

Interactions matter: Improving the quality of educator-child interactions

Background

The quality of educators' interactions with young children in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings matter. Research demonstrates the positive impact that quality adult-child interactions have on young children's learning and development, especially children experiencing disadvantage. Recent population data (Australian Early Development Census) highlights that 1 in 5 young Australian children are developmentally vulnerable in 1 or more domains, and this increases to almost 1 in 2 children in very remote areas. ECEC educators are key to ensuring these children start school on an equal par with their peers. Embedding evidence-based teaching strategies that place priority on language rich interactions in daily early childhood education programs is key to maximising young children's developmental outcomes and addressing gaps in learning in the years prior to preschool and school.

Evidence-based teaching strategies are adult-child interactions that have been proven through research to have a positive impact on young children's development. The *Abecedarian Approach Australia (3a)* teaching strategies referred to in this article have been demonstrated in high quality longitudinal research to have long lasting and large impacts on young children's developmental outcomes. The Abecedarian Approach consists of clear, straightforward teaching strategies that can be learnt by educators with varying degrees of education qualifications. When educators use these strategies as they were intended in ECEC educational programs, they can have a positive and long-lasting impact on the children they teach.

Aims

Research literature highlights the challenges of bringing about lasting change in educator practice and suggests that sustained changes must be supported by changes to educators' attitudes, knowledge and beliefs. In the Victorian Advancing Early Learning (VAEL) study we wanted to address this by using evidence-based teaching strategies to inform shifts in educators' knowledge, practices and beliefs.

Specifically, we aimed to test if a professional learning program could improve the quality of educator-child interactions in early childhood education and care settings.

Key findings

We tracked the quality of educator-child interactions by examining the levels of emotional, organisational and instructional support within classroom interactions. This was measured using the CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System), which measures 'room-level' evidence of the quality of interactions. The Toddler version of CLASS (ages 15-36 months) consists of two domains - *Emotional and Behavioural Support* and *Engaged Support for Learning*. The Pre-K CLASS (ages 3-6 years) consists of three domains - *Emotional Support*, *Classroom Organization*, and *Instructional Support*. Time sampling was also used to capture the type of talk used during interactions.

The professional learning program was found to increase the level of emotional and behavioural support, as well as engaged support for learning in Toddler programs. This was more strongly evident where the management and Educational Leadership group were engaged with the study goals.

In the Pre-K (3-5-year-old) programs there was improvement in the levels of emotional, organisational and instructional support provided to children across the year (see Figure 1). This was more evident in programs that had a more stable staff complement and engagement from leadership and management.

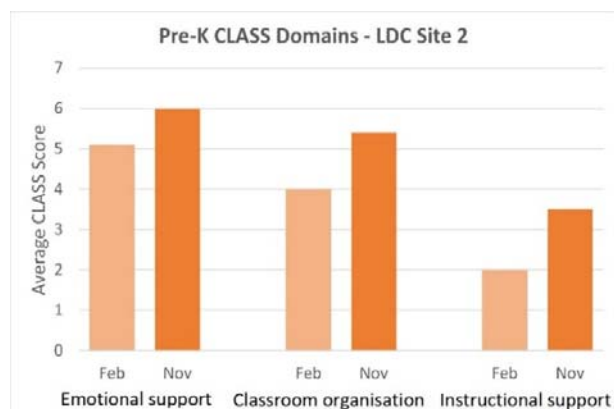


Figure 1: Comparison of Pre-K CLASS scores at beginning and end of program implementation

Implications

For policy and practice

Multi-component professional learning advances the quality of ECEC educators' interactions with young children and improves young children's developmental outcomes.

In the VAEL study the multi-component professional learning that supported practice change consisted of training, external expert coaching and Educational Leader coaching.

With effective support from service directors and approved providers, educators can implement and embed evidence-based teaching strategies in daily interactions in ECEC educational programs and improve the quality of young children's learning.

The combination of training, external expert coaching support and Educational Leader coaching in the workplace over a sustained period of time can support educators to improve the quality of their teaching interactions with children of all ages. Sustained improvement is supported by threshold conditions that ensure proper time and support is provided to Educational Leaders and educators to enact this work over a sustained period of time.

For research

There is value in identifying the key factors that improve the quality of educator-child interactions over time in Australian ECEC settings.

Future research is needed to establish how individual components of a multi-component professional learning program can influence improvement in educators' pedagogical practices.

Study details

The VAEL study included a pilot and a main study. This brief focuses on the main study which began in January 2015 and was conducted in a long-day care facility with two different service providers (referred to as LDC site 1 (2015) and LDC site 2 (2016) in Melbourne, Victoria. The professional learning program was developed to support educators to implement a sustained approach to embedding *3a* strategies in their educational programs and with children. The intervention was delivered over 12 months. The professional learning program was facilitated over a block of four days at the end of January. Two refresher sessions were held in

June and July and a final session held in November. Regular coaching was provided to support implementation of evidence-based teaching and learning strategies in the professional learning sessions.

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About us

The Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood (REEaCh) Hub was established in 2018 with funding from the Leaper Foundation. Our purpose is to make a sustained impact upon the lives of young Australians through advancing the quality of early learning experiences for all children. The REEaCh Hub works to translate research findings into real-life solutions so that all young children can realize their potential. For further information refer to: <https://education.unimelb.edu.au/REEaCh>