

Manor Park talks

A children's centre in London has been working with its families, the local community and other providers to address language delays linked to social disadvantage. *Julian Grenier* shares strategies

ICAN, the children's communication charity, estimates that up to half of all children in socially disadvantaged areas start school with delayed language. It is a worrying figure. But worrying will not help, so at Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre, in Newham, east London, we wanted to stop and think about what this finding might mean and, even more importantly, what we could do with the community and families to make a difference.

Sadly, it is common to abuse statistics like those from ICAN and find fault with parents or sections of the community. In December 2013, *Daily Telegraph* columnist Allison Pearson scorned the idea that child poverty had anything to do with children's development, saying that instead it was 'poverty of being parked in front of the telly instead of having a bedtime story'.

However, our experience in the Manor Park area of Newham is that facing the multiple disadvantages of poverty and poor housing can leave some parents exhausted and highly stressed. Many parents put all their energy into getting through one day at a time – but they still want the very best for their children.

So the real issue is how professionals in children's centres and early years settings can give parents support and ideas in a positive, friendly and blame-free way.

VOCABULARY AND LATER LEARNING

There is little doubt that early communication matters. If young children are not able to communicate well, it is very hard for them to manage their feelings or put across their ideas. Although a lot of important early learning is about exploration and physical movement, a great deal comes through language too. In a free-flow nursery environment, children can easily distort their curriculum, choosing to play on their own or

to do a lot of running, climbing and bike-riding to avoid the language-based learning that they find difficult.

Research by Sue Roulstone and others, published by the Department for Education in 2011, states that 'children's understanding and use of vocabulary... at two years is very strongly associated with their performance on entering primary school.' Whiles terms like 'performance' do not feel very friendly to the more holistic ways of seeing children in the early years, the point is still important. Unless we can help chil-



dren with their language development when they are young, they may find later learning in school a very difficult and unhappy experience.

As a children's centre, we realised that we needed to work with families across our community, together with all the other local settings and child-minders, if we wanted to make a difference. So we brought together staff from all the local schools, private and community nurseries and the child-minders in our network, and together we developed a project that was eventually called 'Manor Park Talks'.

This was not about 'sharing best practice'; instead, we wanted to recognise that all of us needed to learn more about how to help the children we were working with. The best way to do that was by working together



Left to right: 'mini me' cut outs let children position themselves in small-world play; 'All About Me' boxes spark conversations about children's interests; resources such as frogs and rhymes support talk

and learning together in a network. We also wanted to work with the parents and the community, and reject the idea that there was something wrong with the families, or that we were offering a kind of 'rescue' to the children.

NETWORKED LEARNING

Many courses are based on training practitioners to follow a particular programme or set of techniques. This can be useful – but it runs against much of what we hold dear in early years education: that learning should principally be specific, local and build on people's strengths and interests. So we worked with an early communication expert, Judith Stevens, whose approach combined these things.



a wonderful moment at home when 'Libby came in very excited, saying, "Mummy, Mummy I need to fill my box." She then rushed upstairs and began frantically looking for objects to put in it. We soon had so much that you needed to sit on the box to make it close! There was then lots of discussion about which objects were most suitable. She then shared her exciting news to her brother and daddy and anyone else who came to the house for the next few days.'

Mini me

The majority of the schools and settings made a 'mini me' for each child, a laminated photograph of the child's face, or whole body, stuck onto a solid block. With a 'mini me', a child can introduce themselves into a small-world play scene. We encouraged children to make up dialogue between their 'mini me' and the other small-world toys, like wild animals.

There were also successful family workshops where we created props for children to play with for favourite stories, and in one school older pupils from Year 5 made story boxes for children in the nursery class.

Throughout the project, we concentrated on working collaboratively with parents, and making sure that the practice we developed was compatible with a principled approach to play-based early education.

BENEFIT TO THE CHILDREN

During the year, the assessment information we collected at the children's centre indicated that the proportion of children at risk of language delay reduced significantly, from 50 per cent to approximately 25 per cent. So, from a social justice point of view, children's educational chances when they started Reception were more equal than they had been when they started nursery.

However, we recognise that such statistics can be questioned for accuracy and robustness. For example, the assessments on entry do not necessarily reflect the children's overall competencies, because many would still have been settling in. Although we

MORE INFORMATION

- ICAN, www.ican.org.uk
- *Investigating the Role of Language in Children's Early Educational Outcomes* by Sue Roulstone, James Law, Robert Rush, Judy Clegg and Tim Peters, www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/181549/DFE-RR134.pdf

used information from parents alongside our own observations, there was scope for error. All the same, because the data was consistent with the positive responses of children, parents and practitioners, the project can fairly be judged a success.

DEVELOPING THE PROJECT

There was such a positive response to the project that we decided to put together a 40-page publication, summarising the practice we had developed and what we had learned from each other, illustrated with lots of practical examples as well as detailing the theories behind the work. The book, our first ever publication, is introduced by Professor Tina Bruce and is now available to a wider readership through the national organisation Early Education.

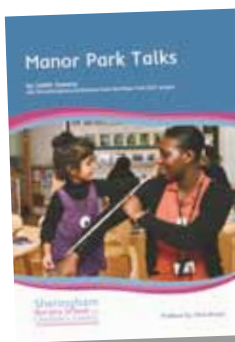
We also celebrated our successes through a conference at the end of 2013, where many of the practitioners showcased their work through short presentations and displays. The conference was opened by Sue Gregory, then Ofsted's director of early childhood, who gave delegates a powerful reminder of how children in poverty can grow up to be poor learners in school if they do not have the support of an effective children's centre and high-quality early education.

As a children's centre, we have made savings in some areas of our work in order to invest more money into our network, so that we continue to improve the quality of early years education in Manor Park, and to promote parent engagement.

The great Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe made famous the African proverb that 'it takes a village to raise a child'; we have endeavoured to work in that spirit in Manor Park. ■

Dr Julian Grenier is headteacher of Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre

MANOR PARK TALKS



Manor Park Talks by Judith Stevens and the early years practitioners from the Manor Park ECaT Project is available from Early Education for £10 including postage and packing. Visit www.early-education.org.uk or telephone 020 7539 5400