

# Proof of concept

In part 3 of this series, **Gemma Goldenberg** discovers what evidence-based practice looks like at a research school

**S**heringham Nursery School and Children's Centre is located in Newham, East London, where 70 per cent of residents are ethnic minorities. The majority of children joining the nursery, which has 210 children on roll, are learning English as a second language. Levels of deprivation in Newham are also high, with half of children living in poverty. Dr Julian Grenier, head teacher, explains, 'Although it's a community that is very disadvantaged in many ways, it also has a lot of strengths and belief in its children and young people, and we benefit from that hugely.'

Sheringham runs a children's

centre and since 2019 also leads the East London Research School, funded by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). The research school supports settings to use evidence to improve teaching, with the ultimate aim of tackling inequalities. Although the children's starting points are often low, 'by the end of Key Stage 2, a disadvantaged child who is eligible for free school meals [FSM] and has gone to Sheringham nursery and primary school is doing better than average,' Grenier says. 'So there isn't any disadvantage gap. That's what the stakes are. If we don't work as hard as we can here, then children who are eligible for FSM fall behind and that's an aspect of educational inequality that we shouldn't accept.'

Part of Grenier's philosophy, as a research school leader, is to embed often university-led research into practice in a way which works in context. 'We see evidence-informed practice as a coming together of the best research evidence with people's professional knowledge, experience and understanding of the children and the community they're working with,' he says.

## GOOD CPD

Sheringham has used the EEF's report on effective continuous professional development (CPD) to think about how best to develop nursery practitioners. The report suggests that effective CPD should be based on trusted, evidence-based sources and use key mechanisms such as revising prior learning, modelling, and embedding practice through action planning and repetition. Sheringham aims to help settings to explore and critique

**Dr Julian Grenier says early years settings should be careful about how they assess what is working and what isn't**



high-quality research, practice techniques and coaching approaches to unpick problems, and maintain a focus on effective implementation.

'It's important that professional development programmes are sustained. Normally for at least 20 weeks, some of it is in big chunks like a whole day, but lots in smaller chunks like twilight briefings or team support where practitioners are observing each other. There's got to be that sustained focus because it's very difficult to change practice on the ground,' Grenier says.

## EVALUATING APPROACHES

So how is the sector doing as a whole on this? 'We're often quite swayed because someone is influential, or they've written good books or they deliver a really good conference,' Grenier's says, 'but I don't think that's the best way for us to make decisions. Far too often we adopt programmes or approaches that haven't been thoroughly tested, and that way we can end up using a lot of time and effort doing things that don't benefit the children.'

According to Grenier, that is why the work of the EEF is so important. 'There's a misconception that the EEF has a sole focus on randomised controlled trials as examples of evidence-informed practice, but most of their guidance, [such the Early Years Toolkit], is based on systematic

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## SHERINGHAM NURSERY FACTS

- Sheringham is an inclusive maintained nursery school, rated Outstanding by Ofsted in 2018
- The nursery offers 200 free part-time places for children aged two, three and four as well as some full day places for three to fours with working parents
- Sheringham also runs the Manor Park Community Children's Centre and East London Research School
- Dr Julian Grenier, head teacher of Sheringham Nursery School + CC is a National Leader of Education. He was awarded a CBE in 2022 and authored *Development Matters* for the DfE



reviews and meta-analysis of high-quality, robust research. The EEF also has the resources to trial and evaluate promising new evidence-based practice,' Grenier says.

Unlike early years settings and schools, Grenier says the EEF has the funding and capacity to run research that is necessary 'to find out to the best possible extent whether new ways of working with children are effective or not'. This is crucial, given a lot of projects and interventions don't work any better than everyday high-quality early years practice, he says. 'It's really unethical to spend large amounts of money on things that don't work.'

### HOW TO IMPLEMENT?

A common mistake, says Grenier, is

trying to 'change too many things all at the same time'. He explains, 'People get involved in lots of different CPD programmes. We're saying we need to focus on fewer things but in much greater depth.'

He also suggests settings be careful in how they assess whether something is working well. 'We're really, really cautious about just making a qualitative evaluation of whether something has worked or not, because we know that that's so subject to observer bias. And we are really cautious about comparing assessment information between one group of children and another because those cohorts of children are likely to have very different characteristics and prior experiences. So it's not really a robust comparison.'



### FURTHER INFORMATION

- Harmey S, Ang L and Grenier J (2022). 'A participatory approach to embedding evidence in practice to support early language and communication in a London nursery school', *London Review of Education*, 20(1). DOI: 10.14324/LRE.20.1.31
- Manor Park Talks, <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/manor-park-talks>
- Newham Communication Project, <https://researchschool.org.uk/eastlondon/news/newham-communication-project>
- The ShREC approach, <https://bit.ly/3RUXW0t>

### IMPACT

Stacia Traille, the parent of a three-year-old girl at the nursery, says, 'My little one is a really good talker, but certain sounds and words she doesn't pronounce really well.'

'Every week there's a focus on a specific book and the staff will record the story. They'll read it aloud at a slow pace to show parents how to do it at home, pause so children have time to look at the pictures, and give you tips on how to get your child involved, ask them "what do you think is happening?" and things like that.'

Working together to implement research-informed approaches has also had a positive impact on staff morale, according to Grenier. 'It creates a really powerful sense of togetherness in the team – everyone's got a really strong sense of what it is that we're all about and what our priority is. And I think that creates a lot of satisfaction for people in their work.'

How far are nursery practitioners encouraged to explore their own research interests, as at Pen Green (see the previous article in this series), or is the emphasis on specific approaches at Sheringham? Grenier says, 'On the one hand, you always have to make intelligent adaptations to any programme you're running because each cohort of children and each group of staff presents its own unique challenges, so we do advocate that idea of responding to the needs of a particular group of children. But people just sort of going off and doing their own thing, that would go counter to our ethos, which is about taking the most robust research and evidence that's available and putting it into practice to make that crucial difference to children's life chances.' ■

## the Manor Park Talks and Newham Communication research projects

Manor Park Talks was led by Sheringham Nursery School and based on the Every Child a Talker (ECAT) programme, a course about supporting children with early language difficulties.

ECAT had not been rigorously evaluated before and settings were implementing it inconsistently. EEF funded a pilot study in 2019 where Sheringham partnered with UCL Institute of Education to update the ECAT manual and explore how it could be implemented in Newham.

The pilot involved eight nursery settings in Newham. It found that ECAT was daunting for practitioners and so the programme was refined to focus specifically on conversational responsiveness. This became the Manor Park Talks programme.

The pilot concluded that Manor Park Talks had been successful, building staff confidence, increasing conversations between children and staff and helping shy children respond well to the conversational responsiveness

techniques used, and was suitable to be implemented across Newham. This later evolved into the Newham Communication Project run by East London Research School for nurseries in Newham. Communication strategies were categorised as the 'ShREC approach': Share attention, Respond, Expand and have a Conversation. Project recommendations included that adults should comment more and question less, and give children more time to think.