1.0	-3.58	p<0.01

Table 5.6: Means and significance of ratings for knowledge of ways to support children with delays or difficulties before and after module 3

There was a significant, on average one-point difference between participants' ratings before and after the training indicating that their training had improved their knowledge about strategies to support children with delays and difficulties with their language and communication development (see table 5.6). In order to determine what

sort of strategies the practitioners were aware about and using before and after the training, they were asked to write down the strategies that they knew about at each point. Again it is not possible to determine whether knowledge about strategies will transfer to use of strategies in the practitioner's setting but again, responses can be considered indicators of behaviour change.

Content analysis of the responses both before and after training was carried out. The assumption was made that practitioners would maintain their knowledge about strategies which they recorded before the training and knowledge of additional strategies would be acquired as a result of the training. The number of responses indicating strategies identified as themes before and after the module are shown in figure 5.7 below.
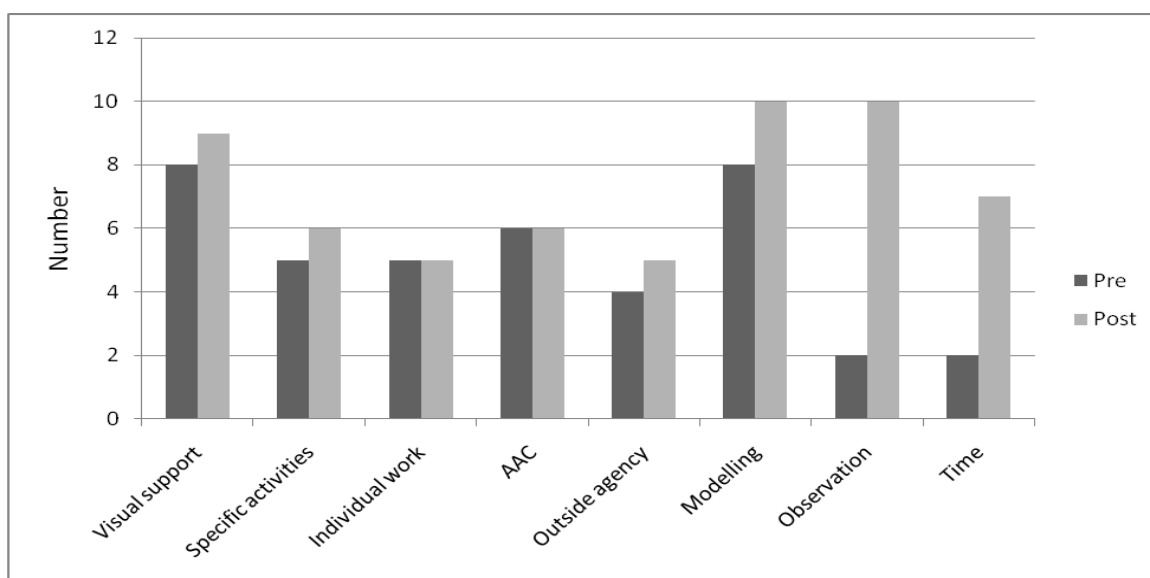
Figure 5.7: Strategies for supporting children with delays /difficulties with language and communication development known about by participants before and after module 3 training

There were a number of strategies frequently reported as ways that participants already knew about to support children who were experiencing language and communcation difficulties, indicating a relatively high level of knoweldge and understanding before the sessions. The most common of these were:

- Providing visual support (including visual timetables and pictures)

- Work on specific activities (often programmes identified by the speech and language therapist)

- Working with children individually (without specific tasks being identified)

- Alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) systems, (including the use of Makaton (sign language) and Picture Exchange Communication Systems)

- Outside agency support (primarily speech and language therapist)

- Use of modelling

Where there was an increase in the number of responses following the training it was not generally related to strategies that could be considered specific to children with language and communication difficulties; strategies identified were more often related to the core skills of observing children and giving them more time to communicate. There was also a slight increase in the number of respondents who reported the use of modelling as a strategy. This result was not unexpected, given the training content, which emphasises key skills that are available to all of practitioners, all of the time, These include them watching, listening and talking about what the child is interested in to engage them effectively. However, it may represent a shift in thinking for practitioners that means they do not necessarily have to introduce lots of new strategies to support children in the first instance; at the most basic level it is the practitioner's own behaviour that supports communication for all children.

The second focus of the third module was related to children who were learning English as an additional language. Participants were again asked to rate themselves based on their knowledge of ways to support such children and mean ratings and significance of any change in ratings were calculated (see table 5.7. below)

The change in ratings for participant knowledge about strategies was statistically significant, with an average difference before and after the module of over one point on the scale. Both means were lower for this statement than the previous one which asked them about their skills and knowledge related to children with delays or difficulties, indicating that this was an area that was more unfamiliar to practitioners. It could be that they had much less experience of working with this group of children and

clearly the training had an impact on their reported knowledge about supporting children in this area of development.

	Pre-	Post-	Difference	Z-score	Significance (2-tailed)
I know about ways to support children whose first language is not English	4.2	5.4	1.2	-3.62	p<0.01

Table 5.7: Means and significance of ratings for knowledge of ways to support children with English as an additional language before and after module 3

Participants were then asked to describe the strategies that they knew about in relation to supporting children who were learning English as an additional language, both before and after the module. Knowledge of strategies was analysed in the same way as for the previous questions, such that a content analysis was carried out to determine themes from participants' responses (summarised in figure 5.8).
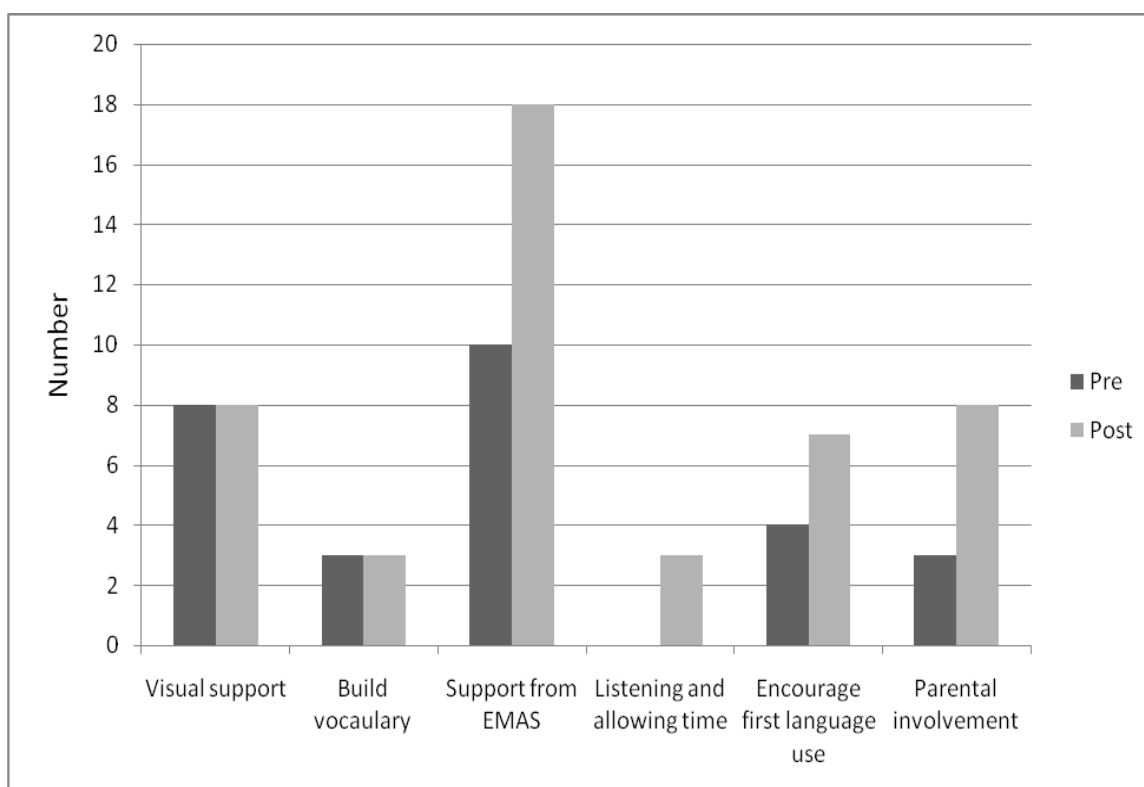
Figure 5.8: Strategies for supporting children with English as an additional language, known about by participants before and after module 3 training

A number of themes emerged from responses before participants started the module with strategies identified including:

- Using visual support (including objects and pictures)

- Developing vocabulary knowledge

- Using support from EMAS (Ethnic Minority Achievement Service) and bilingual support assistants

- Encouraging use of first language (for example at home or with other speakers of teh same language)

- Parental involvement (for example inviting them into the setting and asking them to teach a few key words)

However, after the module, a far greater number of participants reported that they would use EMAS to obtain advice and support for children, with nearly all of the respondents making comments related to this theme. This was likely to have been due to the input for this module having been provided from a member of this service in the county. In addition, respondents indicated that they were more likely to use the strategies of listening and allowing children time to develop their English, as well as encouraging the use of the child's first language by involving other speakers of that language and parents.

5.4.2 End of module 3: participant questionnaire feedback

A decision was made not to include the ratings for this module (for relevance, content and ease of application) in the final analysis, as they were only received from one course, totalling six participants. The sample was considered to be too small to be representative. The improvement suggestions were however combined with those from other sessions to contribute to the overall analysis.

5.5 Improvement suggestions from participant feedback (all modules)

As identified previously, the improvement suggestions from all three modules were collated as the overwhelming majority of the responses were considered to be related to the programme more generally, rather than to the specific modules. As a result, a

total of 60 responses were analysed. 24 questionnaires did not have any comments about improvement suggestions included and therefore it can be assumed that these participants were generally happy with the training received and did not feel strongly enough to suggest that changes should be made.

Four key themes emerged from content analysis of the questionnaires that did have written responses, three of which were reported with similar frequency (see figure 5.9). These were:

1. **Reducing the time and/or content of the sessions:** Practitioners reported that the sessions seemed to be quite long and that the content was somewhat repetitive. This was related by some to the pace of delivery; some participants suggested that by reducing the content and related repetition, the pace would have been better. Other participants felt that the sessions would have been better as half days.

2. **Increasing the time between sessions:** This was primarily related to the completion of the between-session tasks. Practitioners reported that they felt it would have been helpful to have had more time to complete tasks between sessions. A number of their comments referred to the fact that in a busy setting, it could often be difficult to organise the time to complete the activities and then there was time needed to transcribe and write up tasks.

3. **Better information at the outset of the course:** The key issue identified within this theme was related to the expectations of the course. Many practitioners were unaware from the outset what the expectation was for the number of sessions they were being asked to attend and the amount of follow-up work that they would be asked to complete.

4. **PowerPoint handouts:** Some participants indicated that they would have like copies of the PowerPoint handouts to go with the training pack. Some felt that as a result they had copied a lot down from the slides.

A number of more individual comments were also included in the improvement suggestions and although not represented by one of the main themes some could be considered of particular interest in relation to future training including:

- A feeling that the training was more school focused and that they would have like there to have been more pre-school practitioners attending

- Some participants feeling frustrated that they didn't have the correct equipment (Dictaphones) to complete the tasks

- Some participants reporting that they would have like the training to have been more active (with less sitting and listening) –although some sessions were thought to be better than others.
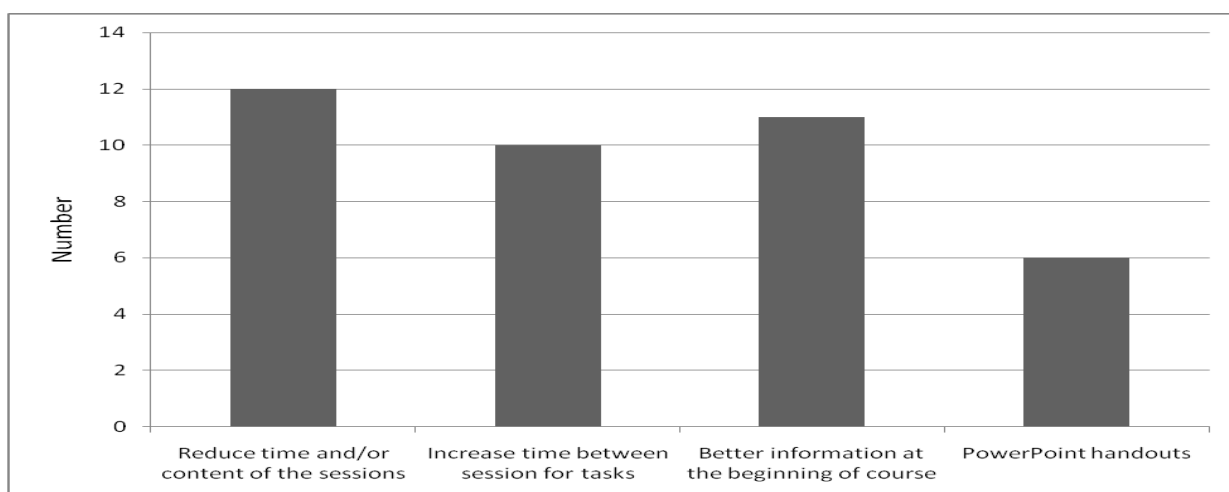
Figure 5.9: Improvement suggestions for future training (all modules)

5.6 Interviews with trainers

Interviews were carried out with two of the trainers and analysed for themes which linked to data collected from participants and themes common to the two interviewees (see appendix 8). They were analysed under the following structure:

- Preparation and planning for the training

- Delivery of the training and expectations of participants

- Usefulness of materials and relevance to the audience

- Outcomes of the training

- Issues related to future delivery of the training

One interview was carried out face to face and was recorded using a Dictaphone and then transcribed in full. The other interview was carried out over the telephone and handwritten notes were taken and typed up to capture the main points of the conversation.

5.6.1 Preparation and planning for the training

Trainers reported that the materials were adapted prior to the training and further adaptation typically took place as the training progressed. It was reported that the materials needed to be adapted in order to accommodate the shortened session structure -which was a modification made to the content based on early feedback from participants about the course structure. It was reported that some trainers used their own individual materials that they had used previously. This tended to be the case particularly for trainers with more specific roles (e.g. from the EMAS service and speech and language therapy) as identified in the trainers comments:

'..the speech and language therapist came and she had really sort of developed her own PowerPoint and she'd adapted quite a lot of the slides ...'

'...because she delivers quite a lot of training on working with children with English as an additional language and I think she basically used the materials that she normally used.'

Both trainers interviewed commented on whether the mix of practitioners was appropriate, or whether it would have been better to have targeted the training at more specific groups. Overall, their comments suggested that they felt that the training could have been targeted better to specific groups of practitioners for example:

'I think that was a problem with it, that it was too much of a wide base, that it was aiming at too many different types of practitioners and I think it would have been better if it had focused one either early years, you know preschools and nurseries you know, or schools...'

'They found it difficult. It was just that some of them weren't able to take in all of the information, the preschool practitioners especially. The teachers coped with it quite well.'

'It's difficult to deliver 'one size fits all' training. It's impossible to meet everyone's needs. We talk about all children being individuals, but then we try and deliver training to everyone in the same way, with the same content.'

5.6.2 Delivery of training and expectations of participants

The motivation of participants for attending the training was questioned by one of the trainers, with a feeling that some participants attended the training because they thought that they were obliged to and that they were somewhat coerced. If this was the case, this will clearly impact on the participants' motivation to attend the course, participate in sessions and complete between-session tasks and activities.

The fact that the number of sessions was reduced (and the content condensed) was commented on by the trainers interviewed and the rationale for this was primarily related to the expectations of the training from the participants. Trainers appeared to empathise with participants who reported difficulties in attending six full days and therefore felt the need to adapt the training accordingly.

'We cut down the number of days, as the settings didn't realise that it was such a long course. They weren't expecting to have to come for so many sessions. It felt as if there was quite a lot of repetition in the materials anyway and so we decided to reduce the number of sessions.'

The number of tasks requested of the participants was also reported as problematic. As a consequence of reducing the number of sessions the opportunities for completing between session tasks was reduced. In addition, both of the trainers interviewed reflected that tasks were often not completed by participants. One trainer commented:

'I don't think that most of them knew what they were expecting actually and I think they definitely weren't expecting to be asked to do all these tasks and I think they, a lot of them didn't find time to do it.'

Whilst those that did complete tasks were thought to have benefitted from it (gaining more from the following sessions), the lack of participation from many of the candidates created difficulties for the trainers in relation to the review and reflection aspects of the sessions. These activities had to rely on the experiences of those that completed the between-session tasks, who fed back to other participants who had not completed activities.

'I mean part of the second session on module 1 was, you know, analysing their tapes. So only about two or three of them had actually done it, so it turned into a sort of joint discussion of what those people had done.'

5.6.3 Usefulness of materials and relevance to the audience

Although the materials were thought to be generally useful by participants, trainers reported their perception that at times there were not pitched at the right level for the audience. Sometimes trainers felt that they were pitched at too high a level, at other times too low. For example commenting:

'...I mean sometimes it seemed to be pitched, sort of, at a very high academic level, you know, talking about the strands and the quotes from various theorists and then at other times it seemed like almost, you know, teaching your grandma to such eggs, so there was a bit of disparity ....'

The video clips were acknowledged by the trainers as having been very useful and one of the trainers had already used these in different contexts.

'I think that the video clips were really helpful, I can't remember which module it was in but, of a lady, a very brave lady who was reading Goldilocks and the Three Bears and that was very powerful'

'... video clips I thought were excellent, they always prompted a lot of discussion...'

It was thought that there were certain sections of the materials that would be useful in bespoke training sessions; which contained key messages that trainers thought were important (for example, reducing the amount of adult talk, allowing longer pauses, allowing children to lead conversations, developing story-telling). In addition, both trainers commented on the practical strategies that were introduced that practitioners

could easily grasp and implement in their settings, for example in relation to story-telling:

'They all took away ideas about the story-telling chair; they cottoned on to that because it's something they can do practically and easily. But there's so much more to story-telling than a chair.'

However, the quote highlights that practitioners may pick up practical strategies without necessarily looking at and understanding the wider context.

The difficulties with delivering a pre-scripted course were highlighted by the trainers interviewed, one of whom commented about how this can impact on a trainer's motivation and enthusiasm for the course:

'I find it difficult to deliver from a script without having input into the materials. It's difficult to get enthusiastic about it.'

On the whole, the trainers interviewed felt that the content didn't flow very well when being delivered:

'I had to keep looking back at it, it was just, it seemed to be the way it was written, not in a very user-friendly way I didn't think.'

Although participants did not comment on this specifically, there were comments about the content feeling repetitive and this may link to the trainers' reflections about how the content flowed when delivering it.

The trainers reported that the tasks seemed to be useful in relation to supporting reflective practice alongside the opportunities to view and discuss the video clips. However, they emphasised the need to consider how the expectations for task completion are communicated and how participants are supported in preparing for and carrying out the activities in their own settings.

5.6.4 Outcomes of the training

Both of the trainers commented on the issue of not necessarily being able to provide on-going support as a result of the training, making it difficult to assess the effectiveness of practitioners putting the knowledge and skills into practice. They

seemed to feel that it would be more beneficial if they were able to deliver the training to the settings that they were working with on a regular basis:

'And if [participants] were in settings that we were supporting, I mean that would work better really, because then we could be going in to the settings later on and saying 'How's it going?' and just continuing with feedback and support really.'

This made assessing the impact of the pilot training difficult for trainers, even informally by using observation and discussion during setting visits.

There seemed to be a belief that practitioners had taken away certain 'key points' that they felt would make a difference to their practice, for example:

'I think that was one of the big things that they took away from it, was how much they try and fill the silences and that really comes across when they are doing the sort of audio bit, you know, a lot of them said it made them feel quite uncomfortable ...and I think that was something that really did change their practice.'

However, on the whole the trainers did not feel that they had a sense of how effective the training was. One trainer was uncertain about the time commitment to the programme, relative to the difference that it was likely to have made to practice. There was a perception that the time required to prepare and deliver the materials was not particularly efficient:

'It's a very time intensive course, for the trainers and the practitioners. There was the training for trainers, and then the preparation and delivery time, I just don't know whether the time was justified for the effect it had.'

5.6.5 Issues related to future delivery

There was a clear issue that emerged through the interviews; participants needed to be better informed prior to future training. One trainer felt that is would be helpful if there was some sort of breakdown of the sessions with information about the between-session activities prior to participants signing up for the training:

'I think it might have been more helpful for them to have been send some sort of, not agenda, but, you know what I mean ....what's going to happen basically, and that they will be expected to do some sort of task...'

'Some of the tasks were asking a lot from practitioners, especially when there wasn't much time between sessions. I think we need to be a lot clearer about what the expectations are.'

There was acknowledgement by the trainers interviewed that the 'Communicating Matters' materials were only one set of materials amongst an increasing number of different training and development opportunities for early years practitioners, in both local and national contexts. This created uncertainty about the best forms of training and how different forms of training opportunities related to each other (both those that had been delivered before 'Communicating Matters' or that had been planned since).

'There was a bit of duplication with the speech and language workshops that we've been putting on, and the speech and language workshops that are going to be organised in the future.'

'I know there's the Inclusion Development Programme as well, they've got resources and DVDs and things and who knows, there's probably some things that are very similar... and I CAN have got a DVD as well, 'Learning to Talk', which quite a few practitioners have as well.'

One of the trainers thought that the timing of the training (whole days) and the need to send two practitioners to the course, would have likely impacted on the number of participants who signed up and on attendance. For some settings, it was thought that releasing staff for such a large time commitment would be problematic and therefore put them off attending. There was a clear view from the trainers interviewed that there was a need to condense the sessions in the future and possibly review the breadth of focus:

'If it was compressed into two days and there was still a task and practitioners were definitely prepared for the fact that they would be expected to do a task, then I think it might work better.'

'And whether it was for perhaps four afternoons, as opposed to two whole days, because people do find it difficult to take out a whole day, 'cause there are a lot of groups where they just can't spare people, because of that, they miss out.'

'... if it was a bit more focused on, you know, one particular angle ...'

'I think it would be good to take certain sections of the materials and use them. That would be the best way of delivering it.'

The importance of a multi-agency approach was emphasised by one of the trainers and this was a core assumption of the materials as they were developed. There was a clear expectation to involve a number of services. However, difficulties with engagement from all agencies and funding are inherent in such an approach as described in the quote below:

'The multi-agency approach is a real strength and that is one bit that would be good to continue. But it needs everyone to be able to deliver it. You need a multi-agency approach with everyone's expertise. It's good to have an expert there, such as speech and language therapist. But it's difficult and expensive to get the course to run like that.'

Other models of training that were thought to be possibly more effective involved entire settings, for example a local project, based on an I CAN model of training where the setting staff were invited to attend a couple of workshops sessions and then the speech and language therapist visited the settings to support the implementation of what had been covered in the sessions. One trainer felt that is was much more powerful to involve an entire staff group in this sort of training. The other type of model raised was related to practitioners observing other people and settings who had implemented the strategies suggested by the training and the power of seeing practice in action.

One of the trainers commented that there might be a better uptake and commitment to the training if there was some sort of 'status' to attendance and participation in the course. This may be helpful with many practitioners seeking to improve their qualifications.

Finally there was an issue about the leadership and direction of such a project; this was highlighted by one of the trainers comments about when one of the key people responsible in supporting and steering the delivery left:

'It was made more difficult when S left. When it's somebody's baby then things are more likely to happen to make it work. When she left and then L, who was meant to be taking it on left, there didn't seem to be anyone to take it on.

Finally, when asked about the future delivery of the training, both trainers were uncertain about whether they would be delivering it again in the future, however, one trainer commented:

'I would love to deliver it again, but, in a different way, I wouldn't want to do it in the same way again, definitely not!'

5.7 Summary

Although the size of the sample was relatively small, the results revealed interesting and useful information about the training with respect to:

- Participant and trainer experiences

- What knowledge and skills were developed through attendance on the course

- The intended application of learning from the training to early years practice

- Difficulties that arose during the training

These outcomes, particularly where themes emerged that were supported by more than one data-source, can be considered to indicate the effectiveness of the training with respect to the aims of the evaluation. Participants appeared to improve their knowledge and understanding, reflective practice and recognise the impact that their behaviour can have on children's language and communication. This was

demonstrated by responses to a number of different questions across the three modules. Practitioners reported a better understanding of children's development in the area of speech, language and communication and they appeared to feel more confident to recognise and respond to children's difficulties in the area. Furthermore, there was acknowledgement from a large proportion of the sample that when communicating with children practitioners' needed to give time for responses, reduce the extent to which they might dominate a conversation, use questions more carefully (and possibly less often) and encourage children to take more control of conversations.

In addition to the participant-related aims, the questionnaire and interview responses shed light on implementation and delivery issues which need to be considered in the future. Although data suggested that overall there was a high level of satisfaction with the training, particular areas where there were concerns were highlighted through the results and related to the information received about the course, length and timing of modules and expectations for completing assignments between sessions.

The results and their interpretation will be discussed further in the next chapter with particular reference to the aims of the evaluation.

Discussion of the main findings

6.1 Introduction

Based on the data gathered from the participants and trainers, the findings will be discussed with respect to the intended aims of the training materials and the related aims of this case-study evaluation outlined previously and described again below.

'Communicating Matters' Aims

The 'Communicating Matters' programme identifies three aims which are:

1. To deepen practitioners' understanding of children's communication and language, particularly between the ages of three and five years.

2. To deepen practitioners' understanding of how their own communicative behaviour affects children's use and display of communicative behaviours.

3. To help practitioners reflect on and develop their practice to promote children's communication and language more effectively.

Evaluation Aims

As a result of participating in the 'Communicating Matters' training, the objectives of this evaluation are to determine whether practitioners report:

- improved knowledge and understanding of children's language development and related strategies

- intended changes to their own behaviour and use of strategies in relation to language and communication development

- increased reflective practice and changes to their practice in relation to their interactions with young children

A further objective of the evaluation is to gather information more generally related to the delivery of 'Communicating Matters' in a local context in order to understand:

- what can be learned from the delivery of 'Communicating Matters' in order to inform the future training of early years practitioners in this area

- the factors that contribute to the process of implementation and evaluation of a nationally devised training programme at a local level

The aims will be considered in turn and then overarching themes and issues will be identified. Finally, the limitations of the study will be discussed in order to highlight the potential impact on the conclusions that can be drawn and the implications that can be identified.

6.2 Knowledge and understanding of children's language and communication development

The first aim identified by the 'Communicating Matters' materials was to 'deepen practitioners' understanding of children's communication and language development.' Related to this, the objective of the evaluation was to determine whether this improvement of knowledge and understanding was reported by practitioners attending the training.

Data collected from module 1 suggested that practitioners did report improved understanding of children's language and communication development following the training sessions. This was identified from two sources of information gathered from participants:

- self-report using questionnaires completed before and after the first module

- responses to an open-ended question completed at the end of the first module.

There was a statistically significant difference between participants' ratings for knowledge and understanding before and after the first module. Further support for the change in knowledge and understanding emerged through one of the themes identified from the open-ended question which asked the participants what they found most useful about the module. More than a quarter of respondents identified improved knowledge of language and communication development as one of the most useful aspects of the training. Comments made by practitioners included references to developing their understanding of the ages at which different speech, language and communication skills are developed and to their knowledge of the component skills that contribute to language and communication development. One particular

comment identified that the input from a speech and language therapist had been especially valued.

The data obtained suggests that in general, participants left the training with a better and more detailed understanding of speech, language and communication development than when they started. This is important because if participants have a better knowledge of all the elements that make up speech, language and communication development, it is more likely that they will be able to make structured and informed observations of children in the future. As a consequence, it could be hoped that practitioners would be able to draw on this understanding to inform their judgements about how children are progressing and to identify if and when they might be experiencing difficulties. We cannot be certain that this reported improvement in knowledge and understanding will be applied in practice, as this was not measured directly (which will be discussed further with respect to the limitations of the study in a later section). However, it can be considered as a prerequisite to and an indicator of behaviour change.

A further area for discussion related to the knowledge and understanding of the evaluation is associated with two specific aspects of child development covered by the programme. Course content focused on children who were described as following different pathways to developing language considered as:

- Those children whose speech, language and communication is not developing as would be typically expected (and therefore who are experiencing delays or disorders)

- Those children who are acquiring English as an additional language.

These were key areas that formed the focus of module three of the training. They were delivered with the assumption that practitioners had a good understanding of typically developing speech, language and communication (acquired from the earlier modules). In order to know when a child's development is not following the expected pathway, it is necessary to know what the typical pathway is and be able to carefully observe children in order to determine their areas of strength and difficulty. This will support

practitioners to identify when to refer to more specialist services and/or how to focus any intervention.

With respect to the first group of children (those experiencing delays or other difficulties), participants reported a statistically significant difference in their confidence in identifying such children and in their knowledge about strategies to support them after the training. This was identified through pre- and post module ratings.

The ratings for participants' knowledge of how to support children with English as an additional language also showed a significant difference before and after the training. Initial ratings about knowledge in this area were lower than for children with delays or difficulties with their language. This may have been because practitioners had not had as much experience in the area prior to the training. However, post-training ratings were higher than for the other group suggesting a greater shift in confidence in this area. Input from the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) was provided for this part of the training and this had the advantage of someone with specific expertise in the area delivering these aspects of the programme. Comments suggested that this appeared to be especially valued by participants and hence was likely to have played a role in the much improved knowledge and confidence that was reported.

The need to understand children's development in a comprehensive way was highlighted in the review of the literature (e.g. Mroz, 2006, Rose, 2006) as being important for practitioners and hence there was a significant focus on this area in the materials and the evaluation. There is a need to ensure that children in settings outside the family home are supported through access to language-rich environments with skilful practitioners. In addition, early identification and intervention for children with speech, language and communication difficulties is promoted in the recent Bercow Review (DCSF,2008) which highlights the benefits of early support. Therefore, if as a result of training practitioners are reporting improved knowledge and understanding of development and as a result are able to make better on-going assessment of speech, language and communication skills, the materials can be considered an suitable resource for meeting the training needs of early years practitioners.

6.3 Developing practitioners' understanding of the impact of their own language behaviour

The second aim of the 'Communicating Matters' materials was to 'deepen practitioners' understanding of how their own communicative behaviour affect's children's use of language and communication.' Again, the evaluation had a related objective which was to determine whether practitioners reported improved understanding of how their own language behaviour could affect the language behaviour of the children they work with. The importance of the adult role in conversations with young children was an integral part of the training content and a key message intended to be communicated to all participants. It was hoped that participants would improve their awareness of the impact adults can have with respect to either 'opening up' or 'shutting down' a conversation. A prediction can be made that when practitioners' reflect on and understand more about their own behaviour and how it can impact on a child's language and communication, they are more likely to modify it accordingly.

There were a number of statements as part of the module 1 evaluation which aimed to investigate understanding and views in this area. The use of these statements was to promote reflection from participants on their knowledge about the adult's role in conversations with young children before the training and to determine whether such knowledge changed as the training progressed.

For the question that asked participants if they thought they knew the best ways to talk to children in order to elicit the most talk from them, a statistically significant difference was reported between mean ratings before and after the first module. As a result, most practitioners could be considered to have improved their understanding that there are certain ways to interact to children that will be more effective than others. This finding was supported by analysis of the open-ended questions about what was most useful in the first module, from which a theme emerged about practitioners finding it helpful to have focused on their interactions with children.

Another statement was designed to prompt practitioners to consider to what extent asking questions was helpful in developing effective language and communication in young children. This statement was included because there was a view amongst

trainers prior to the course that a belief held by many practitioners was that questions were one of the principle ways to elicit talk from children. This view appeared to be well-founded; participants' belief that using a lot of questions was helpful to promoting children's language development clearly changed as a result of participation in the first module. Based on the responses to the open-ended question about what was most useful at the end of the first module, nine out of the twenty-six respondents reported that they would ask fewer questions in the future. A number of the responses were expanded to reflect that by asking fewer questions, there was more opportunity for children to talk. There was acknowledgement that sometimes an adult will try to fill a silence in conversation with another question and that adults often ask questions that they already know the answer to, presumably as a way of eliciting talk from young children. Reducing the number of questions asked was also reported by about a fifth of practitioners in module 2, as a response to the activity where they were asked to consider ways they might change their language behaviour. Therefore the emphasis on this area appeared to be reinforced and maintained.

In addition to reducing the number of adult-initiated questions used during an interaction, a number of practitioners in module 2 reflected on having acquired a greater awareness of the types of question they asked. This was identified from the activity analysis. Practitioners suggested that they would change their behaviour by giving more thought to questions before they asked them. They particularly referred to using more open-ended questions in their interactions. This suggests that participants were becoming more aware about the quality of questions that were asked of children (in contrast to the quantity). Again, reference was made to not asking 'routine' questions -questions that the adult was not really interested in and that children did not have to give much thought to.

Participants' understanding of the need to leave longer pauses for children, rather than attempting to fill in the gaps in conversations was explored through a module 1 statement and was found to be significantly different after the module delivery. Dockrell *et al.,* 2004 suggests that adults can often do a high proportion of the talking during an interaction and an important element of the training was to focus on the need to provide longer for children to organise their thoughts and respond in

conversations and to questions, hence reducing adult language. This was a message that appeared to be reinforced more strongly in module 2, where all but four of the activity responses indicated that participants would change their practice in this area, leaving longer pauses in conversations. Responses included references to allowing children more time to think, to formulate their ideas and to articulate their ideas, with adults described as needing to be more comfortable with silence and allowing more time for all children to have the opportunity to respond.

Trainers reinforced this finding through their comments about the effectiveness of the training, suggesting that one thing that participants appeared to take away from the sessions (particularly if they completed the task), was that they had previously tended to dominate the conversation more than they thought. Once they had analysed their interactions they often felt uncomfortable about the extent to which they had previously controlled conversations with the children in their setting. These findings support previous research which investigated levels of adult talk in early years settings and suggested that adults can dominate conversations and use a high level of directive language (e.g. Dockrell *et al.*, 2004).

A final theme investigated in this area was related to allowing children to have greater control over their conversations. Again this was explored through ratings of a statement and elaborated by answers to other questions. There was a significant difference between the pre- and post-module 1 rating for the statement referring to this area. This suggests that following the sessions, adults' were reporting that they were more inclined to let children control conversations. Two related themes that emerged with respect to practice reported after module 2, were about allowing children to take the lead in conversations and encouraging children to ask their own questions (of adults and of each other). This emphasises the change in the control of the interaction, from the adult having the role of questioner, to the children taking more responsibility for this role. Participants made comments that reflected this, either related to a specific activity (for example by letting the children ask questions about a story) or by encouraging them to ask questions about their interests more generally. There was acknowledgement from some practitioners that children may need support to take a greater role initially, for example by using adult models,

suggesting that this was not something that children were encouraged to do or were familiar with doing prior to the training. As well as encouraging young children to develop a specific skill (e.g. asking questions) there was also a commitment from a proportion of participants in module 2 to changing practice with respect to allowing children to take a greater lead in conversations. Responses suggested that this involved the adult allowing time for the children to have quality conversations during a typical session or day. Also for this approach to work effectively, the adult needs to be willing to sit back and to relinquish control of the situation to the children, resisting the urge to jump in and intervene with the conversation themselves unless really necessary. Clearly this also relies on supporting children with the development of related language skills, such as turn-taking and listening to each other.

6.4 Increased reflective practice and changes related to developing communication in young children

The third theme of the training materials considered in this evaluation was related to practitioner's being able to reflect on and develop their practice in order to more effectively support children's communication skills. One of the important outcomes for participants was that they were able to reflect on how to actually change their behaviour as a result of the training and were able to identify some key changes that they intended to make. Some of these have already been identified in the previous section. Evidence for this was primarily elicited through open-ended questions and activity feedback. Participants suggested that the training had given them time to reflect on their own communication, something that they may not have done on a more regular basis previously. One comment from a practitioner suggested it was helpful to have been able to analyse her own communication and another commented about how it had challenged her to reflect on her own style of communicating. This process of self-evaluation and reflection is important with respect to practitioners actually making changes to their practice in the longer term. As noted in the introduction, it was beyond the remit of this evaluation to examine longer-term changes and this is clearly a question that should be addressed through future research.

Comments were made about how it had been useful to focus on adult-child interaction by more than a quarter of participants at the end of module 1. A number of practitioners indicated that the first task had really made them think about their own interaction and reflect on this in a way it would seem that they had not done before. There were related comments about the task being an 'eye-opener' and 'fascinating', suggesting that participants were somewhat surprised by their interactions when analysed. It would appear that the participants' had not analysed the impact their language behaviour could have on children to the same extent previously and that this information was illuminating to them.

The fact that there was a task for participants to complete between sessions prompted the self-analysis of practitioners' own skills. It was hoped that this activity would create the opportunity to apply some of the new skills which had been learnt during the sessions. However, we cannot be certain that practitioners actually *did* change their practice as this was not measured directly in this evaluation. Those participants that completed the activity appeared to benefit more from the training as was demonstrated through the related comments and feedback from trainers. Trainers reported that they thought that those practitioners who had completed the task gained significantly from it, as it involved them in more detailed reflection on their language behaviour. However, it was also noted that a significant proportion of practitioners did not complete the between-session tasks and therefore were not likely to have benefitted from the training in the same way. Reasons suggested for this, identified from participant and trainer feedback, were that practitioners did not have the appropriate equipment (e.g. Dictaphones) and there was not enough time between sessions. Such reasons seem relatively simplistic and it could be argued that there may me more complex reasons that the evaluation failed to identify. It could be argued that those that did not complete the tasks would be less likely to actually change their behaviour as a result of the training, having not engaged in the reflective process. This highlights the importance of supporting participants to engage in self-reflective behaviour by identifying potential barriers to completion of activities. This would ensure that they are able to better understand how their behaviour might influence children's communication and more likely promote change in practice as a result.

The use of self-reflection clearly links to an individual's own language and communication behaviour, but also in need of consideration is early years practice in a broader sense. The setting environment and the experiences offered to children are also relevant to their language development. At the end of the first module about twenty percent of practitioners reported that they would provide more opportunities for children to talk, primarily through creating time and space for such opportunities. One participant, for example, referred to having a more flexible timetable -presumably so that conversations are not curtailed by children having to move on to the next activity. Practitioners reported that the pace of activity in settings was often not conducive to promoting extended conversations and therefore 'space' to talk might not refer to simple having physical spaces where talk was promoted, but 'mental' space for talk to be encouraged between children and adults. In other words, for adults and children to have the time to enter into a quality conversation without having to think about other jobs that they might need to be doing or other activities they might want to move on to.

The development of storytelling was a major topic that emerged from the participant feedback from both modules 1 and 2, in which this subject was covered. Two particular themes emerged from the feedback. The first was related to better engaging children in stories that are read to them by asking children questions that promote thought and conversation. The other related to supporting children to tell their own stories. When participants were asked to rate their knowledge about ways to encourage children to tell their own stories and then asked to re-evaluate their rating, their confidence increased significantly as a result of the input from the first module.

Developing story-telling was the most common theme identified from module 1 when participants were asked about the usefulness of the training and how it encouraged them to change their practice in the short-term. This was further supported by comments that indicated that practitioners were able to take away practical ideas from the session, often referring to introducing a story-telling chair in their setting and using story sacks to support story-telling. In addition, and probably more importantly, participants appeared to be more aware of the importance of developing narrative skills in children; in other words, children being able to tell stories themselves. It can

be inferred from the comments that prior to the training, this area did not get much attention in settings. The ability to use narrative is an important skill, which research suggests is crucial in the broader development of children's language and communication skills (Davies *et al.*, 2004)

Feedback from the second module activity indicated that participants reported an intention to develop story-telling through the better use of questions about the stories they read to children. Comments referred to using planned and open-ended questions about the story, modelling questions and supporting children to come up with their own questions about what they had heard read to them. This was considered to encourage children to become more engaged in the story and therefore would further develop their language and thinking skills as a result.

Trainers in their interviews commented on the relative effectiveness of providing quite simple strategies to participants (e.g. a story-telling chair), suggesting that these were most likely to be put into practice. However, there were underlying concerns about this relating to the possibility that practitioners might miss the broader training aims related to promoting changes to practitioner language behaviour and reflective practice. Participants might become focused on the perceived need to put certain strategies into place without really reflecting on why they were doing it and to provide physical resources without reflecting on their own language behaviour.

There were a number of changes to practice that were reported by participants with respect to supporting children whose language development was delayed or different, or where children were learning English as an additional language. One of the main areas that emerged through feedback from the third module was that often practitioners were already aware of some specific strategies to support children in these groups (e.g. using additional visual structure) but that they did not necessarily reflect on the effective communication skills that underlie *all* interaction and the related importance of really understanding where the child is in their individual development. In essence, there was a greater recognition by participants after the training, that they may not necessarily need very different or specific skills to support children following different pathways. Instead, they may need to be more aware of the way in which they were observing and communicating with the particular child, so as

to ensure that the child was listened to and that adult communication is matched to the level of the child's development. As a result, for children experiencing delays or difficulties with their communication development, there was an increase in participants reporting that they would use strategies such as modelling, observation and giving more time to children following the training input.

With respect to supporting children learning English as an additional language, the training appeared to raise the profile of existing services in the Local Authority that are available to support children and to highlight the importance of using the parents' of the child to develop a better and shared understanding of the child's first language. Again, listening to the child and giving them time to talk and respond were highlighted as important communication skills.

6.5 Summary

In summary, and with respect to the first three aims of the evaluation, the feedback gathered from all of the modules highlighted some key areas of knowledge and understanding that participants developed and areas of intended behaviour change that were reported. These included:

- The need to allow a child time to communicate and for the adult to leave long enough pauses for a child to formulate and share their thoughts and ideas. Many of the practitioners reflected that they were going to be more aware of the time they gave children to do this and to leave longer pauses in the future.

- The need to carefully observe children and to understand at what point they were in their own language and communication development. Practitioners benefit from having a good understanding of children's language development and need to be able to use this knowledge to observe and assess the children in their settings.

- The need to support children to respond to and tell stories through creating opportunities in the setting for listening and then discussing stories and for children to develop story-telling for themselves.

- The need for adults to be more aware of their own language behaviour and for settings to be appropriately structured, child-centred and flexible in order for opportunities for talk to be promoted.

In this respect, the training can be considered to have been effective in meeting the short-term, practitioner-related objectives of the evaluation. Participants commented on an improved understanding of speech, language and communication issues and identified a range of strategies that were appropriate for supporting children's language and communication development. They outlined intended changes to their practice; with those participants that completed the between-session task more likely to have systematically reflected on their own language behaviour and to have implemented changes to their practice more completely. As highlighted previously, we cannot be certain that the knowledge and skills will be retained or implemented by practitioners, but engagement in the between-session tasks will much more likely promote change. However, all practitioners were able to identify some aspects of their own behaviour and practice that they intended to apply in their settings, a significant step toward behaviour change.

6.6 Implementation and delivery issues related to the pilot programme

Further data was analysed to gain an understanding of some of the implementation and delivery issues which were related to the training programme. Such issues are important to future delivery and outcomes for participants. Participants and trainers need to have a positive experience of the training in order to be motivated to fully take part in it and trainers need to be able to engage with the participants and materials with enthusiasm and commitment.

Several sections of the feedback questionnaires were relevant here although the data is not entirely complete due in particular to missing data for module 3. In addition, a number of issues raised through interviews with the trainers are particularly pertinent to delivery issues. Again, the limitations of the data should be acknowledged as only two interviews were carried out. However, given such limitations the following issues emerged from the data which can be considered of interest.

When asked about the relevance to their role and how appropriate practitioners considered the content, the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. On the seven-point scale, average ratings for training relevance and content were all at the upper end of the scale (between 5.5 and 6). From this we can infer that the training on the whole was relevant to the participant's roles in their settings and the content of the materials was largely appropriate. This was reassuring given the range of roles that were represented on the programme. Although the ratings were overwhelmingly positive, some of the individual observations suggested that not all of the training was as relevant as practitioners might have hoped, with some comments suggesting that is was disproportionally school-focused (rather than preschool focused). This finding was supported by the trainers' comments. They suggested that the content of the materials may not have been appropriate for such a wide range of different early years practitioners that the training aimed to target. With respect to this, trainers commented that sometimes the materials seemed to be pitched at a very high level and at other times pitched much lower. However, one factor that might be relevant was the composition of the training group and the balance between the number of preschool and school-based practitioners. For example, the training might have felt more school-focused if there were a greater majority of school-based practitioners in the cohort.

Ratings provided with respect to the ease of implementation of the training content were somewhat lower than the ones for relevance and content, but still placed very firmly at the positive end of the scale. They were clustered nearer to point 5 on the scale (5.5 and 5.3 for modules 1 and 2 respectively). The activity completed in module 2 sheds further light on these responses. This activity asked participants to consider difficulties with the implementation of behaviour changes and application strategies.

Time was seen as the most significant factor in putting the training content into practice. This was interesting given that the most popularly reported changes to practice that participants' identified were about changes to their own behaviour (for example leaving longer pauses, asking more open-ended questions and allowing children to have more of the lead in conversations and discussion). Such changes to personal behaviour could be considered the least time consuming as opposed to

strategies that rely on planning, resourcing and timetabling specific activities. One possible reason for time being recorded as a particular issue might be illuminated by one of the individual responses. This described a lack of time to stay with individual or small groups of children -to really listen to children and extend conversations. Therefore, participants appear to feel restricted in the time they have available to develop conversations in the way they would like. Only a small number of responses to the activity recognised that changing one's own behaviour can be often be difficult and require high levels of self-awareness in order to prevent a relapse to previous behaviour. There were a high number of quite individual responses to the question of implementation difficulties, suggesting that there are a wide range of reasons that practitioners experience as barriers to changing their behaviour and practice. If training is to be effective, these barriers must be recognised and challenged by trainers, in order to support changes to practice.

Practitioners attending the training often reflected through their questionnaire feedback the benefit they found in sharing ideas with other practitioners. Comments from both module 1 and 2 feedback questionnaires indicated this, with 10 out of 28 practitioners reporting this as a perceived benefit in module 2. This may have been higher for the second module because relationships had begun to develop as the training progressed. There seems to be something that the participants valued about discussing the training content with other practitioners, which is probably related to being able to identify with other practitioners from a similar context. Discussion of this sort can happen through formal and informal situations, such as group tasks or conversations over lunch together. In this instance, a number of comments indicated that the discussion prompted by structured tasks (e.g. watching the video clips) was helpful in understanding and sharing strategies for communication and working with young children. In some respects the information shared with other practitioners may have been considered as more valuable than information shared by the trainers, perhaps because it is seen as more authentic and practical.

With respect to improving the delivery of the training, there were a number of key issues that were raised across the groups of participants. A good proportion of the issues highlighted were about the timing and content of the sessions. There was a view

that the material could have been covered in a more concise way, so that the pace of the sessions was quicker and fewer or shorter sessions would have been required. The reasons for this perception were not entirely clear from the responses but comments suggested that there could be a number of possibilities including that:

- Elements of the material were repetitive and could be covered more quickly without losing the key content and important messages.

- Practitioners' beliefs that the time they can commit to training is very limited, often because they feel that it is at odds with their primary role -that of working directly with the children in their care.

- Practitioners' finding the practicalities of organising cover for themselves whilst attending training or organising their own personal commitments around whole-day training is problematic, especially if they do not usually work full days.

The difficulties of providing training for this particular group of people are well-known by those that work regularly within the sector. For example, many of the workforce are part-time, fit in work around their own family commitments and are not paid for working additional hours, to identify just a few factors that are relevant.

Although the length of time taken by the modules was considered by some as too long, participants reported that the time allocated between the modules (in which they were asked to complete the tasks) was too short, hence not allowing them time to complete tasks fully or to their best ability. Some of the comments described the difficulties of trying to squeeze in time to complete tasks with other, previously scheduled or competing commitments in their settings. In addition to the time to actually work with the children on the task, there was further time required for transcribing conversations and writing up findings, which was reported as difficult to fit in.

The pressure to decrease the number of sessions for the training was acknowledged by the trainers in their interviews. The need to reduce the number of sessions was probably created to some extent by the lack of clarity in the initial expectation of time

commitment provided to the participants (see further discussion below). However, the trainers also took a view that there was repetition in the materials, which probably reinforced the perceived need to reduce the number of sessions from their perspective. However, this will have compromised the content of the training and it was unclear from the trainers interviewed to what extent the same content was removed from each of the training courses (and therefore how consistent the content was across venues).

A further area about which there were a high number of comments was related to the information and hence expectations that participants had about the training. Many of them felt that they were not provided with all of the information that they required, or that would have been helpful to them. This may have led to participants agreeing to take part in the training when they might not have done so having had more detail about the course and the related expectations. Initially, information provided about the training only outlined module 1 (two days) and did not provide detailed information about the additional commitment to further days and between-module tasks. Only when the participants arrived to attend module 1 was the extent of the commitment (including task completion and additional days) more clearly described to them. The result of this was that many trainers reduced the number of sessions that had originally been planned (and that were set out in the complete training package), so as to accommodate the needs of the participants. This meant that three out of the four courses reduced the number of days from six to five (two courses) or four (one course). This also had an impact on the tasks that could be set. For example if module three was delivered in just one day, there was not time to complete a between-sessions task.

The lack of clarity of expectations was raised by the trainers with respect to the impact on the commitment of participants, attendance at all of the sessions and completion of between-session activities. There were a number of consequences that they described as a result, including difficulties with follow-up activities when between-module tasks had not been completed by all participants and reduced participant numbers for the second and third modules of the training, again making some of the group activities more difficult. One of the trainers confirmed that it would have been beneficial to have

provided a more detailed outline of the course content and task expectations prior to the start of the programme. This may have had the effect of reducing the numbers of participants that signed up for the training, but may have improved the commitment of those that were involved.

A number of participants commented that they would have liked to have had more detailed handouts from the sessions, although some trainers provided handouts of the slides so this was not consistent across all of the training venues. Trainers, in fact reflected the opposite view; that when they had given out handouts of slides, it felt as if they were providing far too much information which could become overwhelming. In other comments about resources, some practitioners commented that they did not have the correct equipment to carry out the between-module task (e.g. the Dictaphones that had been promised). This may have also influenced the low rate of between-module task completion. These may have been relatively minor concerns in comparison to other issues raised, but should be noted with respect to ensuring that participants needs are met and activities can be completed.

6.7 Implementation and evaluation of a nationally devised programme at a local level

The implementation of any programme that has been designed and written by others can clearly have advantages and challenges. The advantage of having a ready-made resource is the obvious implication for preparation time. The usually long process of designing and writing materials has already been completed. However, as a trainer, there is a need to orientate one's self with the materials in order to ensure that the content is relevant to the audience and to make adaptations where appropriate. Some of the issues raised about using such a resource as a result of the evaluation of the pilot programme are described here.

One particular issue relates to the consistency with which a training programme that is devised by one person or a group of people is delivered by other trainers. Despite an event provided for 'training the trainers', clearly there was a significant amount of adaptation of the materials even in the pilot programme. It was also apparent that some practitioners felt that they already had materials that covered a similar content and with which they were familiar. Hence these were often substituted in appropriate

places. Therefore, we can assume the same content to a large extent, but cannot be sure that the input was a consistent as one would want for robust evaluation. What was beyond the remit of the evaluation was to examine to what extent these materials might or might not have been similar to the original ones and whether they fitted closely with the module aims. The modification of materials clearly raises difficulties for the consistency and evaluation of a programme. The way in which materials were adapted was not likely to be the same across the different venues. Therefore the training aims and consequently the evaluation questions may not have been as relevant to the modified content and the validity may have been compromised. Outcomes for participants may have been different and not analysed or understood through the evaluation process.

A further difficulty highlighted by the trainers was the challenge of delivering one training package to a wide range of participants, who may have arrived at the training with very different skills and diverse prior experience. This provided a challenge to the trainers when trying to deliver content which was accessible for all participants and that from all of the participants could gain relevant skills and knowledge. There does not seem to be much evidence of this with respect to the feedback that was received from practitioners (the majority reported that it met their needs). However, participants may have chosen to attend fewer sessions if they perceived the content as not being very relevant and therefore will not have completed evaluations for later sessions. When using pre-written materials, the opportunity to jointly negotiate the training aims with the intended recipients is not provided. Therefore the potential to fail to meet the needs of the cohort of participants is much greater.

A further issue that was raised with respect to delivering a pre-scripted course was that of trainer commitment and motivation. It was not surprising that reports from trainers indicated that they were less likely to be motivated and enthusiastic about delivering training into which they had had relatively limited input. This is clearly an issue as an increasing number of pre-packaged training materials are disseminated to local authorities.

The logistics of delivering training across a local authority and targeted to specific geographical areas also raises issues, particularly with respect to the follow-up and on-

going support of practitioners. Trainers reported that they thought the training could be made more effective if the trainers and the settings that were accessing the training were in regular contact, before, during and after the programme. This would support the practitioners' understanding of training content, completion of associated activities between modules and the on-going monitoring of the implementation of strategies in practice. This would likely improve the impact of the training and support on-going evaluation.

An increasingly relevant and complex issue is related to the sheer number of different training packages and professional development programmes associated with speech, language and communication development and to child development more generally. Trainers reported the challenge of trying to keep up to date with how all of these packages fit together and even more of a challenge for practitioners to be able to choose an appropriate level and method of training for them. Some of the current programmes are funded and developed through central government departments (e.g. the DCSF), whilst others are developed by key agencies in the field (e.g. I CAN). Some are commissioned by the government through such bodies. Such training initiatives are often developed in addition to what may have already been delivered previously at a local level. Sometimes trainers and practitioners can feel that the work that might have already been developed is not relevant and there is the danger of replacing programmes that are already working well with new initiatives promoted nationally, sometimes without evidence that they are better. Some of the local programmes may have already been well evaluated and proved effective and therefore key decision-makers face the dilemma of whether or not to implement the nationally recommended materials or whether to continue their own programmes –and potentially face the need to justify them. Hence evaluation becomes increasingly important in both respects. Although the aim of delivering consistent information and messages across the country through nationally developed training is clearly appropriate, the importance of maintaining the professionalism and autonomy of trainers seems equally significant, given that they will usually know their audience the best.

Whilst there is the assumption that practitioners delivering the training will have a shared knowledge base, there is the potential for trainers to find themselves presenting materials that they do not feel they have the expertise to deliver. One of the trainers interviewed emphasised the importance of maintaining a multi-agency approach to training, with specialist knowledge to deliver the relevant sections. Clearly this approach was also valued by participants, with comments related to the usefulness of input from various key people (speech and language therapist, ethnic minority achievement service). However, this approach is not without difficulties. In relation to this particular programme, it proved difficult to engage speech and language therapists in delivery of the training in their local areas. A response to this was to commission an independent therapist to deliver training in more than one area; however this relies on additional funding which is not always available. Again, the effectiveness of local therapists delivering training to their local settings must be the preferred model with respect to providing on-going support. The assumption of the programme model is that at a local level all of the agencies identified as potential contributors to the training have the time and capacity to deliver such initiatives. Whilst there is an agreement at a philosophical level that working together is advantageous, the practicalities are not necessarily so straight forward when agencies are also dealing with other competing demands.

6.8 Methodological limitations

There are a number of limitations to the methods employed; due in part to the constraints and challenges experienced both prior to and during the programme. This meant that the evaluation design was somewhat limited from the outset and further compromised as the training progressed. As a result, the conclusions that can be drawn and the implications identified following the data analysis need to be understood in the light of such limitations.

Developing the evaluation module by module had the advantage of enabling quite specific data to be collected that closely related to the aims of the particular module. The disadvantage of this approach was that there was no measure of the knowledge and skills acquired across all three modules, which may have identified broader issues and looked at practitioner development over the entire training course. Having a

questionnaire that was completed pre- and post-training might have been helpful, but was problematic to develop, as it was not entirely clear from the outset how the complete training package was to be delivered to the participants and what materials would be covered. Plans for the next module's delivery tended to be finalised following the previous module's completion.

The decision to collect data both before and after modules 1 and 3 was made in order to obtain some form of baseline measure with which to make a comparison after the training input. The rating scales used to collect pre- and post-training information have a number of methodological issues that should be taken into consideration when interpreting the data gathered. All of the ratings were obtained through self-report. This method not only relies on participants understanding the meaning of the statements, but also interpreting the scales correctly. The impact of this was hopefully reduced by developing the statements with a number of the trainers so that for each statement the language used and meaning of the sentence was discussed. In addition, each of the scales was labelled individually so that respondents did not have to remember or refer to a key. One of the issues with completing the rating scales is that due to their subjective nature, people may place themselves at very different points on a scale despite having very similar views or understanding of the issue. Secondly, people's ratings may not be consistent; they may change at any time and on any given day and be influenced by personal states. The first issue was not considered a significant problem as the data was interpreted using paired results and therefore comparison of the measures was made for the same person. With respect to the second issue, it was assumed that there would be a good enough level of internal consistency in responses to the ratings, so as to not affect the results obtained. Further limitations to scales have been identified by Cohen et al. (2000) and have been already outlined in the methods section. These include the possibility that the points on the scale may not be treated equally by respondents and they may be reluctant to use the more extreme ends of the scales. This may have had the effect of reducing or increasing the degree of significance recorded for certain items, depending on how conservative participants may have been with their responses.

As noted previously, although a significant difference was recorded between responses for a number of statements before and after the module 1 and 3 training, this difference can only serve as indicator to what happened for participants (for example possible improvements in knowledge or changes to behaviour). This information needs to be further analysed in the light of other data collected in order to obtain additional evidence to support initial outcomes. Such conclusions could have been strengthened by collecting a more comprehensive baseline and follow-up data once participants had returned to their settings, although it was beyond the scale and remit of this evaluation in this case.

There are a number of potential limitations related to individual statements which concern the language used and how individuals might interpret statements. However, given that the data gathered through this method was considered in conjunction with other information and claims are not being made on the basis of this information alone, these will be acknowledged and accepted in relation to the scale and purpose of this study and not given more detailed individual discussion here.

The way in which open-ended question responses are interpreted can also have limitations and possible problems. Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to the researcher's role in identifying themes from data collected. They suggest that the researcher takes an active role in the process, having an impact on the themes that are chosen and identified and reporting the results accordingly. Although the researcher seeks to do this in an unbiased way, we cannot ignore the role the researcher brings with associated values and beliefs about the data and the situation from which it was collected. This, Braun and Clarke suggest is often not referred to or is underestimated in research reports. They refer to the notion that:

'What is important is that the theoretical framework and methods match what the researcher wants to know, and that they acknowledge these decisions, and recognise them as decisions; (p.80).

Decisions about which themes were identified in this case were based on the evaluator's understanding of the aims of the training and the key messages that it

sought to deliver to participants. Therefore, another evaluator might potentially identify different aims and consequently different themes.

One particular issue that is raised by Cohen et al. (2000) in handling responses to open-ended questions is related to the potential conflict in paradigms (quantitative and qualitative). They suggest that this is the case where qualitative responses (words) are aggregated to provide numerical data (through the identification of groups of responses or themes as used here). There is an impact on the data's validity when using this method as the individual meaning of the responses may be lost. However, the advantage of grouping responses is that the data can be more concisely presented and more general conclusions can be drawn.

With respect to the interview data, the biggest limitation was the number of interviews carried out and therefore the confidence with which key themes could be identified. Hence the interviews were primarily used to support other data rather than being analysed in their own right. Furthermore, the two interviews were carried out and recorded differently. One was carried out face to face, recorded and transcribed. The other was carried out over the telephone and notes were taken during the conversation. Therefore the amount of conversation captured in the second interview will have been reduced. Again, the researcher may have made decisions either consciously or not about which information was more or less worthy of being recorded.

Despite the limitations outlined above, the data can support a range of conclusions and associated implications from the evaluation. These can be used in practice by the training group involved in this project to further develop the materials and structure of the course. In addition, the findings clearly highlight areas for further investigation. Outcomes of this study will be of value to other practitioners who are involved in developing similar professional development opportunities with respect to issues to consider and plan for. The implications arising from the evaluation are described and developed further in the following chapter.

Reflections on the evaluation

7.1 Introduction

In order to understand more about the context of an evaluation, it is important to consider through reflection, the role the evaluator plays. This includes how they influence the process and how the process in turn influences them. Nightingale and Cromby (1999) suggest that reflexivity encourages us to:

'explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research' (p.228)

There are two particular areas related to this study that will be considered here with respect to evaluator influence. Firstly the way in which an evaluator negotiates and interacts with key people related to the process will influence outcomes. Evaluation by its nature, involves a high level of interaction with stakeholders, commissioners and programme delivery teams who may have differing levels of influence on and input into a particular programme. All of the people involved will have views that need to be considered or will make demands that need to be accommodated. The way in which the evaluator manages these issues will impact on the design and process of the evaluation.

Secondly, an evaluator has a significant role in the analysis and interpretation of the data and is in a position to make decisions and judgements about the attention that is given to particular information and how meaning is derived from it. Furthermore, the interpretive nature of the process, which is designed to produce judgements about merit and worth and proposes implications as a result, will inevitably involve construction of meaning by the evaluator.

Therefore, given the potential influence an evaluator may have on the outcomes of the evaluation some time and discussion has been devoted to reflecting on the investigation described here and the evaluator's role in it.

It can be argued that reflexivity is particularly relevant to an evaluation where the evaluator is already part of the organisational system prior to carrying it out –as in this case. Whilst it is generally accepted that the evaluator is never completely

independent of the context in which their investigation is being conducted, there are clearly different degrees to which they are initially and progressively more involved in the context through the evaluation process. With respect to this study, the evaluator was very familiar with the context in which it was being carried out and she knew some of the individuals involved in the programme (to differing extents). As a result she was likely to have had some preconceived ideas about possible difficulties the context might present and the constraints within which she would be working. In this respect, she held certain knowledge, beliefs, values and experiences about the context before starting the project, which may have influenced the approach to it. Reflection on such understanding can support an awareness of the situation and its' participants and how they may exert influence. Steier (1991) suggests that if we consider how we as researchers are part of the system we study, we realise how reflexivity becomes a helpful way to understand what others are doing.

7.2 Reflections on the process

The project evolved through a number of steering group meetings. The steering group was made up of a range of professionals with an interest in SLCN and training for early years practitioners. This included speech and language therapists, teacher advisors, area inclusion coordinators, literacy advisors and early years practitioners. The evaluator was invited to the group as a representative from the educational psychology service with a specialist role for early years work.

There was much initial enthusiasm for the project and an eagerness to get it off the ground. A programme with a focus in the area of language and communication was welcomed and the content broadly accepted as relevant and useful by the steering group. Some initial concerns were raised about the number of sessions required of participants and the expectations for task completion. As the project progressed, attendance at the steering group meetings dwindled and at the final meeting only those most closely involved with the project's implementation attended. As with many initiatives, the initial enthusiasm is often quickly reduced as it has to complete with other priorities for people's time.

Once agreement for the evaluator to lead the evaluation of the programme had been given, she was able to meet with the programme leader and a number of trainers on

several occasions. This enabled the evaluator to discuss the purpose of the evaluation, the questions that the group wanted it to answer and the proposed design and data collection methods. Working with this group allowed her to talk about how practitioners might understand and interpret questionnaires and to consider the most appropriate ways to collect data so as to maintain a balance between gathering enough data and not overwhelming participants with additional tasks to complete. There was concern from this group about the evaluation not creating significant additional work for participants, whilst acknowledging the need to collect useful and valid data. This concern will have undoubtedly constrained the evaluation design from the early stages and also influenced decisions about methods of data collection.

As the evaluation design was developed, a whole range of unforeseen issues arose that further compromised the design in one way or another; the words of Rossi et al. (1999) seem pertinent here as much of the following quote was relevant to this evaluation:

'...once an evaluation is launched, it is common for changes and "in-flight" corrections to be required. Modifications, perhaps even compromises may be necessary in the types, quantity or quality of the data collected as a result of unanticipated practical or political obstacles. Moreover, adaptations may be required in the basic questions being addressed in response to shifts that occur in the operation of the program or the composition and interests of the stakeholders.' (p.24)

Some of the issues that arose during the planning and data collection stages of the evaluation are described below:

- The programme leader changed twice during the course of the pilot programme, once just before the training sessions started and again at the end of the project. This meant that much of the negotiation about the evaluation was done with one person and then had to be renegotiated with another.

- Data was due to be collected by asking a sample of participants to record a brief sample of conversation with a child in their setting before they attended the training. This would have enabled some comparison with their later recorded conversations that were part of the tasks. Despite agreement by some of the trainers to gather the data from one cohort of participants, the

data did not get collected. As a consequence, the extent to which the evaluation could report outcomes of the training with respect to observed changes in participant behaviour was significantly reduced.

- The Dictaphones required for the between-module tasks did not arrive until part-way through the training delivery, meaning that for some groups the completion of the task was more difficult. This was also the reason why the proposed collection of baseline data was left until the final cohort of participants began the training. Therefore, when it did not get collected, there was no further opportunity to gather data from alternative sources.

- A number of the trainers resigned from their posts during the course of the training or at the end of it, making it difficult to contact and interview trainers about the project in order to gather feedback from their perspective. When trainers left part-way through the training, it meant that the evaluation for the remaining modules had to be renegotiated with new trainers.

- Commitment to the evaluation was given from some trainers directly (those involved in the planning and evaluation meeting) and by the project leader on behalf of the other trainers. The data for each module was intended to be collected from all four of the training venues to maximise the number of responses that were available for analysis. Despite clear descriptions about the information that needed to be collected, it was seldom that complete data from each session was obtained. This may have been due to a number of factors including the commitment of the trainers to the evaluation and the willingness of practitioners to complete feedback questionnaires.

- Communication with the trainers was problematic at times. For example, dates of sessions were changed and the number of sessions reduced without trainers recognising that it was important for this information to be passed on to inform evaluation and so that questionnaires could be provided at the appropriate time. Sometimes this led to very tight timescales within which to work or in one instance the lack of evaluation materials being ready at all.

The issues described above were significant with respect to the impact they had on the evaluation and evaluator. In relation to the evaluators role under these circumstances, it became one where she needed to be able to tolerate frequent changes to circumstances (e.g. personnel, training dates and programme content), manage frustrations (her own and those of others) and persevere with renegotiating the evaluation design and process on a frequent basis. This was personally challenging, particularly when the design was being seriously compromised and consequently the validity of the data and conclusions were under threat. The evaluator had to continually balance the needs of the evaluation against the needs of the trainers, participants and other individuals.

7.3 Reflections on the data collection and results obtained

The data held some initial disappointment for the evaluator with respect to the amount that was actually available. There were a number of pre- and post-module responses that could not be paired for analysis and other questionnaires that were missing for a number of reasons (for example one set of data having gone missing when one trainer left her role). However, once the analysis of available data had taken place there emerged some interesting and useful information which was somewhat reassuring.

With respect to the analysis of the qualitative data, the evaluator made decisions about the themes that she deemed appropriate to identify from the written responses. Although decisions were guided by what she considered to be the main themes of the 'Communicating Matters' training materials, another evaluator might have grouped responses differently, based on a different interpretation of the materials. Therefore the decisions made will have influenced the overall outcomes of the investigation.

It was interesting that much of the data about the usefulness and application of the training in module 1 was related to having certain strategies that could be implemented, for example story-telling ideas. Although it might have been predictable that this would be the case, the responses highlighted a broader issue relating to whether the training met the participants' needs. In the evaluator's experiences, it appears that often practitioners are eager for training to provide them with a handful of strategies to take away and implement. There is often less enthusiasm for (or

understanding of) training designed to change behaviour and develop reflective practice. Such changes are often more difficult to implement as they typically require higher levels of personal commitment and effort in order to actually change behaviour. The reporting of intended changes to practice (based on personal behaviour) was more evident in module 2, which was pleasing given the training aims.

Also surprising was the importance to the participants of the opportunity to discuss ideas with each other. This had not been articulated as an aim of the training at all, although activities were structured to promote discussion. However, this aspect was clearly seen as valuable by the participants.

The evaluator was disappointed in the number of interviews with trainers that she was able to complete. Clearly there was the problem that about half of the trainers had changed role by the time interviews were carried out. However, obtaining commitment from others to participate in interviews was also difficult. The evaluator proposes that this was primarily because once the delivery of the training had been completed and the trainers had been told that they were unlikely to be delivering the materials again, they had other projects on which to focus. Given the feedback meeting (discussed further below) had taken place before interviews could be completed, the trainers probably saw little relevance to them in participating in further interviews.

7.4 Reflections on the outcomes

A further disappointment in the evaluation process was that the evaluator was unable to attend the final meeting of the training group (which had been responsible for the programme delivery). This was scheduled just before the project leader was due to leave her role and planned to draw everything together before handing over the lead responsibility to someone else. Unfortunately the evaluator was not consulted about the time of the meeting and there was no opportunity to reschedule the meeting. Therefore, she was unable to feed back the analysis of the evaluation in person and had to instead provide written summary. The evaluator proposes that it would have been helpful to have discussed the results with the training group, for example, whether the results of the evaluation had been expected or whether there was anything surprising or particularly interesting about them. Moreover, it would have

been useful to have been involved in discussion about how the results might inform future training delivery. The evaluator's absence at this meeting raises concerns about the extent to which the evaluation findings were understood and would actually be used to inform future programme delivery.

Post-training interviews with participants were originally considered in order to gather further feedback about the training. However, these were not carried out. This was due in principal to issues of timescale; the training had already been reviewed and leadership passed over before interviews could have been completed. Therefore the purpose of the interviews became rather superfluous; the outcomes of any interviews would not have formed part of the main evaluation and hence would not have been effectively been utilised. This meant that only a proportion of the originally anticipated data was used to inform the evaluation.

With the responsibility for the leaderships and delivery of the training being transferred to a different group of teacher advisors at the end of the pilot phase, the evaluation findings were probably not as well-used or as relevant to the new group of trainers as they would have been to the original group. As they had not been involved in the previous delivery, evaluation design or data collection they were unlikely to have the same interest in the evaluation outcomes. Therefore it is likely that the results and related implications were not well utilised. Weiss (1990) recognises such an outcome to evaluation suggesting that:

'We are often disappointed after all the strum and drang of running an evaluation and analysing and reporting its results, we do not see much notice taken of it. Things usually seem to go along as they would have gone if the evaluation had never been done' (p.171).

Bamberger et al. (2006) discuss why evaluations are often underutilised, identifying difficulties such as:

- the timing of the investigation and the flexibility of stakeholders with respect to timescales,

- asking the wrong questions which do not necessarily interest stakeholders,

- weak methodology meaning that very firm conclusions cannot be reached,

- the demands of the evaluation being too much for programme staff relative to the perceived outcomes.

All of the above points could be considered relevant here. In particular, the evaluator would argue that the timescale was probably the most significant issue with different people often have very different expectations about timescales. Furthermore, the timescales that are required by decision-makers may not be realistic for evaluators. Rossi et al. (2004) recognise and refer to the pressure that is often exerted on evaluators to complete their assessments more quickly than their chosen method permits. They refer to 'political time' and 'evaluation time' suggesting that the two timescales of evaluators and decision-makers may be very different. In this particular study the timescale changed primarily due to staffing changes and decisions about future delivery that were made earlier than originally anticipated. However the evaluator would argue that a further issue with respect to the utilisation of findings is related to the understanding of evaluation and its intended purpose by stakeholders in the process.

A key challenge that was faced, which extended across the entire project, was the different understandings that individuals appeared to hold about the purpose of evaluation. Although these were not overtly articulated, the author would argue for their presence nonetheless. As a result of holding different meanings about the purpose and process of evaluation; the commitment to it, expectations from it and use of it varied considerably between individuals. It appeared that for some, evaluation is considered a necessary but unwanted chore; something that has to be carried out because it should be. As a result of this belief, one could argue that findings are likely to be under-used and implications not fully considered. In other words, findings are not likely to have a significant bearing on practice. In the trainer's experience, all too often for events such as training, the evaluation simply informs the trainers at the end of the day about whether participants have enjoyed themselves. Even if some of the questions posed as part of the evaluation go deeper than that, they are seldom subjected to any more than a cursory analysis. This reflects the concerns that Guskey (2000) and others identify in their critique of professional development evaluation (as

discussed previously in the literature review). As a result of this type of approach to evaluation, those involved may feel that information gathered is not particularly helpful in highlighting relevant issues.

In addition to managing peoples' differing perceptions of the evaluation process itself, the difficulty with carrying out an evaluation where there is a reliance on other people to gather data for the investigation is obvious. This is one of the inherent complications of applied research where time constraints limit the amount of data collection that can be carried out by the evaluator in person. Some of the stakeholders and trainers were very supportive with respect to the data collection and they were interested to know the outcomes of the analysis. It is possible that the commitment to data collection in these types of situations can be influenced by the process through which the data collection is initially negotiated and planned. Although in this case some trainers were involved in the evaluation design, not all were. However, even those who did engage in the design process did not always carry out data collection that they had agreed to (for example due to other competing commitments). Ultimately, the 'Communicating Matters' programme was only part of the trainers' role. In addition to managing many other competing demands the programme will have been considered a further demand on their role –to which they could only provide a certain amount of time and commitment. However, in an applied context, the use of other people is often the only way of gathering data if evaluation is to be carried out -given the limitations on budget and time that are usually present.

7.5 The dynamics and tensions of the evaluation

In any evaluation there will be inherent tensions which exist, for example between the needs of the programme and the needs of the evaluation and the requirements of the programme leaders and those of the evaluator. In addition, the needs of the participants can be in conflict with those of both the programme and the evaluation. Some of the dynamics that existed and tensions encountered through this evaluation have already been highlighted in the previous section and some will be given further consideration here.

Maintaining relationships with the project team vs. research design and data collection needs

In this case study, the dynamics of the situation were such that there needed to be frequent review of the evaluation design and renegotiation with trainers and those leading the programme. In any evaluation, relationships can be challenged; in this situation the evaluator needed to balance the need to maintain positive working relationships (both during and after the evaluation) with the necessity to collect an appropriate amount of data to allow the evaluation to be firstly feasible and then appropriately valid. There were inherent tensions between the requirements of the project team who were keen for the evaluation to take place and the trainers who were not, as a group, wholly committed to the process. The lack of clear messages from the project team about the importance of the evaluation and the expectation that it would form an essential part of the project were evident and understanding of the process was further diluted when some trainers changed. As a result of this situation, the evaluator had to often negotiate commitment directly with trainers and manage her expectations of what was achievable in the presenting context. There were interesting issues of power at play in this situation, for example it could be assumed that the project leader held greater power than the evaluator in eliciting commitment from trainers to the evaluation.

Collecting adequate data vs. maintaining commitment from trainers (and participants)

In a similar way to the tensions encountered with the project leaders, there were tensions in relationships with trainers. The relationship with participants is also relevant here, as although this was not a direct relationship with the evaluator, it was one that existed through the trainers and the data collection tools. In order to maintain the commitment from trainers to gathering data (and from participants to providing data), the methods had to be accepted by the trainers. For example, the fact that a set of data was not collected prior to the start of the training clearly meant that the commitment of the trainers involved had not been adequately gained. The failure to collect recorded conversations from participants at the start of the programme meant that the evaluator had to be more reliant on questionnaire data. Also, the use of further questionnaires in other modules was guided by the probability that further

collection of recorded conversations would not be likely. The evaluator had to accept that although there had been a verbal commitment to gather certain data, it did not necessarily happen and further data collection had to be adapted accordingly. The evaluator had to manage such frustrations in order to maintain relationships with trainers -or risk the likelihood of future data collection not being carried out.

Timescale of the evaluator vs. timescale of the programme

As an evaluator with other responsibilities in addition to the evaluation described here, there were clearly tensions between the timescales of the programme team and those of the evaluator. Timescales for design and distribution of the data collection tools were often tight, but manageable -unless there were changes to the proposed training dates as was sometimes the case. This happened in one instance where the third module took place without informing the evaluator of the date and before questionnaires had been developed. It is clear that links with communication between trainers and the evaluator can also be made here.

There was a great deal of tension created at certain key stages in the process, for example when trying to accommodate the timescales of the training group and to meet rearranged deadlines. For example, an interim report of the results needed to be produced to enable there to be information to report back at the final evaluation meeting, which was scheduled without consultation with the evaluator. As time progressed the evaluator had to modify her expectations of what could be achieved in the time available and the context which presented.

Needs of the evaluator vs. needs of others

Clearly understanding the process of an evaluation, constructing a design and working in a way which supports the use of data to draw appropriate conclusions is the remit of an evaluator. Often tension was created in this case, when the requirements deemed desirable by the evaluator for an effective evaluation (such as the appropriate data collection) were not met. Infringements of the design may be made by the evaluator themselves, based on practical and methodological decisions. However, they may also be made by others and this is particularly the case when data is not being collected by the evaluator themselves. In this particular evaluation, the needs of others –with

respect to the type and amount of data that the trainers could be expected to collect – needed to be balanced with the evaluators expectations. Therefore modifications had to be made to the design which did not necessarily feel satisfactory to the evaluator. This was the case when the recorded conversation data was not collected and some venues did not collect data for each module delivered.

A further compromise to the original design of the evaluation was made when interviews with participants (which had originally been planned) were not completed. This decision was taken on the basis that the final meeting of the training group had taken place so soon after the training that it did not allow time for the interviews to be completed-let alone analysed. The short timescale was due to the project being passed over to another group for future delivery. Therefore it did not seem appropriate (or indeed ethical) to ask participants to give up time for interviews in the knowledge that their responses would have been gathered at too late a time for them to be included in the evaluation report –and therefore they were unlikely to be utilised in decisions about future use of the materials.

In summary, many of the tensions experienced during the evaluation process overlap and the dynamics of relationships run throughout the process and can be considered as fundamental to it. Often decisions had to be taken to maintain relationships in order to ensure that the evaluation proceeded and these might not have always been decisions that were the most satisfying with respect to methodological needs or evaluator priorities.

7.6 Summary

Two issues related to reflection on the case study were identified at the beginning of the chapter. The first issue, which was related to how the negotiation and interaction between stakeholders and the evaluator impacted on the evaluation process, proved to be the most influential on the development of the investigation. The process was constrained by a number of factors related to individuals and the training group as a whole and those involved themselves were in turn constrained by factors within and beyond their roles. Although changes were inevitable, the extent of changes to personnel, timescales and delivery content that took place could not have been predicted and as a result the intended design of the evaluation was changed

significantly from that initially envisaged. To what extent greater clarity of timescale, purpose and expectation could have been negotiated at the outset is unclear, and on reflection, the evaluator would want to clarify the aims, objectives and expectations of the evaluation with respect to the roles of others involved much more explicitly in future. However, even the tightest of proposals is unlikely to be immune to unexpected changes when dealing with real-life situations.

It is much more difficult to reflect on the way in which the evaluator's involvement with the data might have been affected by her internal beliefs, values or understandings. It is probably something that operates at a much more unconscious level. Even decisions about which quotations to use to illustrate findings were based on the quote seeming appropriate and relevant to the evaluator with respect to the way in which data had originally been interpreted. This will have been at the expense of other potentially relevant comments which may not have been considered as having the same significance –by the researcher. However, decisions about data have to be made in this type of study and one can only acknowledge the potential biases that might exist.

Implications, areas for further investigation and conclusion

8.1 Introduction

As a result of this evaluation, there are a number of associated implications which will be outlined in the sections below. Some of these are related to changes to the 'Communicating Matters' materials that could be considered in order to make the training more effective (in the context it is being delivered) and to better meet practitioner needs based on feedback provided. Other implications are broader in nature and related to training issues more generally in the local and wider context.

8.2 Practitioner knowledge and skills

If we assume that participants did improve their knowledge of language and communication, we can make the related assumption that they are more likely, although not certain, to use this knowledge in their practice. The use of a training programme as a means to improve knowledge is widely recognised, however the extent to which knowledge and skills are applied as a result is less understood and more difficult to assess without further follow-up of the participants –as in this case. Despite some initial plans to follow-up participants, this was not realised and as a result further investigation is required in order to determine to what extent knowledge is applied in context and retained over time.

As regards the most effective way to improve practitioner knowledge, it was evident from participant feedback and trainer comments that the training was most highly valued when specific content was delivered by the most relevant professional. The input from speech and language therapists, literacy consultants and the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service was specifically commented upon as being valuable in questionnaire responses. This could be considered as a very predictable finding; however in practice, the recruitment of the most relevant trainers can be problematic. There are a number of concerns related to engaging and recruiting the most appropriate professionals to provide input. One of the issues is that often the professionals who might be involved in programme delivery are working for different services (for example health and local authority children's services). It is usual in this

situation that the service responsible for programme delivery needs to commission (and fund) another service in order for them to be able to commit the time to a programme. An example in this case was the speech and language therapists, some of whom could deliver the training as part of their community role and others who were not able to do this. This raises issues of funding and equality across a large county. With respect to the pilot programme, some time was commissioned from an independent speech and language therapist to deliver training where it had been difficult to recruit a local speech and language therapist. This is satisfactory for the delivery of the materials but limits the potential involvement of the trainers in follow-up support (an issue further discussed in section 7.4 below).

There continues to be a need for further work to enable professionals to work jointly on training and associated projects in the area of speech, language and communication in order to ensure the quality of input and coherent messages across disciplines. If this is not realised, there is the danger that the quality of the training will be reduced, attendance less valued and application of knowledge and skills less likely. In addition, the opportunity for those delivering the programme to learn from each other through co-delivery will also be limited.

8.3 Changes to practitioner behaviour

As a result of participation in the 'Communicating Matters' programme, practitioners declared an intention to change their behaviour with respect to their early years practice in a number of different ways, depending on what they had understood and assimilated from the training content. The between-session tasks were certainly included in the training materials in order to reinforce such changes in behaviour and support reflection on practice. This appeared to be effective for participants when between-session tasks were completed. Further investigation will be helpful to determine whether or not behaviour change definitely occurred and was maintained over time.

Frequently training is delivered with little follow-up after the event which has been a long-standing criticism of training models of professional development (e.g. Guskey 2000). In addition, so often the next initiative arrives before the previous one has been fully integrated into practice and therefore the focus of professional development

changes and the prominence of earlier initiatives are quickly lost. Feedback from trainers indicated that there might be more successful monitoring of the application of skills if local trainers were used to train practitioners with whom they were in regular contact. This would allow for greater reinforcement of key themes and messages through on-going contact. However, the dilemma which presents itself here is that the local support team may not be the most skilled in delivering all the training content. Therefore some form of compromise may have to be made. Further research could identify which of the models (specialist trainers vs community support team delivery) is the most effective.

Where participants have failed to complete between session tasks, further investigation concerning the barriers to completion is needed. This would provide a better understanding of how training could be structured to encourage between-session task completion or how other opportunities for practitioners to apply and reflect on the knowledge acquired could be developed. Some practitioners may need a much higher level of individual support in order to be able to complete activities, apply skills and reflect on the content covered and providing this may reduce the number of participants who failed to attend subsequent sessions. However, making such support available will also have an impact on trainers' time and may reduce the number of practitioners that can be trained at any one time. The balance between providing the most effective CPD opportunities needs to be considered with respect to the cost of that provision. Garet et al. (2001) highlight this dilemma suggesting that:

A focus on breadth in terms of the number of teachers served comes at the expense of depth in terms of quality of experience' (p.937)

Ahsam et al. (2006) suggest that transferring theoretical knowledge about strategies that support adult-child interaction that are acquired in off-site training into the preschool setting can be difficult. Although the 'Communicating Matters' programme aims to address this to some extent, the activities that are completed in settings are provided for practitioners to tackle on their own. Some previously evaluated and effective models of professional development in the area of language and communication have involved much higher levels of trainer involvement in analysing and supporting reflection on practitioner skills. For example, findings from research

carried out by Girolametto et al. (2006) indicated that as a result of an in-service training programme (based on three group sessions and three videotaping and feedback sessions) practitioners were able to adopt a range of interaction strategies that prompted children's use of language. The benefit of this type of model is that trainers work alongside practitioners in their own settings and they are therefore more likely to learn skills in context with higher levels of support to complete activities. Further comparison of training models would be helpful in determining which are the most appropriate for the needs of practitioners. It is likely that different models will suit different practitioners in which case it would be useful to know which groups of practitioners benefit from which sort of training.

8.4 Professional development for practitioners in speech, language and communication

With respect to the training evaluated in this case study; feedback clearly indicated that there needed to be much more explicit detail about the content and expectations of the course, so that potential participants could make informed decisions about whether it would meet their needs. There is an inherent tension between the need to provide CPD opportunities in order to improve the skills of early years practitioners and their ability to commit to training and development opportunities. They are often in a situation where there is limited availability of cover for their role and time in which to complete work outside of the training contact time. There needs to be a continued emphasis on the value attributed to professional development in the early years sector, which in turn needs to be met with appropriate and accessible learning and development opportunities (in terms of content, time and expectations). Top-down pre-prepared training packages allow little opportunity for consultation with practitioners about what their training requirements are and how these might be delivered. A substantial proportion of the feedback reported the difficulties that practitioners faced in completing tasks and being available for the number of sessions which was originally proposed; hence the decision by a number of trainers to reduce the number of sessions and condense the course content on the pilot programme.

The 'Communicating Matters' materials were condensed and adapted by trainers even at the pilot phase of this training. These decisions were based on early feedback from

participants and trainers own perceptions of the content. Some adaptation was based on trainers having delivered similar training before and therefore using their own materials to cover some sections. This may be appropriate if the content meets participant needs at a local level, but may not be as satisfactory if an agreed content and standard of training is desired for practitioners across the county. Furthermore it raises issues of the wider workforce with respect to establishing a 'training standard' for the 'Communicating Matters' programme. For example, a practitioner trained using 'Communicating Matters' in one county might have had a very different experience to one trained in another.

In contrast, the inherent danger of a 'one size fits all' training package, offered to all practitioners, is that it may not meet the needs of many. Although a high number of practitioners can be trained for a relatively low investment of resources, for some participants the level of demand (both intellectual and practical) may be too low or too high. This will have an impact on the training meeting participants' needs, their motivation and consequently their commitment to the training. Moreover, the content of training needs to be considered with respect to the composition of the group. Although practitioners appear to value and benefit from opportunities to work with each other and discuss the training content, the balance of participants needs to be considered if individuals from a range of different settings and working with different age-groups are to be trained together.

What is likely to be effective in the long-term is to ensure that practitioners are supported to find appropriate training routes for themselves. Further development needs to take place locally and nationally to make clearer the possible training pathways and related course content, so that practitioners are clearer about what route will best meet their professional development needs. This has been developed very recently on a national level, through the work carried out by The Communication Trust who has produced a framework for supporting those who work with children and young people in developing their skills in relation to SLCN (The Communication Trust, 2009). This is designed to support practitioners to develop a training pathway to suit their skills and stage of professional development. Practitioners are able to access an on-line questionnaire to support them in assessing their own skills and development

needs and links them to nationally recognised and delivered training. Furthermore, at a national level there is now a wider range of training approaches that practitioners can access, for example the Inclusion Development Programme materials (DCSF, 2008c), which are designed to be accessed by groups of practitioners in their settings through on-line resources. However, there is further work that needs to be done at a local level to support practitioners in using such existing tools or developing local pathways to ensure practitioners access appropriate CPD experiences. It would be helpful for locally derived training pathways to be developed as they will include development opportunities which are available on a local basis and not necessarily identified nationally.

8.5 Policy

Training packages and materials have been a key resource provided through central government initiatives to local authorities, in an effort to improve standards in the key skills of literacy and numeracy. Language and communication has been a more recent addition to the focus of educational policy, the importance of which has been highlighted by educators. Pre-prepared training materials (of which 'Communicating Matters' is an example) are often welcomed by local authority support teams with respect to the time that it can take to devise training programmes from scratch. However, as demonstrated through this evaluation, there are inherent risks to such an approach to professional development; one that simply relies on the wholesale delivery of pre-prepared materials without reference to the local context and resources available.

Significantly, resources need to be allocated to such a programme and time needs to be invested in ensuring the engagement of relevant agencies at a local level. The intention of a programme might be that it will be delivered by a multi-agency team, but the realisation of this is much more difficult on the ground when managing such a wide range of competing demands on already-stretched children's services. There remains a long way to go with respect to the development of shared priorities for children's services and a more comprehensive approach to supporting child development -with language and communication skills at the heart. In addition to shared priorities for services working with children, there also needs to be a more

structured approach to the continuing professional development of practitioners in this sector. This includes placing a greater emphasis on the value of professional development and ensuring that practitioners are supported to engage in and fulfil their professional development commitments. This may be though local authority support and/or support from immediate mangers although the profile needs to be raised at a national level.

Training programmes are clearly a cost-effective way of supporting CPD for practitioners and with respect to resourcing from central government they are a very cheap method of supporting local authorities with the development of their children's workforce. However, the difficulties that lie with this approach are in ensuring that the participants' needs are met. Alternative approaches that focus on more individualised support (e.g. using video feedback and coaching with individuals) have been successful and positively evaluated (e.g. Ahsam *et al.*, 2006). Although this approach is more intensive and demands a higher degree of practitioner-trainer interaction, it may have a much greater impact on behaviour as a result. Therefore, policy makers need to consider the relative effectiveness of CPD approaches compared to the quality and cost of the experience.

8.6 Conclusion

This case-study evaluation has produced a range of outcomes with respect to the value of the pilot programme for 'Communicating Matters' in a large local authority. It has highlighted a number of areas where training could be considered to have been effective and identified where changes to the programme and future professional development opportunities might be considered.

Practitioners' that attended the training could be considered to have improved their knowledge about language and communication in young children. This included having a better understanding of and ability to identify children that are following a different pathway to acquiring language and communication and where English was an additional language. Further research in this area is required to establish the extent to which knowledge is maintained over time as a consequence of attending training.

The ability of participants to understand how adult behaviour can influence the way in which children communicate was improved through the programme. Many practitioners were able to identify changes that they might make to their own behaviour including, for example, leaving more time for children to respond in conversations and considering the questions they ask more carefully. They were also more likely to reflect on their practice with respect to changes to the setting in which they worked, including developing story-telling and providing more opportunities for children to talk with each other and initiate and develop conversations with less adult intervention.

The findings suggested that the training made relatively high demands on the participants, such that in all but one of the programme sites the number of sessions was reduced (and content condensed). The feedback highlighted the importance of practitioners needing to be fully aware of the commitment they are making before enrolling on a training programme and the need to be able to offer a range of flexible programmes to meet different practitioner needs. Training pathways appear to be developing on a national level, but need to be tailored to account for the local context.

The use of the findings of the evaluation has been limited for a number of contextual factors primarily related to pragmatic decisions about the future delivery of training. As Scriven (2005) so aptly identifies; evaluations can be examined by the stakeholders and other individuals involved with a programme, but they will not be the only source of information that is used to inform decisions on about a programme. Often decisions about a programme's future are made for much more practical reasons which can be frustrating to evaluators but a necessity to those who are responsible for delivery.

There are a number of areas that have been identified where further research is needed including:

- The need to determine whether behaviour change actually occurred when participants were back in their settings and whether such changes were maintained over time.

- The comparison of different approaches to programme delivery, for example comparing delivery by specialist teams (with particular expertise in the area of

language and communication) to delivery by local teams (who are in regular contact with practitioners). The extent to which behaviour change might occur as a result of the different models would need to be examined.

- Investigation of how practitioners perceive follow-up activities related to CPD activities, the barriers to completion of activities and ways to support practitioner engagement.

- Examination of how the 'Communicating Matters' programme compares to other programmes with similar aims but with different methods of delivery.

- Investigation into how different agencies can be most effectively engaged in programme implementation and delivery.

- Development of more comprehensive and consistent pathways of CPD for early years practitioners with better information about the experiences available.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Letter to participants

Dear participant,

As part of the 'Communicating Matters' project, the team involved are keen to evaluate the training programme. It is important for the project group to gather feedback about how helpful you found the training and how you used the ideas.

I am also intending to use the project evaluation as part of my doctoral research at Southampton University and so will receive copies of the evaluations. These will be treated confidentially and individuals will not be identified in the work. I am happy to provide more information about the research and feedback to participants if you are interested.

If you do not want you evaluation to be used in the research project, please will you inform your trainer.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you in advance for your involvement in this project.

Best wishes

Kirsty Ward

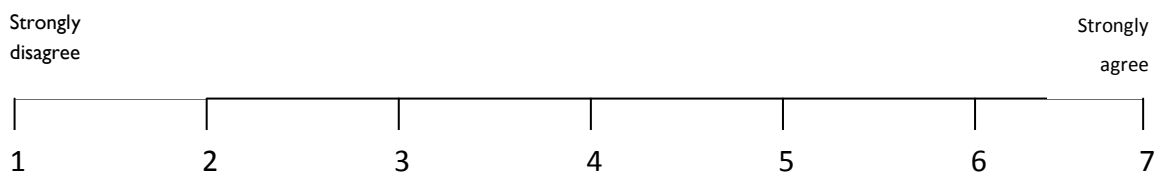Acting Senior Educational Psychologist (Early Years)

Appendix 2: Module 1 pre- and post-training ratings

Please complete at the start of Day1

To what extent do you agree or disagree with these statements about your own practice and children in the foundation stage (please circle a number)

1).   I have a good understanding of young children's language and communication development.

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

2).   Children's conversations are better when the adult plans the activity

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

3).   A child is likely to use about the same amount of talk at home as they do in their early years setting.

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

4).   I know the best ways to talk to children so that I get the most talk from them.

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

5). Using lots of questions is a good way to encourage children's language.

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

6). In conversations with children, it is best to try to 'fill in the gaps', rather than leave long pauses.

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

7). I know about ways to encourage children to tell their own stories

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

8). Adults need to 'take the lead' in conversations to encourage language development

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

Communicating Matters Module 1 Evaluation

Please complete at the end of Day 2

To what extent do you agree or disagree with these statements about your own practice and children in the foundation stage (please circle a number)

1).   I have a good understanding of young children's language and communication development.

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

2).   Children's conversations are better when the adult plans the activity

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

3).   A child is likely to use about the same amount of talk at home as they do in their early years setting.

Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

4).   I know the best ways to talk to children so that I get the most talk from them.

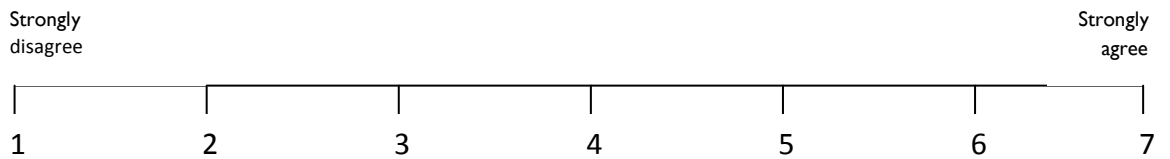Strongly disagree   Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

5). Using lots of questions is a good way to encourage children's language.

Strongly disagree | | | | | | | Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7
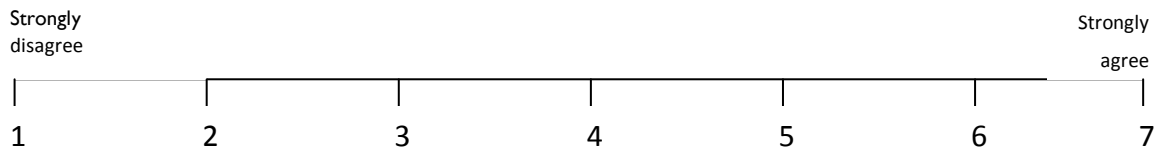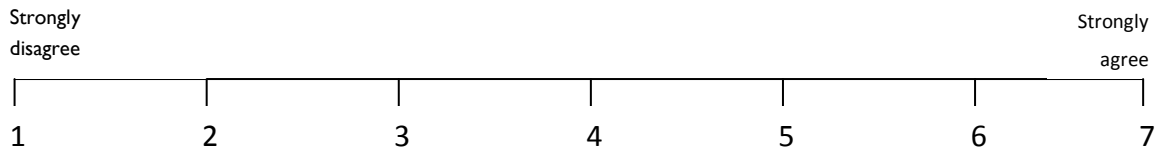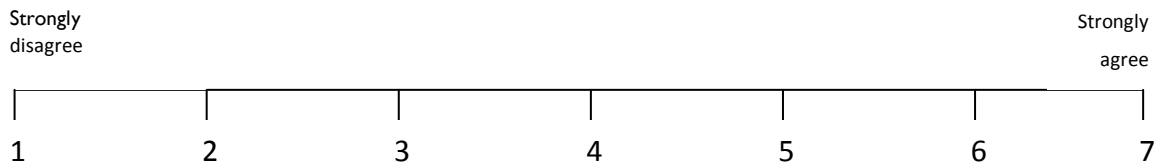
6). In conversations with children, it is best to try to 'fill in the gaps', rather than leave long pauses.

Strongly disagree | | | | | | | Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

7). I know about ways to encourage children to tell their own stories

Strongly disagree | | | | | | | Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

8). Adults need to 'take the lead' in conversations to encourage language development

Strongly disagree | | | | | | | Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

Appendix 3: Module 1 post-training feedback questionnaire

Communicating Matters Module 1 Evaluation

Feedback about the training sessions

How relevant was the training to your current role? (please circle)

Not at
all relevant

Very
relevant

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

How would you rate the overall content of the training? (please circle)

Not at
all good

Very
good

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

How easily will you be able put in place the ideas from the training? (please circle)

Not at
all easily

Very
easily

1   2   3   4   5   6   7
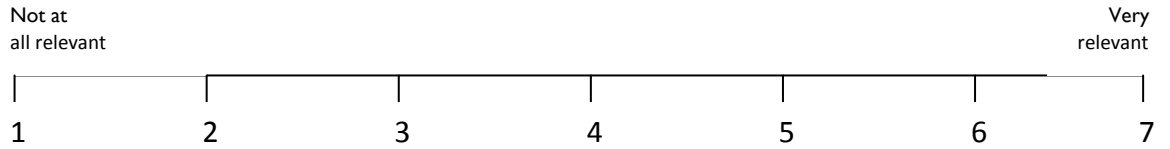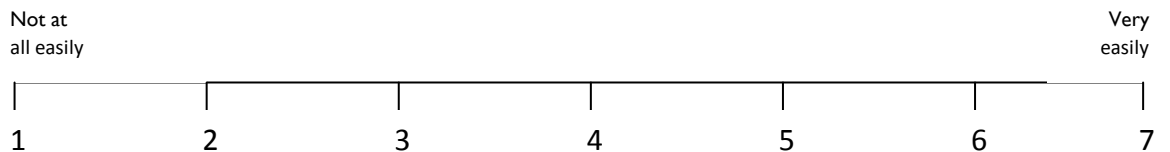
What were the most useful aspects of the training?

What changes to your practice will you make as a result of the training?

Do you have any improvement suggestions for future training?

Appendix 4: Module 2 activity

Module 2

Focus 8 Activity

3. What might the potential difficulties or barriers to implementing changes?	
1. How might I change my language behaviour in the future?	2. Is there anything else that I might change about my language behaviour (as a result of the discussion)?

Appendix 5: Module 2 post-training feedback questionnaire
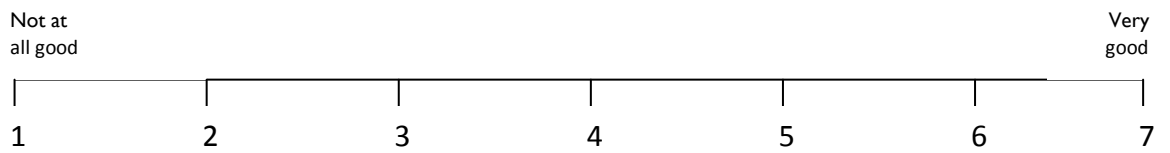
Feedback about the training sessions

How relevant was the training to your current role? (please circle)

Not at
all relevant

Very
relevant

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

1 would you rate 2 overall content o 3 training? (plea 4 cle)

Not at
all good

Very
good

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

1 easily will you k 2 e put in place t 3 eas from the tra 4 ? (please circle

Not at
all easily

Very
easily

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

were the most ul aspects of th ning?

Do you have any improvement suggestions for future training?

Appendix 6: Module 3 pre- and post-training ratings

Communicating Matters Module 3 Evaluation

Please complete at the beginning of module 3

1). I feel confident at recognising children who may be experiencing delays / difficulties with communication and language development

Strongly disagree | | | | | | | Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

2). I know about ways to support children who may be experiencing delays / difficulties with communication and language development

Strongly disagree | | | | | | | Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7
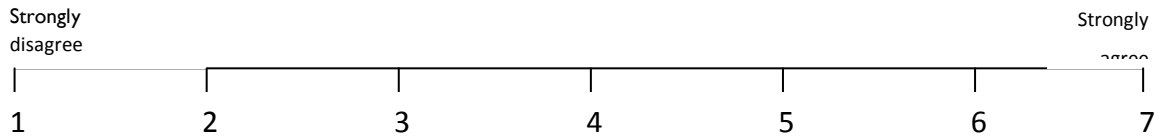
3). What strategies (if any) have you used to support children who have delays / difficulties with communication and language development?

4). I know about ways to support children whose first language is not English

Strongly disagree | | | | | | | Strongly agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

5). What strategies (if any) have you used to support children whose first language is not English?

Communicating Matters Module 3 Evaluation

Please complete at the end of module 3

1).   I feel confident at recognising children who may be experiencing delays /
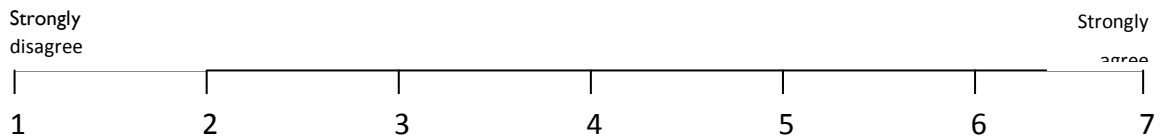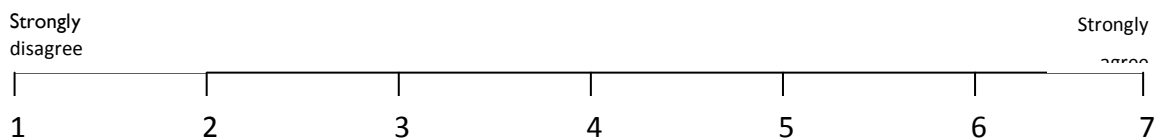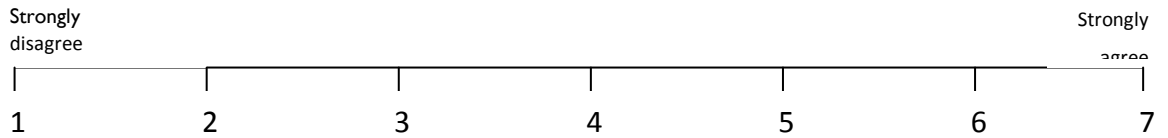   difficulties with communication and language development

Strongly   Strongly
disagree   agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

2).   I know about ways to support children who may be experiencing delays /
       difficulties with communication and language development

Strongly   Strongly
disagree   agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7
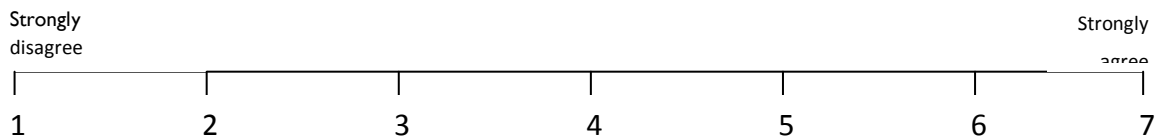
3).   What strategies would you now use to support children who have delays /
       difficulties with communication and language development in your setting?

4).   I feel confident about how to support children whose first language is not
English

Strongly   Strongly
disagree   agree

1   2   3   4   5   6   7
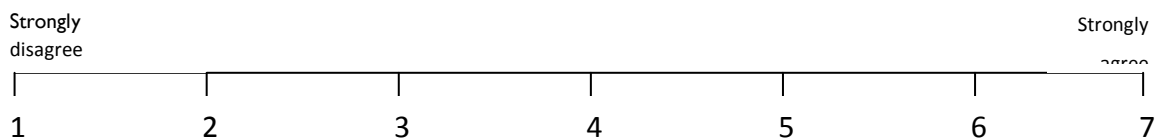
5).   What strategies would you now use to support children whose first language is
       not English in your setting?

Appendix 7: Module 3 post-training feedback questionnaire

Feedback about the training sessions

How relevant was the training to your current role? (please circle)

Not at
all relevant
Very
relevant

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

How would you rate the overall content of the training? (please circle)

Not at
all good
Very
good

1   2   3   4   5   6   7

How easily will you be able put in place the ideas from the training? (please circle)

Not at
all easily
Very
easily

1   2   3   4   5   6   7
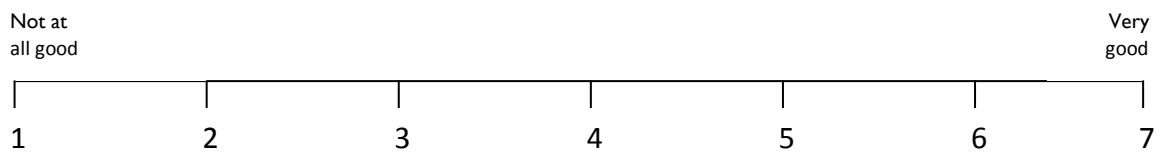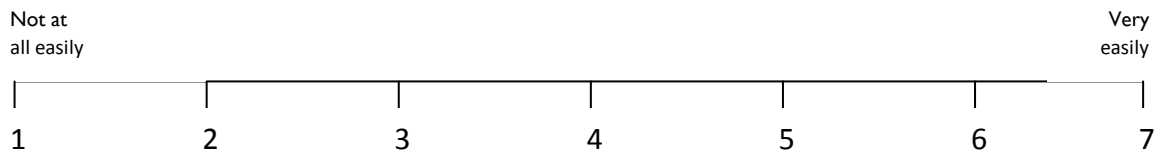
What were the most useful aspects of the training?

Do you have any improvement suggestions for future training?

Appendix 8: Schedule for interviews with trainers

Interview Questions/Prompts

How did you go about preparing/planning the training?

Notes: in terms of using the materials, allocating trainers etc... whether there were any difficulties at this stage.

What do you think the participants were expecting from the training?

Notes: what happened when participants arrived and how did they respond to the content?

What aspects of the training were the most successful?

Notes: from the trainer's perspective, which elements did they feel that participants gained the most from.

Were there aspects of the training that could be improved?

Notes: from the trainer's perspective, what would trainers have done differently if they were running the sessions again?

Have you seen any evidence of the impact of the training in settings?

Notes: have trainers seen any of the strategies being put into practice

Are there any other issues that the trainer would like to raise?

Appendix 9: Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for normality for module 1 statement ratings

Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov(a)			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	Df	Sig.
St1Pre	.312	26	.000	.779	26	.000
St1Post	.329	26	.000	.815	26	.000
St2Pre	.165	26	.065	.922	26	.051
St2Post	.196	26	.012	.906	26	.021
St3Pre	.314	26	.000	.833	26	.001
St3Post	.229	26	.001	.889	26	.009
St4Pre	.277	26	.000	.848	26	.001
St4Post	.284	26	.000	.828	26	.001
St5Pre	.192	26	.014	.923	26	.053
St5Post	.346	26	.000	.792	26	.000
St6Pre	.255	26	.000	.890	26	.009
St6Post	.356	26	.000	.637	26	.000
St7Pre	.243	26	.000	.762	26	.000
St7Post	.316	26	.000	.811	26	.000
St8Pre	.251	26	.000	.883	26	.007
St8Post	.320	26	.000	.771	26	.000

a Lilliefors Significance Correction

Appendix 10: Wilcoxon signed-rank analysis for module 1 statement ratings

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

Ranks

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
St1Post - St1Pre	Negative Ranks	2(a)	9.50	19.00
	Positive Ranks	20(b)	11.70	234.00
	Ties	4(c)		
	Total	26		
St2Post - St2Pre	Negative Ranks	14(d)	9.86	138.00
	Positive Ranks	5(e)	10.40	52.00
	Ties	7(f)		
	Total	26		
St3Post - St3Pre	Negative Ranks	11(g)	6.68	73.50
	Positive Ranks	3(h)	10.50	31.50
	Ties	12(i)		
	Total	26		
St4Post - St4Pre	Negative Ranks	3(j)	12.83	38.50
	Positive Ranks	17(k)	10.09	171.50
	Ties	6(l)		
	Total	26		
St5Post - St5Pre	Negative Ranks	24(m)	12.50	300.00
	Positive Ranks	0(n)	.00	.00
	Ties	2(o)		
	Total	26		
St6Post - St6Pre	Negative Ranks	17(p)	9.79	166.50
	Positive Ranks	1(q)	4.50	4.50
	Ties	8(r)		
	Total	26		
St7Post - St7Pre	Negative Ranks	2(s)	7.50	15.00
	Positive Ranks	18(t)	10.83	195.00
	Ties	6(u)		
	Total	26		
St8Post - St8Pre	Negative Ranks	20(v)	11.28	225.50
	Positive Ranks	1(w)	5.50	5.50
	Ties	5(x)		
	Total	26		

a St1Post < St1Pre
b St1Post > St1Pre
c St1Post = St1Pre
d St2Post < St2Pre
e St2Post > St2Pre
f St2Post = St2Pre
g St3Post < St3Pre
h St3Post > St3Pre
i St3Post = St3Pre
j St4Post < St4Pre
k St4Post > St4Pre
l St4Post = St4Pre

m St5Post < St5Pre
n St5Post > St5Pre
o St5Post = St5Pre
p St6Post < St6Pre
q St6Post > St6Pre
r St6Post = St6Pre
s St7Post < St7Pre
t St7Post > St7Pre
u St7Post = St7Pre
v St8Post < St8Pre
w St8Post > St8Pre
x St8Post = St8Pre

Test Statistics(c)

	St1Post - St1Pre	St2Post - St2Pre	St3Post - St3Pre	St4Post - St4Pre	St5Post - St5Pre	St6Post - St6Pre	St7Post - St7Pre	St8Post - St8Pre
Z	-3.738(a)	-1.864(b)	-1.377(b)	-2.723(a)	-4.339(b)	-3.588(b)	-3.504(a)	-3.899(b)
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.062	.169	.006	.000	.000	.000	.000

a Based on negative ranks.
b Based on positive ranks.
c Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

Appendix 11: Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for normality for module 3 statement ratings

Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov(a)			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Regognise1	.199	20	.037	.909	20	.062
Recognise2	.355	20	.000	.790	20	.001
Delay1	.312	20	.000	.788	20	.001
Delay2	.389	20	.000	.688	20	.000
EAL1	.176	20	.107	.926	20	.128
EAL2	.302	20	.000	.832	20	.003

a Lilliefors Significance Correction

Appendix 12: Wilcoxon signed-rank analysis for module 1 statement ratings

Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

Ranks

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Recognise2 - Regognise1	Negative Ranks	2(a)	6.50	13.00
	Positive Ranks	12(b)	7.67	92.00
	Ties	6(c)		
	Total	20		
Delay2 - Delay1	Negative Ranks	0(d)	.00	.00
	Positive Ranks	15(e)	8.00	120.00
	Ties	5(f)		
	Total	20		
EAL2 - EAL1	Negative Ranks	0(g)	.00	.00
	Positive Ranks	16(h)	8.50	136.00
	Ties	4(i)		
	Total	20		

a Recognise2 < Recognise1
b Recognise2 > Regognise1
c Recognise2 = Regognise1
d Delay2 < Delay1
e Delay2 > Delay1
f Delay2 = Delay1
g EAL2 < EAL1
h EAL2 > EAL1
i EAL2 = EAL1

Test Statistics(b)

	Recognise2 - Regognise1	Delay2 - Delay1	EAL2 - EAL1
Z	-2.676(a)	-3.578(a)	-3.624(a)
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.007	.000	.000

a Based on negative ranks.
b Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test