

Keynote Address *presented by* Professor Julie Dockrell

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Supporting oral language skills in early years: Challenges and opportunities

Abstract:



There is substantial evidence indicating that strong oracy skills are the foundation for learning, achieving and social communication at school. Yet many children around the world enter school with poor oral language skills. Addressing their needs in preschool settings becomes an important and achievable goal and one which raises many challenges for policy and practice. Challenges are evident both in terms of identifying children's language learning trajectories, understanding the knowledge and expertise of practitioners and the limited resources for evidence informed universal/tier 1 oral language support.

To explore some of these issues I will draw on data from our current ongoing random controlled trial in 40 nursery settings in areas of social disadvantage in England. Our intervention aims to support language development for all children by empowering staff to enhance the children's oral language – a universal intervention. In the current project over 800 children were assessed on language and cognitive measures, 40 classes were observed and staff completed an online questionnaire prior to schools being randomised into intervention or business as usual arms of the trial. The manualised intervention drew on but significantly developed *Talking Time* © (Dockrell, Stuart, & King, 2010) to provide more explicit CPD activities to ensure sensitivity with the diversity and needs of the varied nursery settings.

Challenges with implementation of the intervention and the needs of the children provide a strong basis for informing oracy practice in the early years and guidelines for the development of policies more widely.