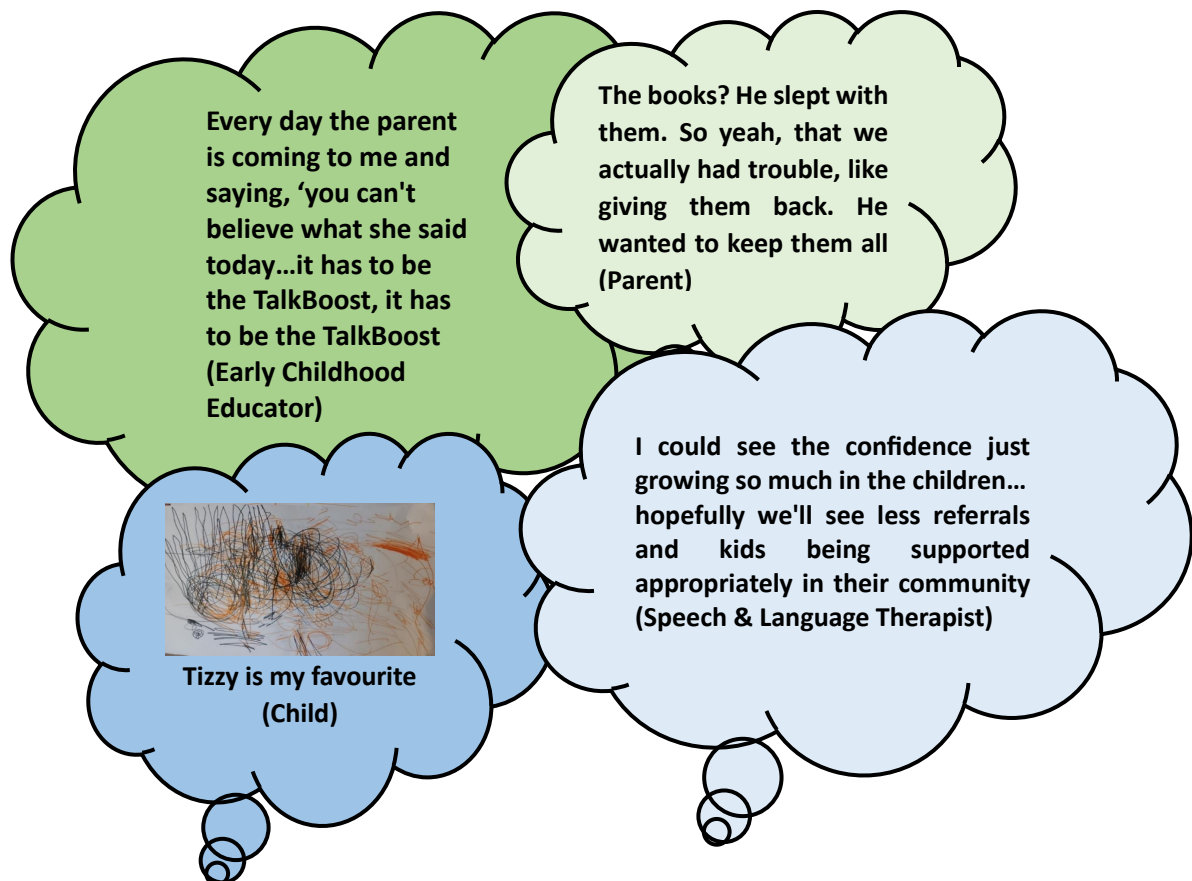




The Early Talk Boost Scaling Up Project Independent Evaluation Final Report



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Glossary of Terms

ABC	Area Based Childhood
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
EAL	English as an Additional Language
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ETB	Early Talk Boost
EPM	Equal Participation Model
IASLT	Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists
PPFS	Prevention, Partnership and Family Support
MIC	Mary Immaculate College
MIREC	Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
RCSI	Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SLD	Speech and Language Difficulties
SLT	Speech and Language Therapy
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
UK	United Kingdom
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Section 1. Introduction, Context and Rationale

Early Talkboost (ETB) is a nine-week early intervention initiative targeted at children between three and four years old with delayed language development. Developed by Speech and Language UK (a UK-based Community Charity), this programme supports children's attention and listening, developing vocabulary, building sentences, and having conversations. Throughout the programme, educators share the Jake and Tizzy books¹ with parents, encouraging them to use them at home with their child. To date, ETB has been implemented in England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

In Ireland, the Area Based Childhood (ABC) programme, established in 2013, is a prevention and early intervention programme for children aged birth to six years, and their families. The purpose is to improve outcomes for children and families living in twelve areas of significant socio-economic disadvantage: Ballyfermot, Ballymun, Bray, Clondalkin, Dublin Docklands, Dublin 5 and Dublin 17 (one area), Dundalk and Drogheda (one area), Finglas, Grange Gorman, Knocknaheeny, Limerick, the Midlands and Tallaght West (Hickey, O'Riordan, Huggins and Beatty, 2018).

As part of the national Prevention, Partnership and Family Support Programme (PPFS), TUSLA (The Child and Family Agency) assumed responsibility for the ABC Programme in September 2019. Through Prevention and Early Intervention approaches, the ABC Programme works in partnership with families, practitioners, communities, and national stakeholders to deliver better outcomes for children and families living in areas where poverty is most deeply entrenched. Its stated aims are to improve health, educational and social outcomes for children and their families by reducing child poverty and ensuring that children get the best start in life. ABC seeks to achieve these aims through evidence-based programmes, which have been proven to achieve positive results for parents and children. Early Talk Boost is one such programme.

ETB has been running for several years in the ABC sites in Limerick and Ballyfermot, and more recently, the wider areas covered by the ABC programme. In 2023, the Tusla National Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme scaled up evidence-based community-based

language support across several new areas, engaging clusters of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) settings and Primary Care Speech and Language therapists (SLTs) in the delivery of the ETB programme. Prevention Partnership and Family Support Tusla, commissioned a research team from Mary Immaculate College to undertake an independent outcomes-based evaluation of the ETB Scaling Up Project in ECCE clusters, nationally.

Importance of Language Development in Early Childhood

According to Reilly and McKean (2023), language development supports and sets the pace for both formal and informal learning, contributing to children's ability to manage emotions and communicate feelings, establish relationships, and think symbolically (Law, Charlton and Asmussen, 2017). Early language skills – listening, understanding words, speaking, and building vocabulary – are the vital foundation that enable children to learn to read (Feldman, 2019). Accordingly, when young children face challenges in language acquisition, they are more likely to struggle with learning to read when they start school, with the poorest children being most at risk of falling behind from an early age (ibid.). Speech and language difficulties in early childhood, therefore, can have lasting consequences for children's social and emotional development and their educational achievement (Chow, Ekholm and Coleman, 2018; Law et al., 2017; St Clair, Pickles et al., 2011). These difficulties may extend into adulthood (Finnegan, Telfer and Warren, 2015) affecting mental health (Hancock, Northcott, Hobson and Clarke, 2023; Lanbecker, Snoswell, Smith et al., 2020), and occupational status (Durkin et al., 2011; Schoon et al., 2010).

Feldman (2019, p.2) suggests that most children “acquire the fundamentals of language effortlessly in the toddler - preschool years, without formal instruction or explicit feedback”.

By age 5, they have a vocabulary of thousands of words; create sentences with complex grammatical features; differentiate literal from non-literal meanings, such as humour or metaphor; observe the social conventions of conversation; and apply language skills in the service of learning to read (ibid., 2019, p.2)

While learning language is an effortless process for most children, it can be challenging for others (Feldman, 2019; McKean and Reilly, 2023; Reilly and McKean, 2023). Noting that variation in the rate and efficiency of language development is substantial, Feldman (2019) indicates that 16% approx. of children experience delays in the initial phases of language learning, with half of these children showing persistent difficulties.

In the main, children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds have more limited language skills than their more advantaged peers (Locke, Ginsborg and Peers, 2002), a difference that may emerge as early as 18 months (Fernald, Marchman, and Weisleder, 2013), and persist across the lifespan (Reilly and McKean, 2023). Moreover, socio-economically disadvantaged populations experience a disproportionate number of speech and language difficulties (SLDs), which often means that economic barriers inhibit access to appropriate support services (Law, Levickis, McKean et al., 2017; Maggi, Irwin, Siddiqi, and Hertzman, 2010).

Archer, Cregan, McGough and Sheil (2012) suggest prioritising oral language for young children in early childhood and school settings. Indeed, Cregan notes that oral language is the child's "first, most important, and most frequently used structured medium of communication...[and]...the primary means through which, each individual child will be enabled to structure, to elevate, to describe and to control his/her experience" (1998, p.7). Additionally, "most significantly, oral language is the primary mediator of culture, the way in which children locate themselves in the world and define themselves with it and within in" (Ibid., p.7). Simply put, oral language is central to communicating, permeating every aspect of a child's development, including, social and emotional development, academic achievement, and even their employment attainment. Therefore, if SLD continues to persist into adulthood, the effects may be profound.

Environmental Factors Affecting Children's Language Acquisition

While the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and delayed or poor language acquisition is well established, other factors, such as gender and bi-lingualism may also play a role. Some studies suggest that girls out-perform boys in language development from an early age (e.g., Adani and Capanec, 2019; Bando, Lopez-Boo, Fernald et al., 2024). For instance, Adani and Capanec (2019) suggest that almost all developmental disorders affecting communication, speech, and language skills, are more frequent in boys. Based on their examination of gender disparities in early childhood development, including language, across nine countries on three continents, Bando et al., (2024) found that girls aged seven to forty-eight months old, consistently outperform boys on language tests (0.14 standard deviations), with differences consistent across all nine countries. Similarly, Moss and Washbrook (2016) found that more boys than girls have poor early language and attention skills at age five. It

appears that overall, boys have weaker or slower capacities for language acquisition (Adani and Capanec, 2019), and that gender affects language development regardless of social class (Moss and Washbrook, 2016; Bando et al., 2024).

Bi-lingualism may also affect early language development. In 2022, there were 88,630 *foreign national children* in Ireland, of which 20% (n= 17,799) were under 5 years old (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), 2024). Nationalities include Africa, Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Spain and Ukraine (ibid.). These children represent a considerable variety of home languages, and for many, English is an additional language. As noted by Pobal (2022), ECCE settings reflect the increasing diversity of Irish society, further noting that linguistic diversity is one indicator of this trend. Accordingly, 8,060 children with neither English nor Irish as their first language availed of the ECCE programme in 2021.

In their 2017 study of language growth in English monolingual and Spanish-English bilingual children from 30 months to 60 months, Hoff and Ribot found that children from bilingual homes lagged 6 months to 1 year behind monolingual children in English vocabulary growth. The size of the lag was associated with the relative amount of English used in the home (Hoff and Ribot, 2017). Moreover, minority ethnic children from low socio-economic backgrounds and with low exposure to the English language may be particularly vulnerable to early language delay (Hoff, 2013; Cheung, Willan, Dickerson et al., 2023).

In general, however, while bilingual children are not more likely than monolingual children to have difficulties with language, show delays in learning, or be diagnosed with a language disorder (Lugo-Neris, Bedore, and Peña, 2015; Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams, 2013; Paradis, Genesee and Crago, 2010), some will experience a language delay or disorder (Byers-Heinlein et al., 2013).

Increasing Evidence of SLDs in Early Childhood

Drawing upon the longitudinal, nationally representative study of young children in Ireland - *Growing Up in Ireland* - Wright and O'Donoghue (2018) reported on the prevalence of speech and language difficulties at ages 3 and 5, and attendance at Speech and Language Therapy services. They reported that:

- 19% of parents of 3 olds expressed concern about how their child talks and makes speech sounds
- 45% of these children continue to have speech and language delay by age 5
- 8.6% approx. of all 3-year-old-children will have SLD at both age 3 and age 5 years
- 27% of children with persistent SLD between the age of 3 and 5 years had never seen an SLT, while with 31% of these children had not seen an SLT in the last 12 months
- 46% of children with SLD at age 5 had not seen an SLT within the last 12 months, and of those who had, only 55% had seen an SLT more than once (Wright and O’Donoghue, 2018).

Covid-19 may have exacerbated speech and language difficulties for young children. The Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI, 2023), for instance, found that by age two, pandemic babies were behind in their communication skills by comparison to those born pre-pandemic. Montacute and Holt-White (2021) noted parental concerns that young children’s language development was considerably affected by limitations in social interactions during the Pandemic. A report by the children’s communication charity ‘I CAN’ (2021) in the UK, highlighted concerns that an estimated 1.5 million children are being left behind in their language development, with many entering the reception stage of education unable to speak or understand what is being said to them by other people. Similarly, Tracey, Bower-Crane, Bonetti et al., (2022) found that 76% of schools reported that children who started reception in autumn 2020 needed more support than previous cohorts of children. Children especially struggled with communication and language, social and emotional development and literacy (ibid.).

Early Intervention

Many researchers support the importance of early intervention and improvements in access to Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) support (e.g., Lanbecker et al., 2020; McConkey, Swift and Titterington, 2021; McKean and Reilly, 2023; Reilly and McKean, 2023; Wright and O’Donoghue, 2018). Noting the importance of early childhood to communication and language, McKean and Reilly (2023) state that this period provides a short window when “the critical foundations are built to support child language development and provide a platform for children’s future life chances (p.2259). Early intervention then, is critical to boosting young children’s language skills (Finnegan et al., 2015; McKean and Reilly, 2023).

In the Irish context, recent studies state that the provision of speech and language therapy is considered insufficient to meet the needs of children (McConkey et al., 2021; Rafferty, 2014; Wright and O'Donoghue, 2018). Furthermore, the Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists (IASLT, 2017) suggest that SLTs have limited capacity to provide guidance to primary caregivers and teachers as to how they can assist children's speech and language development. According to Rafferty (2014, p. 27), "supports for promoting the development of oral language are best provided in naturally occurring environments and throughout the activities of the child's life at home, preschool and school".

Similarly, Wright and O'Donoghue (2018) argue that to improve access to SLT services, and improve outcomes for children, services must be integrated into pre-schools and schools, ensuring that interventions reach all children who need service (ibid., 2018). In this respect, Feldman (2019) suggests that poverty does not prevent most young children progressing in their language development, provided children and parents get the right support. Accordingly, even though some children do not experience socio-economic disadvantage, they can struggle to develop good language skills (ibid.). Feldman stresses the need to ensure support is available for these children also. Targeting the early years is critical, as it yields the highest return on investment ([Heckman equation](#)). In the words of Conti and Heckman (2012, p. 41), investing in the early years "builds the base that makes later returns possible."

The Early Childhood Care and Education Programme – A Conduit for Early Intervention

The universal Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme is available to all children aged between two years, eight months and five years, six months. It provides children with their first experience of formal early learning prior to commencing primary school (Pobal, 2022). The programme is provided for three hours per day, five days per week, over 38 weeks per year from September to June. Children can avail of the ECCE programme for up to two years. Table 1 provides an overview of ECCE provision and uptake in 2020/2021 the latest year for which data is available.

Table 1: Overview of ECCE Provision and Uptake 2020/21

No. of ECCE services contracted	4,022
Total no. of children benefitting	104,612
No. of children benefitting in year one	58,874
No. of children benefitting in year two	45,738
Total no. of approved contracts	109, 823

Source: Pobal, 2022

Under the [Child Care Act 1991 \(Early Years Services\) Regulations 2016](#), all staff working directly with children in an ECCE setting must hold at least a Level 5 major award in early childhood education and care on the [National Framework of Qualifications](#) (NFQ), or equivalent, as deemed by the DCEDIY. Settings participating in the ECCE programme are required to provide an appropriate pre-school programme, which adheres to the national practice frameworks – [Siolta: the national quality framework](#), and [Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework](#).

Given the focus of Early Talk Boost on children aged between 3 and 4 years old, the universal nature of the ECCE programme, and the age profile of children attending, settings providing this programme are a suitable locus for ETB. In their 2014 review of approaches to oral language development, Rafferty (2014) recommends enhancing the transfer of skills from speech and language therapists to early years educators and schools. In this respect, she states that “the development of core skills of early years educators in promoting oral language development and supporting parents’ role is critical” (p. 31). As explained in the following section, ETB is premised upon supporting early childhood educators to develop core skills in promoting oral language development, while also supporting the parents’ role in this regard.

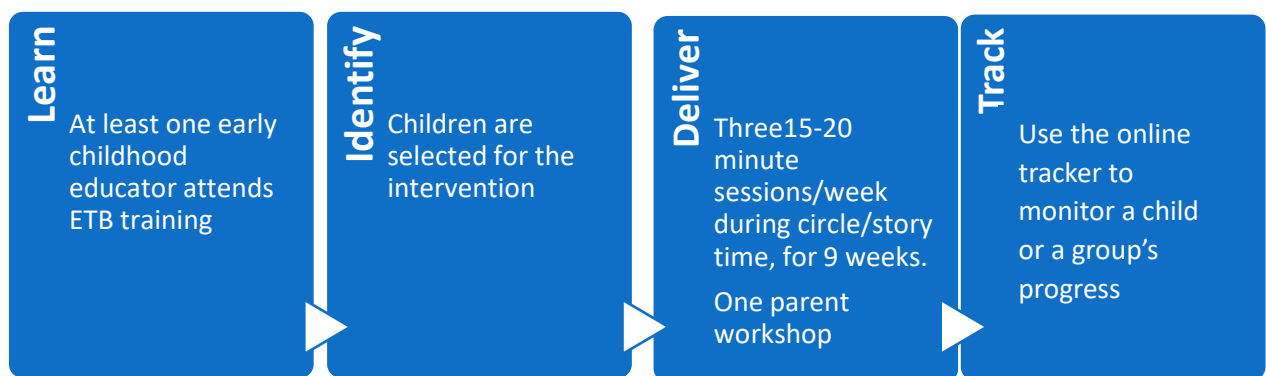
Early Talk Boost

Together with Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs), and with the help of early childhood educators and parents, Speech and Language UK, developed ETB, for use in pre-schools. The intervention was developed using principles from the original language programme, Talk Boost, which has been shown to help children with delayed language in the early years of school (Lee and Pring, 2016). As mentioned, ETB is a nine-week intervention that aims to enhance the language skills of 3-4-year-old children who are behind in their language and

communication, helping them to catch up with their peers (Early Talk Boost, UK, 2016; Bamford, Nancarrow, Huxley et al., 2023).

A core aspect of the ETB intervention involves Early Childhood educators undertaking training with Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) so they can use specialised skills and informed judgement to select the children that would most benefit from Early Talk Boost (Bamford et al., 2023). While this may include children with English as an additional language (EAL), participating children do not have an identified special educational need (see <https://whatworks.gov.ie/hub-search/report/30/Early%20Talk%20Boost>). Educators continue to monitor children's progress using a tailored online tracker (Bamford et al., 2023).

Figure 1: How Early Talk Boost Works in Practice



Source: Adapted from 'I CAN' <https://www.talkingcommunication.co.uk/early-talk-boost/>

As indicated, children selected to participate in ETB attend three 15-20-minute sessions per week (27 workshops over 9 weeks), during circle/story time. Delivered by the early childhood educator, sessions include activities that cover foundational skills in speech, language and communication needed by children for learning and understanding new words, as well as having conversations ([Speech and Language UK](#)). Each session is supported by a range of materials: the ETB programme manual, a planning board, a series of story books and accompanying puppets.



A series of story books, designed and created exclusively for the ETB programme, introduce the characters of Jake and Tizzy, who are used throughout the intervention. The books:

- Reinforce topics covered in the weekly sessions such as learning to listen, big and little, and action words
- Introduce and practise a range of vocabulary
- Focus on language structures required for building sentences.

Regarding the current evaluation, it is important to note that both the early childhood educators, and the SLTs co-delivered the Early Talk Boost programme in the participating settings. As such, SLTs, in addition to delivering training to the educators, attended the participating settings on one-day each week, and delivered the programme directly with the children. SLTs also provided ongoing advice and support to the educators throughout the nine-weeks of the programme. As shown in Figure 2, Early Talk Boost supports children’s attention and listening, developing vocabulary, building sentences and having conversations.

Figure 2: Skills Supported by Early Talk Boost



Skills supported	Weeks
Attention and listening	1 and 2
Developing vocabulary	3 and 4
Building sentences	5 to 8
Having Conversations	9

Through repetition and familiarity, children learn to listen attentively, while learning key words and simple sentence structures. Prior to their child participating in ETB, SLTs facilitate a one-hour parent workshop; to help parents learn some simple strategies they can use to encourage their child’s language development through sharing the story books at home. In the current study, and in keeping with co-delivery of the ETB programme, educators invited parents to attend an information session about the programme in the early childhood setting. Where feasible, a SLT attended these parent information events. Throughout the programme, early childhood settings share the Jake and Tizzy books with parents, encouraging them to use them at home with their child. This approach is intended to enhance the children’s story telling skills. Other skills such as phonological awareness skills are enhanced using songs and nursery rhymes.

Reporting on the effectiveness of ETB in UK-based nurseries, Pring (2015) and Reeves, Hartshorne, Pring et al., (2018) concluded that the intervention had a beneficial effect on participating children. Evaluation shows that children participating in ETB make statistically significant progress in their early language. On average, they make six months progress after the nine-week intervention, helping them catch up with other children their age (Reeves et al., 2018).

Equal Participation Model

As discussed in [Section 2](#), this evaluation explores the applicability of Early Talk Boost as a model of language supports within the [Equal Participation Model](#), “a strategic policy” under development by the DCEDIY. The programme for a partnership Government: *Partnership for the Public Good*, proposes a system of universal supports, as well as the introduction of additional targeted funding (Ireland, 2021). The EPM is the fourth element¹ of the *Together for Better* funding model for early childhood, introduced in September 2022. It will focus on settings dealing with the highest levels of concentrated socio-economic disadvantage (Ireland, 2021; Together for Better, 2023). Provision of funding through the EPM will enable “eligible settings to provide more consistent and higher-quality interactions with children and their families, through for example, lower educator/child ratios; extra training and/or CPD; retaining higher-quality staff, and provision of food” (Moloney, 2023, p. 59). The overarching objective is to address early childhood poverty, and support children’s health, early development and education (Ireland, 2018), thus, addressing socio-economic disadvantage in the context of Early Childhood Care and Education (Moloney, 2023).

Overview of Evaluation Report

The remainder of this evaluation report is set out as follows:

- [Section 2](#) introduces the theoretical framework underpinning the study. It provides an in-depth account of the study design, methodology, data collection strategies, and analysis.
- [Section 3](#), which is the first of five sections that present the findings from the evaluation. It provides insight into the child tracker data, in terms of changes in language and communication scores, the influence of child age, child gender and the influence of English as an additional language.
- [Section 4](#) addresses findings resulting from a meeting between nine children involved in the programme and members of the evaluation team. It demonstrates how participation in the programme supported the young children to find and use their voice, both in the evaluation and most importantly in their everyday lives in their early childhood setting, and their home.
- [Section 5](#) discusses parent/guardian perspectives on the programme. In addition to findings relating to the impact of ETB on children’s language and communication, this

¹ Together for Better brings together three elements: the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (including the Access and Inclusion Model), the National Childcare Scheme and Core Funding.

section provides insight into how the programme enabled parents to utilise a range of strategies to support their child's language and communication during story time.

- [Section 6](#) provides an in-depth account of the educators' perspective of the programme. In addition to discussing gains for children, this section provides insight into how the educators felt about the ETB resources, and how the programme impacted the home environment. It also sets out the professional benefits for educators including increased knowledge and understanding of communication and language in young children, how to support this, and how to identify children for inclusion in the programme.
- [Section 7](#) brings together the findings from two focus groups with Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs), highlighting significant benefits for all stakeholders involved with the programme: children, educators, SLTs themselves, and the home environment. It signifies the potential of the programme to reduce SLT waiting lists, times, and possibly, their caseloads over time.
- [Section 8](#) addresses the barriers to and the enablers of ETB. As discussed, evaluation participants identified very few barriers, and those highlighted did not relate to the programme per se. Rather, they point to broader contextual issues within the early childhood profession, primarily related to staff attrition, changes in personnel and staff absences, which, sometimes impeded programme implementation. The many enablers to implementation feature in this section, including the quality of the programme and resources, positive relationships at multiple levels (between educators and SLTs, parents/guardians and educators, and between children themselves), and overall enthusiasm and commitment from both educators and SLTs.
- [Section 9](#), the final section of the report, presents a series of recommendations for practice, policy, and research. As stressed in this final section, the programme supported many children with a speech and language delay to find their voice, both in the evaluation and most importantly in their everyday lives in their early childhood setting, and their home. We believe that the recommendations are a political imperative, and central to realising positive outcomes for all children in the context of the proposed [Equal Participation Model](#) specifically, and the [ECCE programme](#) and school contexts more broadly.

Section 2. Evaluation

This section, which sets out the study objectives, discusses the theoretical framework underpinning the research, as well as describing the mixed methods research design. It discusses the data collection strategies utilised with all those involved with ETB: children, parents/guardians, early childhood educators, and Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs).

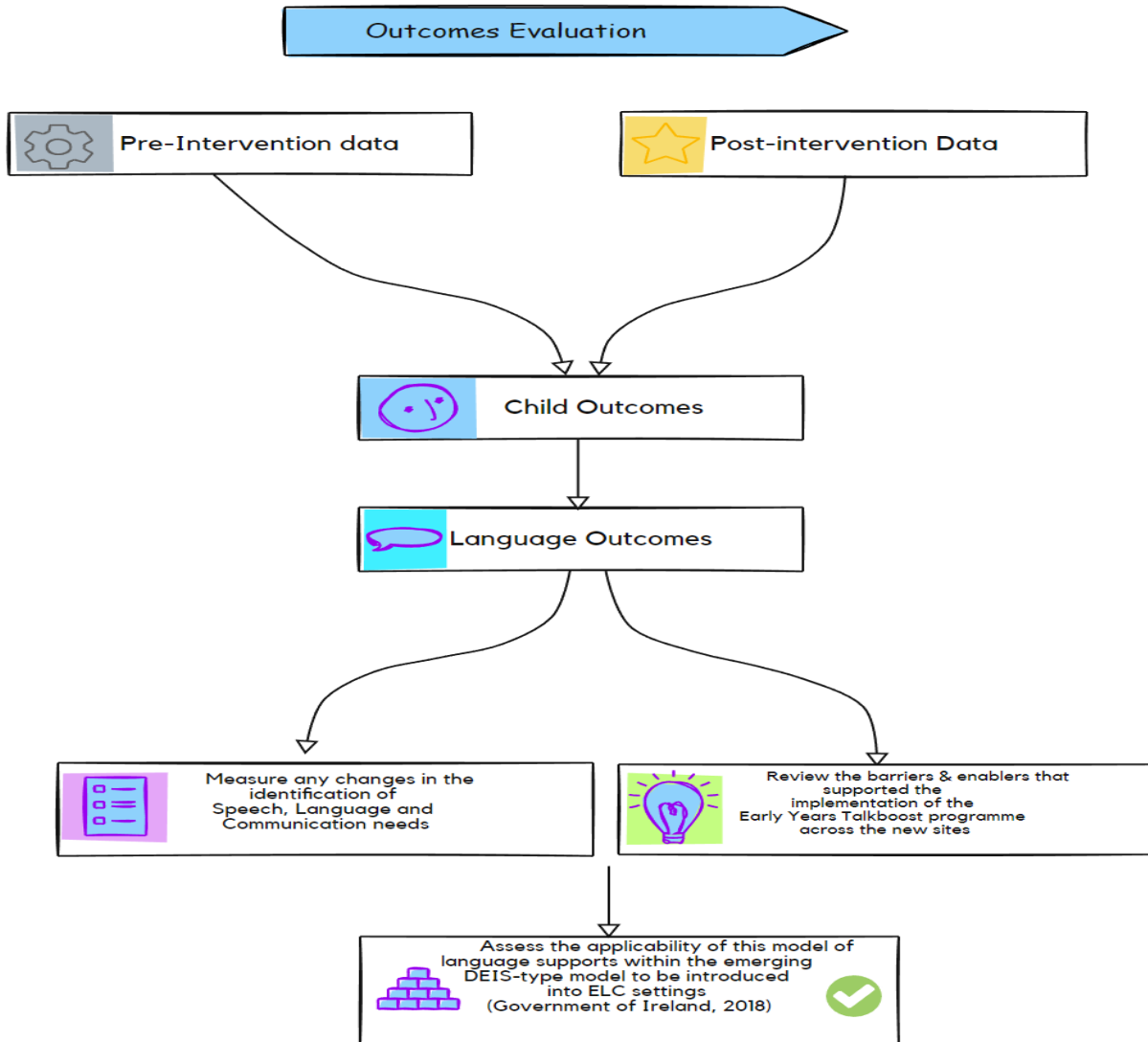
Study Objectives

Using a bioecological framework, this mixed-methods outcomes-based evaluation sought to:

1. Review pre- and post-intervention data, to measure the impact of the intervention on Child Outcomes and Language Outcomes
2. Measure any changes in the identification of Speech, Language and Communication needs
3. Review the barriers and enablers that supported the implementation of ETB across the new sites
4. Assess the applicability of this model of language supports within the emerging Equal Participation Model² proposed within First 5: A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies Young Children and their Families (Ireland, 2018).

² Similar to the DEIS model in the primary school sector

Figure 3: Overview of the Evaluation

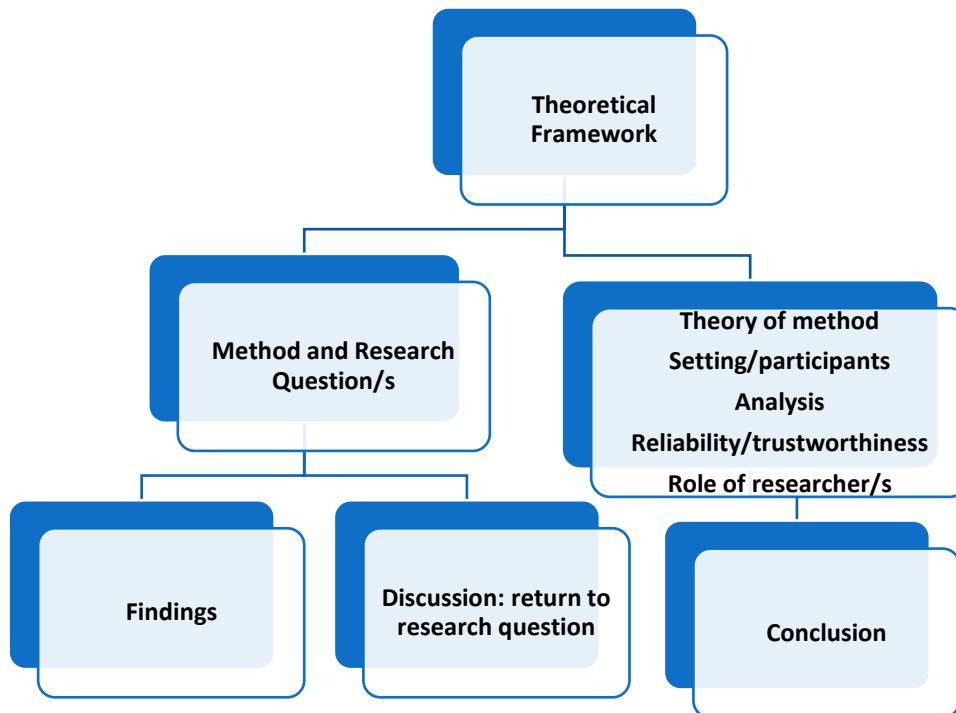


Theoretical Framework

As a mixed methods evaluation, the study involved both quantitative (online tracker data, questionnaires) and qualitative elements (interviews, focus groups, questionnaires) to gain a holistic account of participants' experiences of the Early Talk Boost programme. The qualitative element is underpinned by Bio-ecological Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006), which serves as a framework to guide the study (Anfara and Mertz, 2015). It provides focus to the organisation of the study, connects it to existing scholarship and terms (Collins and Stockton, 2018), helps to determine the methodological

approach, research questions, settings and participants, the researcher/s’ role, data analysis process, and trustworthiness (Ravitch and Carl, 2016).

Figure 4: Relationship between the Theoretical Framework and the Evaluation of ETB

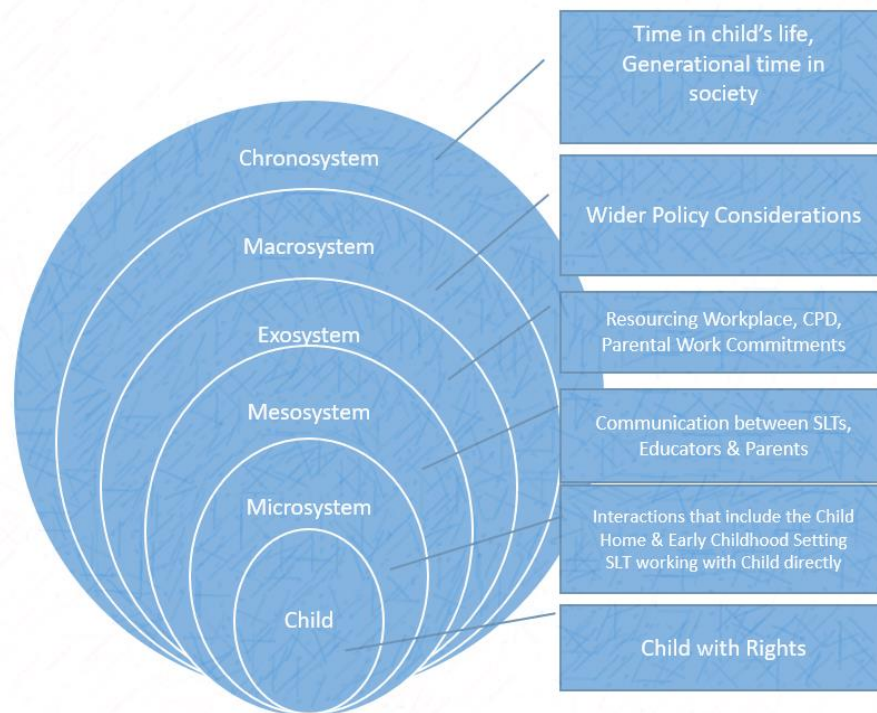


Source: Adapted from Collins and Stockton, 2018.

A critical consideration in the current evaluation is the relationships between all those involved in ETB: Early Childhood Educators, Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs), Parents/guardians, and critically, participating children. Taking these factors into account, and placing the child at the center, bio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994 – see Fig. 5) supported evaluation of interactions between differing systems and levels (Macro - policy, Micro – ECCE setting and home, Meso – interactions between educators and parents, and Exo – supports within the community). While bio-ecological theory acknowledges broader environmental systems as an important contextual influence on development, it focuses primarily upon proximal processes (i.e., the multiple interactions between the child and the adults in their lives, and between the child and the environment in which, they interact daily) (Moloney and McCarthy, 2018). The micro-system, where the child spends most time (e.g., home/early childhood setting) has the greatest influence on their development. Therefore, a child’s interactions with educators, SLTs, parents, and peers in the micro-environment directly

impacts development. For instance, parents and/or educators who read to children, say nursery rhymes and engage them in conversation, may positively influence language development.

Figure 5: The Bioecological Framework



Research Design and Data Collection

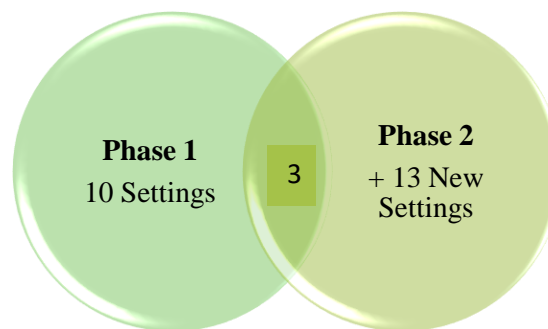
In keeping with the bio-ecological framework, data collection focused upon proximal processes within the micro-environment of the early childhood setting, involving the children participating in the programme, their parents/guardians, speech and language therapists, and the early childhood educators, implementing ETB. Evaluation data was collected between April 2023 and March 2024, involving two data collection phases:

- **Phase 1** - April to June 2023
- **Phase 2** – September 2023 to March 2024

All participating early childhood settings were selected by TUSLA prior to commencement of the evaluation, and all children identified in those settings with a language delay were invited to participate in the programme (i.e., there was no waiting list control group). In total, 23 settings, offering the [Early Childhood Care and Education programme](#) participated in the ETB

scaling up project. Ten settings participated in Phase 1 with 16 settings participating in Phase 2 (i.e., 13 new settings, plus 3 settings³ from Phase 1). As shown in Figure 6, three settings participated in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the programme, involving different child cohorts each time. Of the 23 participating settings, 2 were privately run, with some of the children attending Speech and Language therapy. In both cases, the settings participated in ETB at the request of the SLT.

Figure 6: No. of Setting Participating in Each Data Collection Phase



The 3 settings that participated in both phases, aimed to implement the programme independently in phase 2, with reduced SLT support when compared with the support given for the first run of the programme in phase 1.

Ethics

Prior to commencing the study, ethical approval was sought from, and granted by both the Mary Immaculate College, Research Ethics Committee (MIREC, reference: A23-022; A23-023) and the Tusla Research Ethics Committee. To preserve setting, educator and parent/guardian anonymity when completing online questionnaires, IP addresses were turned off. In this way, information could not be traced back to any individual or setting. Signed informed consent forms were returned to the research team, via email, before data collection began.

³ Four other settings intending to participate in phase 1 and phase 2 were unable to do so, primarily due to staff illness and staff attrition within the setting during the period September to December, 2023

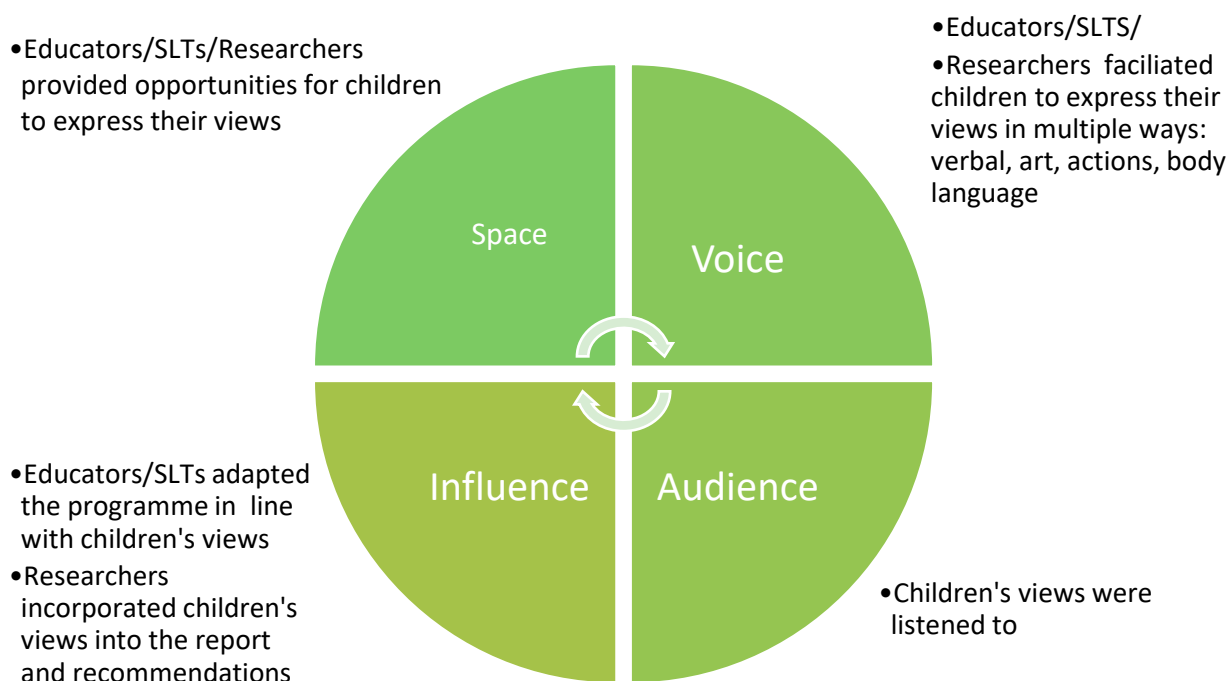
Children's Rights

Early childhood is a critical period for the realisation of children's rights, including their right to express an opinion, and to have their views considered in all matters affecting them (UNCRC, 1989, Article 12). Building upon these participatory rights, Lundy's (2007) model of participation, adopted by the Irish Government (2015), suggests that implementing Article 12 requires consideration of four inter-related concepts:

1. **SPACE:** Children must be given the opportunity to express a view.
2. **VOICE:** Children must be facilitated to express their views.
3. **AUDIENCE:** Their view must be listened to.
4. **INFLUENCE:** Their view must be acted upon.

Therefore, the evaluation draws upon Lundy's (2007) model of participation, to illustrate how, throughout the roll out of the ETB programme, and the evaluation, children's views were sought out, listened to, and acted upon in the present evaluation (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Children's Participatory Rights within the Evaluation



The evaluation team see children as social actors, with the right and the capacity to express their views about their experience of Early Talk Boost, and to have these views listened to and acted upon. While parental consent was sought for children's participation, child friendly information sheets and informed assent forms (using age-appropriate language and visual images including a picture of the researcher/s) were given to children personally by the research team.

Data Collection Strategies and Procedures

In consultation with the Early Talkboost working group⁴, and taking account of the UK Early Talkboost Evaluation (2015), the evaluation team developed a range of data collection tools, comprising both quantitative and qualitative data collection strategies (see Table 2). These included a bespoke anonymous online questionnaire for educators, and parents/guardians, using Microsoft Forms©, an interview schedule for educators and, parents/guardians, and a focus group schedule for SLTs.

⁴ The study was overseen by a working group comprising representatives from Tusla, Speech and Language Therapists, and the Evaluation team.

Table 2: Overview of Data Collection Methods

Participant	Method	Purpose: Gain Insight into
Early Childhood Educator	Bespoke anonymous online questionnaire, administered in week 9 (final week of the programme) 20 completed questionnaires returned = 87% setting response rate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Educators' perspective of the programme - Confidence in identifying children for inclusion in the programme - Confidence in supporting children's language and communication pre and post intervention - Perception of the intervention - Recommending the programme
	Interviews with 8 educators, undertaken within 4 weeks of the programme completion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Educators' experience of the programme - Attitude towards their training and preparation - Perspective on the usefulness of the ETB tracker in determining changes in different aspects of a child's language and communication - Impact of the programme on children's language and communication - Thoughts on the programme overall (what worked well; challenges, if any, recommendations for future implementation)
Parents/Guardians	Bespoke anonymous online questionnaire, administered in week 9 (final week of the programme) 33 completed questionnaires returned	Parent/guardian opinions on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Child's language and communication pre and post intervention - Parent/guardian confidence in supporting child's language and communication - Perception of the programme - Recommending the programme
	Interviews with 6 parents, undertaken within 6 weeks of programme completion	Parent/guardian perspectives about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Their child's involvement in the programme - Impact of the programme on their child - Changes if any, noticed in their child's communication and language skills post intervention - Whether participation increased their child's interest in books or reading - What worked well with the programme in terms of how it was run - Challenges, if any experienced during the intervention in terms of how it was run
Speech and Language Therapists	Focus Group 10 SLTs in Phase 1(undertaken in June 2023) 4 SLTs in Phase 2 (involved in the second roll out, undertaken in February 2024)	SLT views about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The intervention - The training and how it was delivered - How the early childhood setting, educators and children responded to the programme - Suggestions for running the programme in the future
Children	Online Early Talk Boost tracker Pre and post programme data available for 179 children	This assessment of language provided pre and post intervention data relating to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children's auditory (receptive) and expressive abilities - Changes in the identification of speech, language and communication needs
	Informal conversation/drawing with 9 children in one participating early childhood setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Experience of participating in the programme - What they liked/disliked - What they liked best/least - Anything they might like to change about the programme

Child Tracker Data

As indicated in Table 2, pre and post intervention data were collected using an online tracker tool, developed by Speech and Language UK, specifically for ETB. The tracker, which measures children's language and communication in four domains: **Attention and Listening, Understanding, Speaking and Communication**, is based on developmental norms and was benchmarked using the Pre-School Language Scales – 4th Edition (PLS-4) (Zimmerman et al, 2009). As it was developed for use by educators in busy settings, the tracker is simple to use, easy to score and quick to administer (see also Early Talk Boost, 2015, for additional information on the development of the tracker). Under the supervision of a speech and language therapist, educators working directly with the children in the ECCE programme carried out the pre- and post-intervention assessments. The SLTs uploaded the children's assessment scores to I CAN.org.uk. These data were then made available in anonymous format to the MIC evaluation team for analysis.

A first assessment was completed for 191 children, of which 179 children also completed a second assessment. The children were all aged between 3 years old and 5 years old during the running of the programme. There were 112 males and 79 females. The primary language of most children in the programme was English, with 16.8% (n=32) of participating children speaking other primary languages: Arabic, Bengali, French, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish, Romanian and Urdu.

Educator Questionnaire

At the end of the nine-week programme, the evaluation team asked each participating early childhood setting to complete a bespoke anonymous online ETB questionnaire, seeking their perspective on the programme (see Table 2). The link to the online questionnaire was included in the information letter issued to the settings via email. The questionnaire included quantitative questions, Likert scales and several open-ended questions allowing for qualitative commentary on various aspects of the programme.

Cognisant of the ever-changing National policy practice landscape, notably, the increase in the number of educators holding a degree level qualification (Pobal, 2022), and the [Nurturing Skills Workforce Plan](#) (Ireland, 2022), the evaluation sought to determine the qualification

levels of the educators implementing ETB, and also, if there was a relationship between their knowledge and awareness of how to support children's language and communication skills, and qualification levels. At the outset of the questionnaire, educators provided information detailing their highest qualification level (i.e., Level 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 on the [National Framework of Qualifications](#)); and how long they had been working in the early childhood profession.

Educators were then asked:

- ✓ To rate children's overall communication and language skills on completion of the programme, compared to the start of the ETB intervention
- ✓ How children use communication and language. Thirteen examples were listed (e.g., Happy to talk to educators and peers, understands when spoken to, shares a book and talks about it
- ✓ Whether children's communication and language were better; about the same; or worse than, following participation in Early Talk Boost
- ✓ How much they knew about language and communication development before undertaking the ETB training
- ✓ How confident they felt about identifying children with language difficulties before and after the programme
- ✓ How confident they felt about supporting children's language skills before and after the programme
- ✓ How they felt about implementing the programme.

At the end of the questionnaire, educators were invited to self-select into a follow up interview. If interested, they were asked to provide an email address or phone number so that a member of the evaluation team could follow up with them to arrange an interview.

Educator Interview

Interviews with participating educators (n=8) sought to gain deeper insight into their overall experience of implementing the ETB programme in their setting. Depending on the educator's preference, interviews were undertaken either in-person or online via Microsoft Teams⁵ ©.

⁵ All interviews/focus groups were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Interview questions focused on:

- ✓ How educators became aware of the programme
- ✓ How they felt about their training and preparation for implementing the programme
- ✓ Their perspective on the usefulness of the tracker in seeing how different aspects of a child's language and communication changed
- ✓ How the programme impacted children's language and communication
- ✓ Thoughts on the programme, overall.

Parent/Guardian Questionnaire

At the request of the evaluation team, educators disseminated an information letter to parents/guardians of children participating in the programme, inviting them to complete a bespoke anonymous online questionnaire. The information letter included a link to the questionnaire.

As with educators, the parent/guardian questionnaire included quantitative questions, Likert scales and open-ended questions. Likewise, at the end of the questionnaire, parents/guardians were invited to self-select into a follow up interview, and if interested, to provide an email address or phone number so that someone from the evaluation team could get in touch to arrange an interview.

Parent/Guardian Interview

Interviews with parents/guardians (n=7) sought to gain an in-depth account of their overall attitude toward, and experience of the ETB. Questions focused on:

- ✓ How parents/guardian first became aware that Early Talk Boost was being implemented in their child's setting
- ✓ How they felt about their child being involved in the programme
- ✓ How the programme impacted their child
- ✓ Changes, if any, noticed in their child's communication and language skills following involvement in the programme
- ✓ Whether participation in the programme had increased their child's interest in books or reading
- ✓ What worked well with the programme in terms of how it was run
- ✓ Challenges, if any, experienced by parents/guardians during the programme in terms of how it was run.

SLT Focus Groups

Speech and Language therapists (SLTs) from a range of districts including Counties Dublin, Galway, Laois, Limerick, Mayo, North Tipperary, Westmeath, and Wicklow participated in two focus group discussions. 10 SLTs participated in a focus group in phase 1, with 4 SLTs participating in a focus group in a follow up focus group in phase 2. Members of the evaluation team hosted the focus groups online via Microsoft Teams ©.

Using open-ended questions, the focus group sought to determine the SLTs views on the ETB programme, what they felt about the training and how it was delivered, how the early childhood setting, the educators and the children responded to the programme. They were also invited to discuss any challenges they encountered with the programme, and to share any suggestions in relation to running the programme in the future.

Data Collection with Children

The children's experience of participating in the Early Talk Boost programme mattered. Drawing upon the Mosaic Approach (e.g., Clark and Moss, 2001; Clark, 2005), children were invited to draw a picture of what they most liked about the ETB programme and to participate in an informal conversation with the researchers.

The informal conversation was concerned with:

- What children like about Early Talkboost
- What they think of the Jake and Tizzy Books
- What the children might like to change about the programme.

Nine children (3 girls and 6 boys) from one participating setting met with two members of the evaluation team. Of these nine children, one had English as an additional language, one child was on the autism spectrum, and one child had speech dyspraxia. These nine children completed ETB when they were aged between 3.5 and 4 years old approximately. The researchers met the children approximately two months after the programme was completed, by which time, three of the children had turned 4 years of age.

Parents/guardians of all nine children gave their informed consent for their child's participation in the data collection, and all 9 children gave their informed assent to speak with the researchers, to draw pictures of Jake and Tizzy or to have photos taken of their pictures. The

children were informed that the researchers would be telling other people and other boys and girls what they said about Jake and Tizzy and would show other people their drawings. The children were given the option of choosing their own pseudonym for their pictures and these are used where the children specified an alternative name (3 children) or assigned in the reporting of findings where the children did not specify a pseudonym.

The nine children participating in the data collection met with members of the evaluation team in a room separate to other children in the early childhood setting. Their educator advised them in advance that the researchers were coming to meet them. In line with the researchers' s child safeguarding statement, the educator remained in the room with the children and the researchers. The researchers introduced themselves, told the children about what they were doing and why. Conscious of adopting a playful approach, the researchers invited the children to talk to them about Jake and Tizzy and to draw a picture if they wanted to. They also told the children that they did not have to talk to them if they did not want to or draw a picture if they did not want to, and if they wanted to stop at any stage, to tell the researchers.

With children's permission, researchers took contemporaneous notes during the informal conversation, and a copy/photo of their drawing and/or memory book⁶ for possible inclusion in the final research report. At the end of the session, the researchers thanked the children and the educators for their help in taking part in the study. The session lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Data Analysis

Trackers: All outcome data were shared anonymously with the evaluation team by I CAN UK. Upon receipt of the data, further cleaning was undertaken to ensure any potential identifiers were removed. Following this, data were exported to SPSS©, recoded, and where required, new variables computed by the evaluation team. Descriptive statistics were generated for all variables (e.g., age, gender, EAL), and analyses of differences between pre-and post-programme measures were carried out using the appropriate statistical tests.

⁶ Children created memory books while engaging in the Early Talk Boost Programme

Questionnaires: Microsoft Forms © generated descriptive statistics for all closed questions and Likert scales. Prior to analysis, the evaluation team reviewed all 53 questionnaires (33 x parent/guardians and 20 x educators). Data were analysed by respondent type: early childhood educator and parent/guardian. The evaluation team downloaded all completed questionnaires using Microsoft Excel ©, which allowed for inductive analysis of the open-ended qualitative responses.

Qualitative data: Microsoft Teams generated interview/focus group transcripts. Working in pairs, the evaluation team, initially read each transcript for accuracy, cleansing data of any potential identifiers, such as inadvertent use of a setting or child's name. Engaging in a collaborative process, research pairs swapped transcripts. In this way, transcripts were double read. All qualitative data (open-ended questionnaire responses, interview and focus group transcripts) were analysed thematically⁷ using the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). Working in pairs, the evaluation team engaged in an iterative process of reading and re-reading all qualitative data, generating, and agreeing initial codes, consolidating, discarding and/or applying new codes. Following several rounds of coding, the team developed a series of themes. These were then reviewed, defined, and named. To validate themes, the team ensured there was sufficient data to support themes, and that there was no overlap between them. In other words, themes are distinct. These qualitative findings contextualise and triangulate the findings from the different data sets: educator and parent/guardian questionnaires, and interviews, SLT focus groups, and the outcome findings extrapolated from the online tracker data.

Research Reliability and Validity

The evaluation team adopted a rigorous process of triangulation. To this end, the team engaged in a parallel mixed methods data analysis process. Accordingly, the quantitative (online trackers and questionnaires) and qualitative (interviews and focus groups) data sets were analysed separately, and then compared. Comparing analysis across data sets and participants facilitated identification of converging and diverging findings. Alongside this, throughout the data analysis process, the team always considered relevant policy and scholarship, using it to

⁷ Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method. It is an iterative process that involves reading through a data set (e.g., interview/focus group transcripts), and identifying patterns in meaning across the data to derive themes

understand, confirm and contextualise emerging findings. This comprehensive and rigorous approach to data analysis, redressed researcher subjectivity, increasing the reliability and validity, and overall trustworthiness of the evaluation findings.

Section 3. Findings

Findings are presented over the following five sections, beginning with a presentation of pre- and post-intervention data from the online ETB tracker. The subsequent sections present findings from the meeting with the children ([Section 4](#)), findings concerning parent/guardian's experiences and attitudes ([Section 5](#)), and the educator's perspective ([Section 6](#)). [Section 7](#) presents findings relating to the SLT perspectives, while the final section, [Section 8](#), explores the enablers and barriers to implementing the programme.

Child Tracker Findings

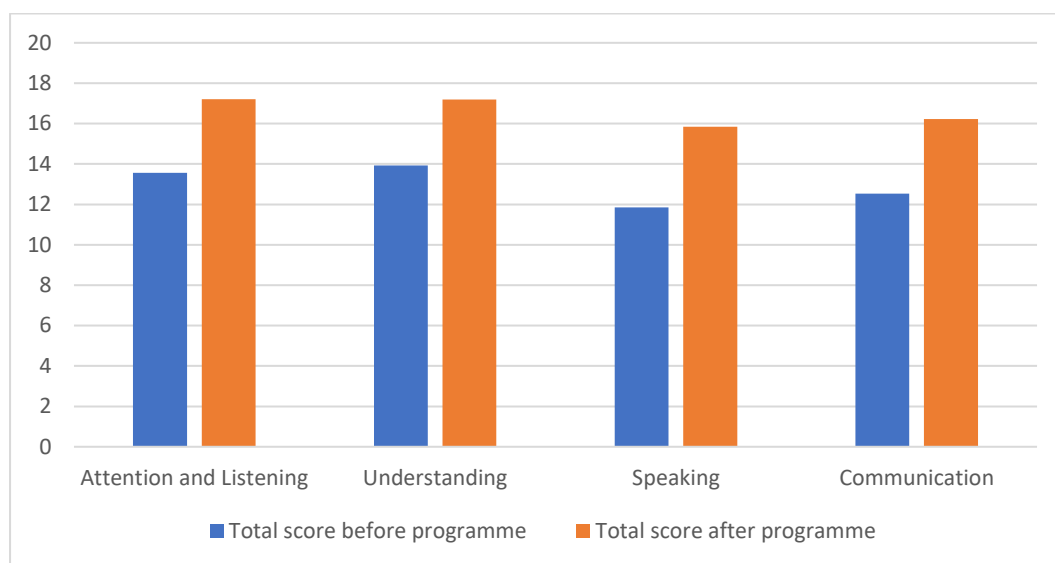
Participants

Prior to beginning the programme, tracker data was gathered for 191 children, comprising 112 boys and 79 girls, who ranged in age from 34 months to 70 months, with an average age of 48.9 months. Of those children, 19% (n=36) were aged 34-42 months, 24% (n=45) were aged 42-48 months, 41% (n=79) were aged 48-54 months, and 16% (n=31) were aged over 54 months. As previously mentioned, for 16.8% of the children (n = 32), English was an additional language. Tracker data was gathered at the end of the programme for 179 children.

Change in Language and Communication Scores

The findings show a statistically significant increase in each of the language areas measured, between the children's score before the programme and after the programme, all p 's < .001.

Figure 8: Average Scores in Different Areas of Language Development



There was also a significant increase in overall language and communication scores (see Figures 9 and 10), $p < .001$. The greatest gains were made by the children who attended the most sessions, with a positive correlation between the number of sessions attended and score increases, $p < .001$.

Figure 9: Distribution of Language & Communication Scores on the Tracker before the Programme

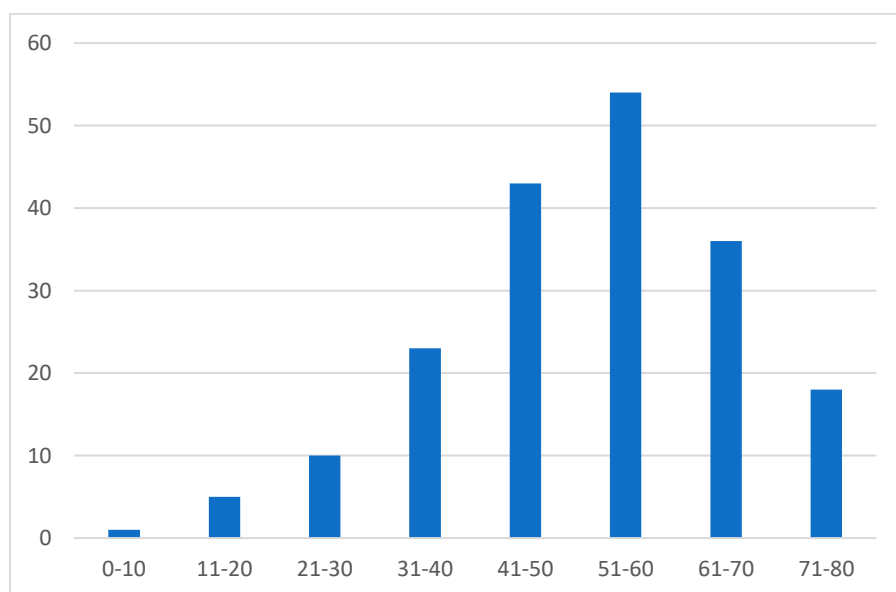
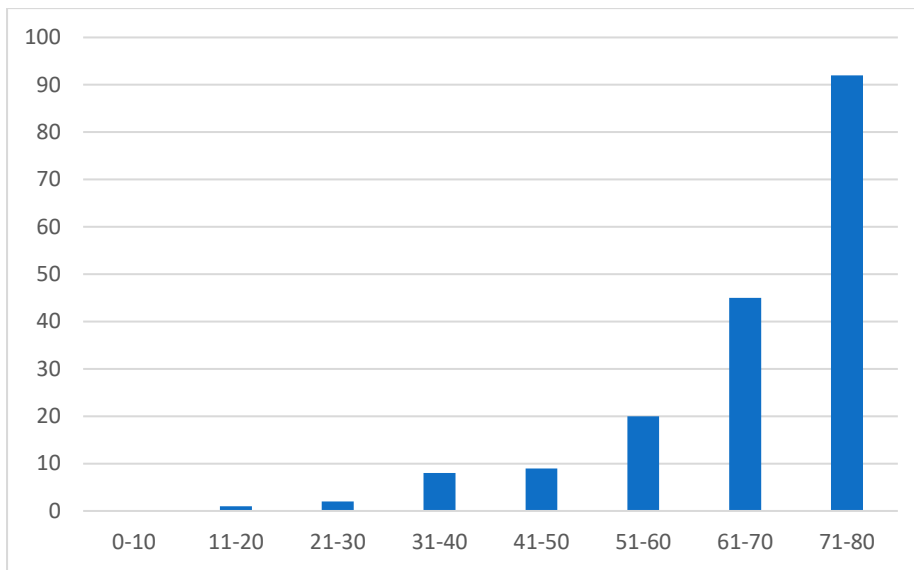


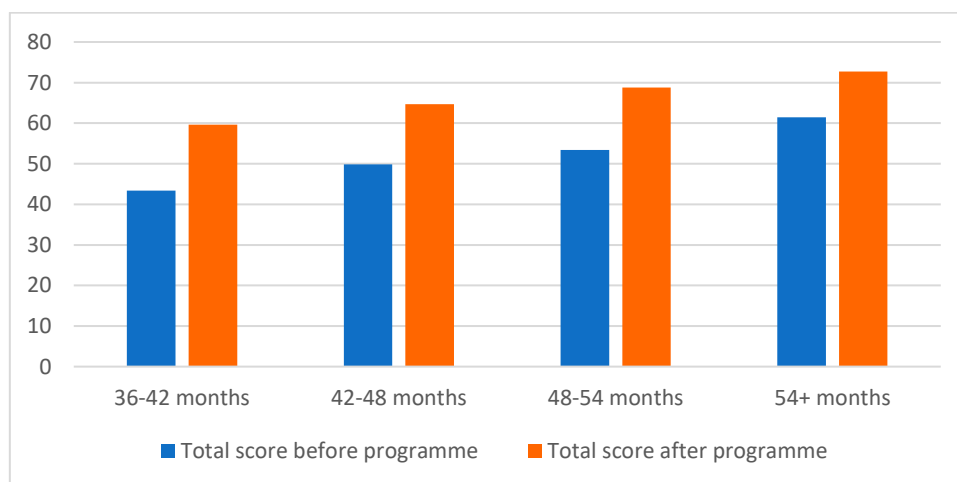
Figure 10: Distribution of Language & Communication Scores on the Tracker after the Programme



Influence of Child Age

Analysing children in different age groups shows that these significant increases were present in each of the age groups, all p 's < .001, with the largest overall gains in the 36-42-month-old age group, and the smallest overall gains in the 54+ month age group (see Figure 11 below). Children participating in the first year of the [Early Childhood Care and Education \(ECCE\) Programme](#) then, had the largest gains. However, all effect sizes were large, all Cohen's d 's > 7.92, suggesting a good effect of the programme, regardless of the age of the child.

Figure 11: Total Language & Communication Scores for Different Age Groups



Depending on the child’s age, their tracker scores may be categorised as:

- working below age expectations (also labelled as a ‘red’ score for ETB)
- working towards age expectations (also labelled as an ‘amber’ score for ETB and the target population that might benefit from ETB)
- working at age expectations (also labelled as a ‘green’ score for ETB). Table 3 below shows before target scores for various ages, before and after the programme.

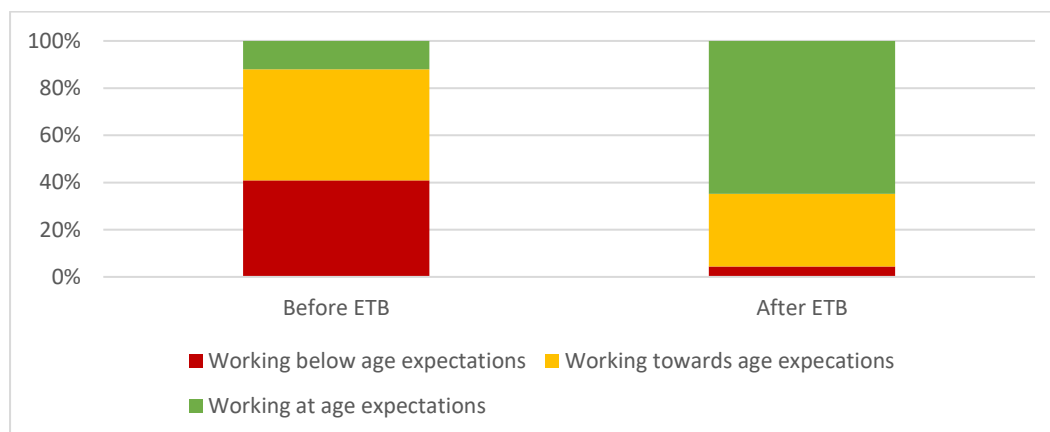
Table 3: Percentage of children in red, amber and green scoring categories on the tracker tool, before & after the programme

Age	Before			After		
	Red	Amber	Green	Red	Amber	Green
3-3.5 years	20	60	20	6	31	63
3.5-4 years	29	64	7	5	50	45
4-4.5 years	58	37	5	16	32	52
4.5 + years*	39	51	10	7	31	62

* Same red, amber and green scoring used for 4.5 + years as for 4-4.5 years

Prior to commencing ETB there were 168 children with a total overall score indicating they were working below age expectations or towards age expectations. Many of these children may have been referred to an SLT for an assessment. After completing the ETB programme this number was reduced to 63 children (see Figure 12 below). This represents a 62.5% reduction in the number of children that may have been referred for an SLT assessment.

Figure 12 Percentage of children Before and After ETB working below, towards or at age Expectations.

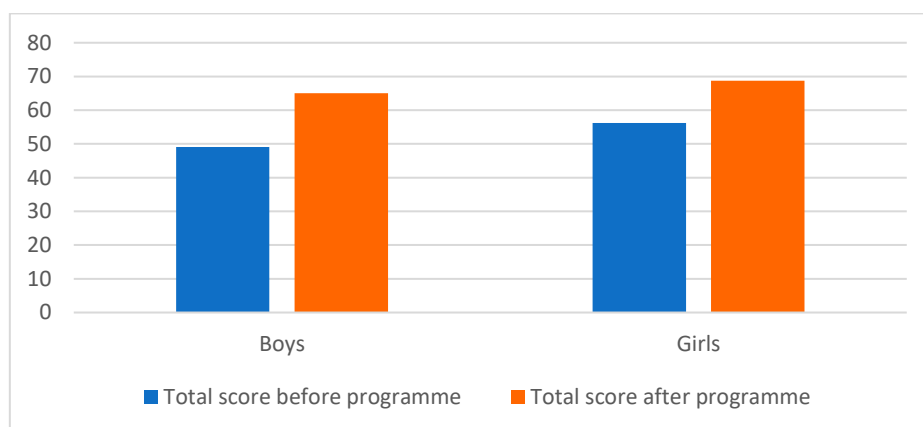


Influence of Child Gender

Boys and girls were also analysed separately to investigate if the programme had a significant positive impact on their language and communication skills, and to identify any differences between them. Before beginning the programme, boys had significantly lower scores in three of the four areas measured (**Attention and Listening, Speaking, Communication**), all p 's < .034. After completing the programme there was only a significant difference in scores in one of the four areas (**Attention and Listening**), $p = .016$. However, as Figure 13 shows both boys and girls benefitted from the programme, with boys making greater gains than girls (a mean increase of 16.25 points for boys, compared with a mean increase of 12.64 points for girls, $p = .012$).

After the programme, there was no significant difference in overall language and communication scores between boys and girls, $p > .05$. It is important to note the findings show that each of the four areas of language and communication skills improved significantly from before the programme to after the programme, for both boys and for girls, all p 's < .001, and all effect sizes were large, all Cohen's d 's > 2.66.

Figure 13: Gender Differences in Total Language & Communication Scores

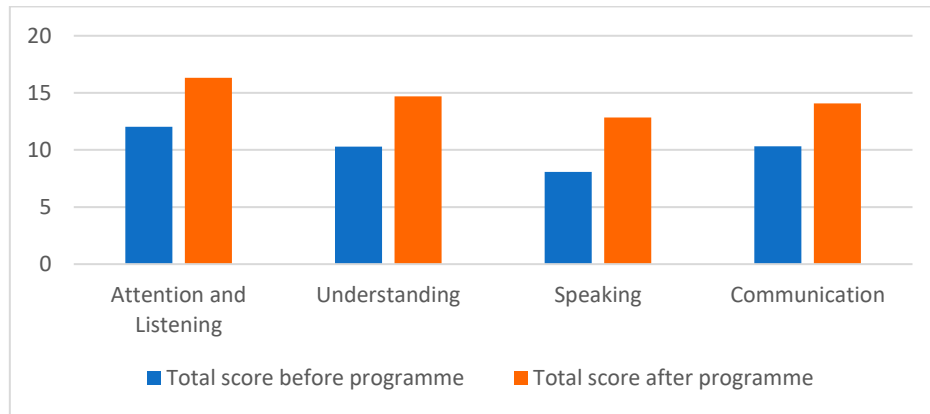


Influence of English as an Additional Language (EAL)

Children with English as an additional language were also analysed separately ($n = 32$) to investigate if the programme had a significant positive impact on their language skills. The findings show that each of the four areas of language skills improved significantly from before the programme to after the programme (see Figure 14), all p 's < .001, like children who did not

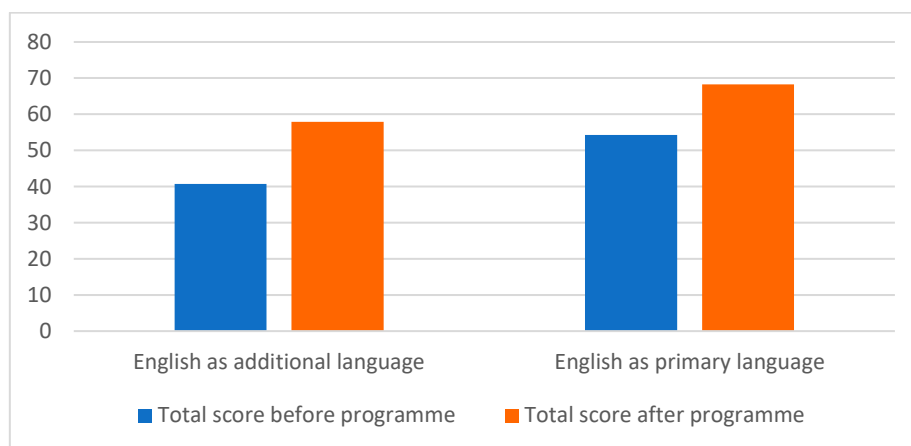
have English as an additional language ($n = 149$), all p 's $< .001$. All effect sizes were large, Cohen's d 's > 2.82 .

Figure 14: Scores in Different Areas of Language Development for Children with EAL



Before beginning the programme, children with EAL had significantly lower scores in all aspects of language and communication measured than the children without EAL, all p 's $< .009$. This was also the case after the programme except for attention and listening skills where there was no significant difference between the two groups, $p = .102$. However, the gains made by children with and without EAL over the course of the programme were similar (see Figure 15 below), except for understanding skills, where children with EAL made a larger gain (4.60 points versus 3.01 points), $p = .006$.

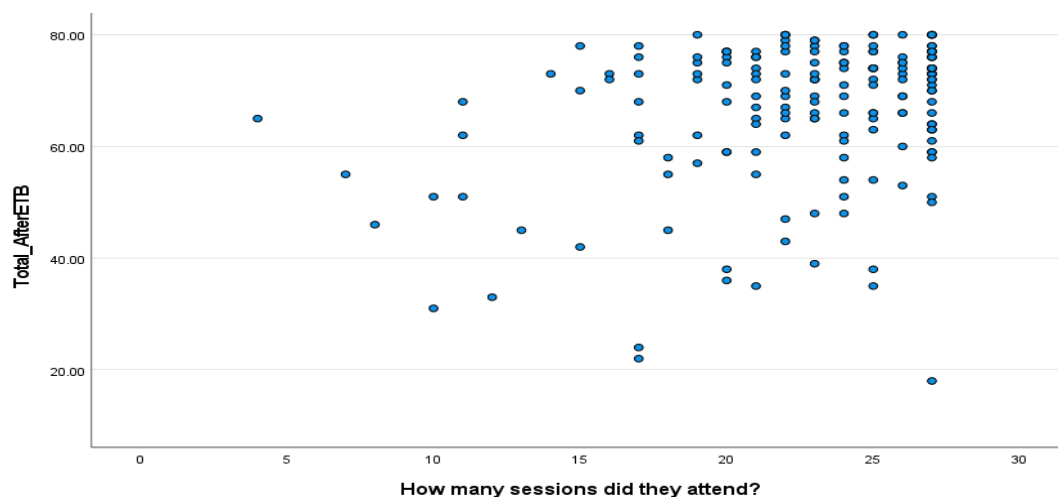
Figure 15: EAL Differences in Total Languages and Communication Scores



Number of Sessions Attended

There was good attendance overall at the 27 sessions (3 per week for the 9 weeks of the programme), with 80.4% (n= 144) attending 20 sessions or more (22.9% of the sample (n= 41) attended all 27 sessions). Only 5.6% of the children (n= 8) attended less than half the programme (fewer than 14 sessions). The findings show a significant positive correlation, in each of the language areas and overall, between the number of sessions the child attended and their score after the programme. This indicates that the more sessions a child attended, the higher their language scores at the end of the programme, all p 's < .01.

Figure 16: No. of Sessions Attended by Children



Summary

Overall, the findings from the analysis of the tracker data indicate that the ETB programme had a beneficial effect on average language and communication scores. This positive effect was present for children of varying ages, for both boys and girls, and for those with English as a first language or an additional language. It is important to note that in addition to the various language and communication scores being significantly higher at the end, than before commencing the programme, that the statistical effect sizes were all large. This suggests that the programme is having a noticeable positive effect on the children, and as illustrated in later sections in this report, parents, educators and speech and language therapists also evidence this positive effect.

The congruity of the findings across multiple measures, by multiple agents, regarding improvements in children's language and communication, suggests a very real and substantial effect.

The findings reported in the next section, from conversations with the nine participating children about the programme, highlights their enthusiasm for the programme, and provides insight into their growing competency in language and communication.

Section 4. Meeting with Children

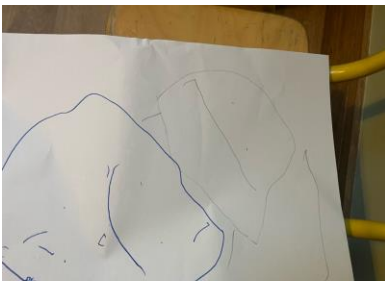
As mentioned, the nine children whom the researchers met, had turned four years of age. Their educator indicated that despite the programme having finished, the children enjoyed it so much, they regularly asked for more ‘Jake and Tizzy.’ She also explained that since completing the programme, children revisited topics and the books on a weekly basis.

She provided access to drawings of Jake and Tizzy completed by children during the programme as part of their memory books (i.e., a record of some of the activities they complete week to week in the setting, see Drawing 1). Children agreed that the researchers could photograph these drawings also, and each child gave permission for them to do so.



Drawing 1. Yellow memory copy books used by the early years setting (one for each child)

Drawing 2. Jake and Tizzy



The researchers asked the children if they liked Jake and Tizzy. Each child excitedly agreed that they did. While some children nodded their head in agreement, others simply said “yes”, while others expressed their enthusiasm for the programme by *jumping up and down*.

When asked if they had a favourite between Jake and Tizzy, the children all expressed a preference for “Tizzy”. At this point, the educator introduced the Tizzy puppet. The children

quickly gathered around in excitement. The educator explained that Tizzy gave ‘high 5’s’ to each child at the end of their usual sessions.

This picture drawn by one of the children depicts “Tizzy with his tail sticking up.” Notice how the child used orange and black – colours of the Jake and Tizzy puppets. This indicates the child’s capacity/ability to comprehend, recall and express thoughts.



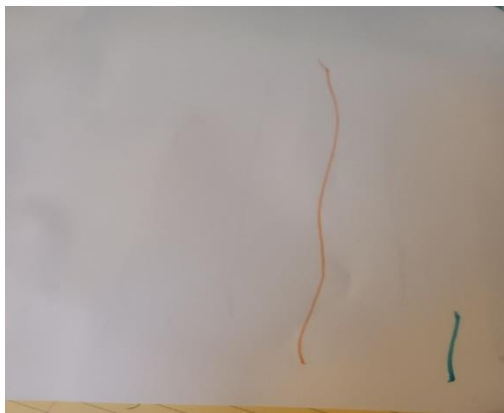
Drawing 3. Tizzy with his Tail Sticking Up

The researchers also asked the children if they had a favourite book or story about Jake and Tizzy. Two children separately mentioned the story about going swimming, as they liked to go swimming themselves. Children's language and communication skills were evident throughout. When asked if there were any other things, they would like to see Jake and Tizzy doing, children clearly demonstrated their ability to combine words to form comprehensive phrases and sentences, to recall information, to use descriptive and positional language etc. One child for example, suggested that Jake and Tizzy should do “gymnastics, with lots of flips” because the child did gymnastics and liked it, whereas another suggested that Jake and Tizzy should “play with a ball or hide and seek.”

Across the drawings done during the informal conversation with the researchers, and those completed previously in their memory books, were drawings of *parachutes, feathers, football games, marshmallows, chocolate spread and sandwiches*. These drawings reflected the stories in the Jake and Tizzy books (e.g., football), as well as toys and items contained in the Early Talk Boost pack (e.g., feathers). Children also drew pictures of Jake and Tizzy (see drawing 2). Relationships featured in some of their drawings. One child included their educator with Tizzy in one of their drawings, while the picture included here, shows **Jake and Tizzy and Jake’s Mom and Dad**.

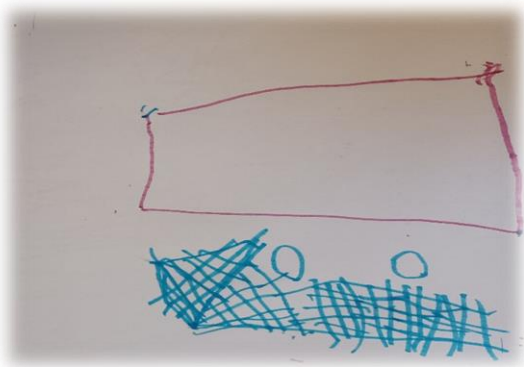


Drawing 4. Jake and Tizzy and Jake's Mom and Dad



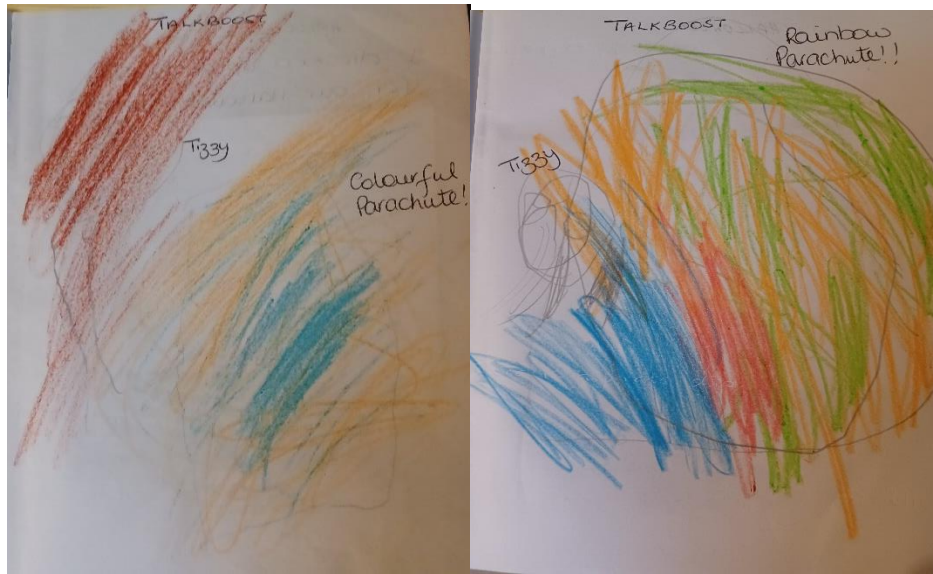
Drawing 5. Jake is Big and Tizzy is Small

In this picture the child drew Jake as the long orange line, and Tizzy as the small blue line because “Jake is big, and Tizzy is small”. One of the books in the series is called ‘Jake is big, and Tizzy is little.’ In drawing this picture, the child again, demonstrates recall. Their depiction of big and small demonstrates comprehension of size and differentiation, as well as the ability to combine words to form comprehensive phrases.



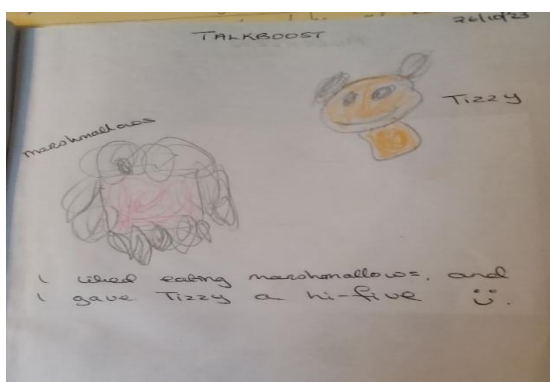
Drawing 6. Jake and Tizzy Playing Football

This is a picture of “Jake and Tizzy playing football”. The two circles represent two footballs in the net, further evidence of recall and understanding. As with other children, here again, the child combines words to form a comprehensive phrase.



Drawing 7 and 8. Tizzy and a Parachute

These pictures of Tizzy and a parachute, drawn by two different children during the programme, are from their memory books. As shown, the educator wrote down the information given by the children at the time. The children’s use of descriptive language is evident, i.e., ‘*colourful parachute*’, ‘*rainbow parachute.*’ The use of multiple colours in the drawings provide insight into children’s awareness of the environment around them, and their understanding that a rainbow is multi-coloured. Furthermore, there is evidence of their growing vocabulary.



Drawing 9. Picture from Memory Book

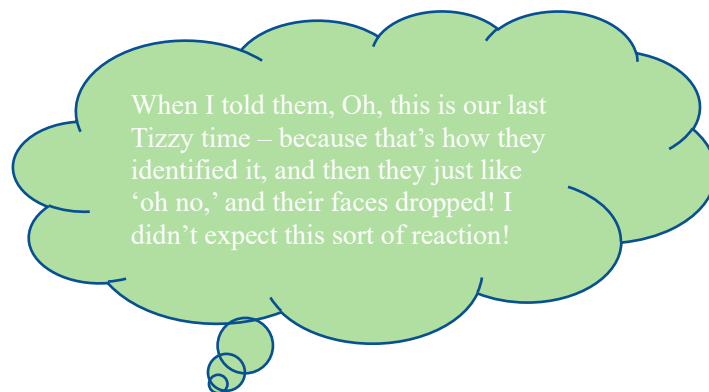
This picture drawn during the programme is from a memory book. Again, as shown, the educator wrote down the information given by the child at the time. Here, the child is clearly combining words into short comprehensive phrases: “I liked eating marshmallows,” and “I gave Tizzy a hi-five”.



In this picture, the child drew Jake at the swimming pool. Here again, the child combined words to form a comprehensive phrase, noting “Tizzy doesn’t like water.” As in other instances, this demonstrates the child’s ability to recall and to understand information.

Drawing 10. Jake at the Swimming

Children’s enthusiasm for the programme features prominently in parent/guardian, educator and SLT interviews. While these findings are discussed in the following sections of the report, the following excerpt from an educator interview provides insight into the children’s positive response to the programme, and their disappointment upon learning it had come to an end.



Summary

Meeting and chatting with these young children provide insight into their enthusiasm for, and engagement with the programme. The strategies utilised throughout the programme (e.g., Jake and Tizzy puppets and books, nursery rhymes, artwork) appealed to the children, supporting active hands-on, relevant and meaningful learning experiences (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA, 2009). Chatting with the children, coupled with the notations written by their educator to accompany drawings in their memory books, reveal they have acquired the fundamentals of language and communication. These young children

demonstrated attention and listening skills, developing vocabulary, ability to build sentences and have conversations, all skills supported by ETB.

Feldman (2019) asserts that by age 5, children have a vocabulary of thousands of words, can create sentences with complex grammatical features and observe social conventions. The researchers observed first-hand the children's growing competency across all these areas, which are considered the fundamentals of language and communication, and central to learning how to read (Feldman, 2019). The remainder of this report, which presents findings from parent and educator questionnaires and interviews, as well as findings from focus group discussions with SLTs validate the findings from the tracker data, and further attest to how Early Talk Boost significantly enhanced children's language and communication skills over the 9-week intervention period.

Section 5. Parental Perspectives

The findings presented in the following sections relating to parents combine findings from both the anonymous online questionnaires and interviews. Regarding the questionnaires, 33 parents (all mothers) completed a questionnaire. Across the collected data (questionnaires and interviews), parents were overwhelmingly positive about the ETB programme. They identified a range of positive outcomes for their child in terms of language and communication, but also in terms of social and emotional development. They further identified wider benefits relating to family book sharing experiences within the home, including children with English as an additional language or growing up in bilingual home environments. All parents felt the Jake and Tizzy books were suitable and indicated that involvement in ETB had increased their awareness of and use of strategies to support children's communication and language during story time. All parents would recommend ETB to other parents.

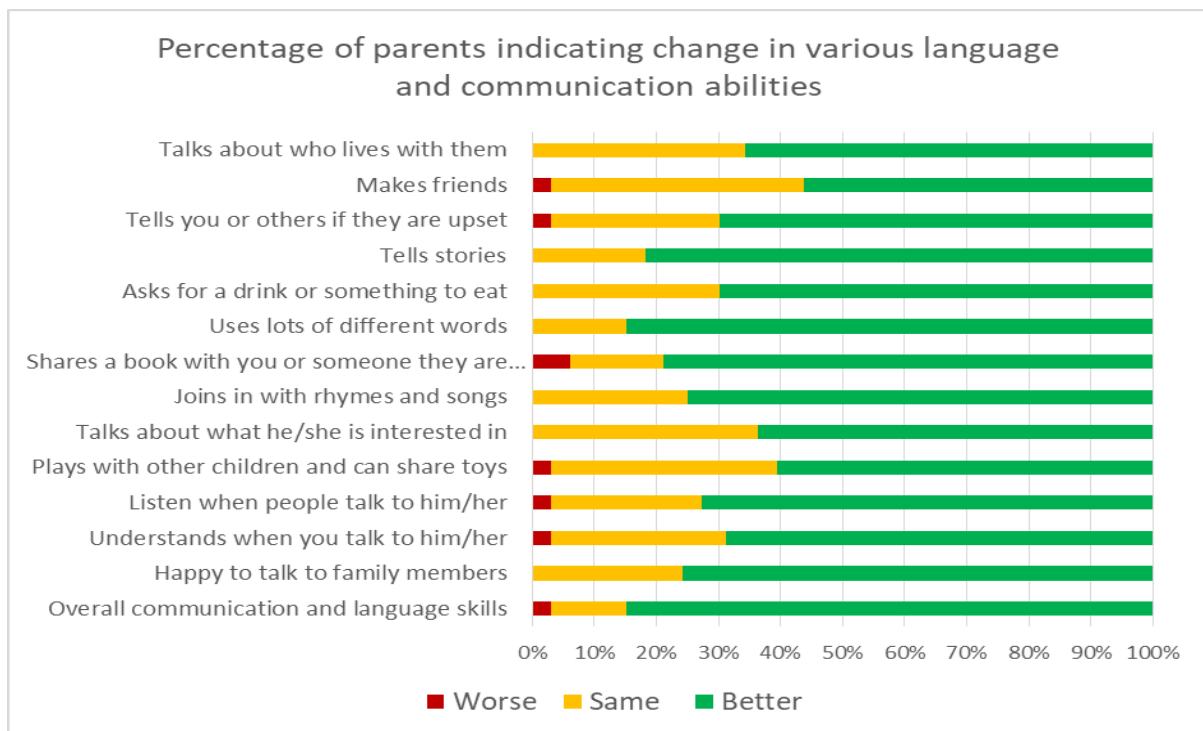
How Early Talk Boost Impacted Children's Language and Communication Skills

When asked if they thought that taking part in Early Talk Boost made a difference to their child's language and communication, all 33 parent respondents (100%) agreed there had been a difference. Of the 33 responding parents, 18 (55%) said 'yes, there was a definite difference' and 15 (45%) said 'yes, there was somewhat of a difference,' in their child's language and communication.

Parents were asked to think about some of the ways their child uses communication and language, and to indicate whether they were *better*, *about the same* or *worse* on a range of indicators, following their participation in the programme.

Parents overall, indicated their children were better across a range of outcomes: talking, understanding, listening and telling stories. Figure 16 indicates that 11 parents (85%), felt their child was better at using lots of different words, 82% that their child was better now at telling stories, while 79% felt their child was better when it came to sharing a book with them or someone, they are close to and talking about it. When it came to making friends, however, while 54.5% of parents felt this was better, 39% felt it remained the same.

Figure 17: Parental Perspectives of Children's Use of Language & Communication Post-ETB



Interview data provides insight into parent/guardian overwhelmingly positive responses to the programme. Parents noted specific ways in which children’s interaction styles and vocabulary use had evolved. One parent described how her child would say, “we have to listen, Mammy, until after I’m finished talking and then I listen until you finish talking.” Another parent, explained that her child, “had a bit of confidence because he had done it with the girls before he came home...he kind of knew all the words and he was showing off that he knew them.” In another case, the parent stated, “my daughter really enjoyed the programme, and her results show that it made a difference,” and another, “I have seen definite improvements with my child.” The following parent/guardian comments highlight positive and significant outcomes they observed regarding their children’s speech, vocabulary, confidence, communication and wider interactions.

My child encountered a period of not speaking at the beginning of this programme, which has now largely resolved. The programme has no doubt been of great help to him

The programme helped my son so much with his confidence

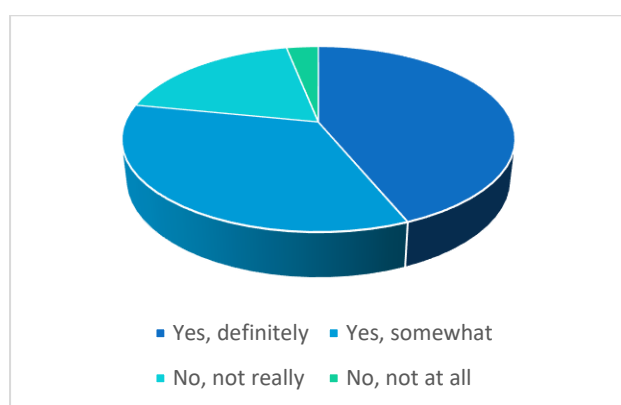
My son was barely speaking last August and the difference between then and now is amazing. Through a combination of preschool this program and work we do at

I have been concerned about his speech over the last number of years, but he has shown great improvement with a few weeks of intervention. It has boosted his confidence and I see that he is talking more to people outside the house now

Impact on the Home Environment

Parents highlighted the positive impact of the Jake and Tizzy books within the home literacy environment. They noted their child’s increased interest in books, and the consequent effect on family story time. Therefore, when asked if taking part in Early Talk Boost increased their child’s interest in books or reading, 26 parents (78%) said yes- (either ‘yes definitely’ or ‘yes somewhat’).

Figure 18: Did Early Talk Boost Increase Children's Interest in Books or Reading



During an interview, a mother, whose little boy “never had an interest in books as much before,” described how he now “has stack of books beside his bed every night”.

He's looking at other books now and finding that there's a story. And it's not just pictures. Like there's a storyline in there as opposed to just sitting front to look at

Reflecting on the home reading environment before Early Talk Boost, some parents referenced the positive impact the programme had on reading, book sharing, and relationships with parents and siblings within the home.



Noting that “language and communication is a key part to their [child’s] development,” this parent felt it “can often be overlooked due to telly, tablets etc.” In her opinion, Early Talk Boost “helped encourage parents to spend time one to one with their child in a supportive way.” Similarly, another parent mentioned that “it was enjoyable to set aside time at the weekends to read together.”

When asked if taking part in Early Talk Boost encouraged them or other family members to read more with the child at home, 91% (N=29) answered yes (63% indicated ‘yes definitely’ with 28% indicating ‘yes somewhat’). Qualitative commentary provided through questionnaires further supports this. Some parents mentioned siblings. One parent for instance, explained how their “child picks out two books to read every night and gets to decide who reads them with her it could be a parent or a sibling, she loves relaying the story back to us also”. While another described how her older daughter “enjoyed reading the books to my son also.” In another case, ‘we all loved the books and we read them with her brother also who is 5. She loved having her schoolbook to read.’

Strategies to Support Children’s Communication and Language

In the main, parents believed that the Jake and Tizzy books “give a focus,” and a “way to engage” with children. Parents indicated that the programme increased their awareness of, and use of strategies to support their child’s communication and language during story time. It seems that it changed the way parents “shared stories at home.” Accordingly, parents utilised a range of strategies, including *slowing down and not rushing when reading, talking less and listening more, and taking turns* listening to and speaking with the child. Table 4. summarises the strategies parents used to support communication and language as a result of their child’s involvement in ETB.

Table 4 Strategies Used by Parents to Support their Child’s Communication and Language

Strategy	Parent Commentary
Slowing Down	<p>When you're rushing, sometimes you don't give them that time. It's to understand how important that was for speech and language and her communication skills. Yeah, that was a bit eye opening for me...but it's just to give them the time and pause and not be rushing through it. But it did make me a lot more mindful</p> <p>It's not just going through, firing through the book, it's you know, asking questions about the picture of getting a bit more of their information...and giving her...that opportunity to describe what she sees or tell me what she sees and could be, you know, different</p> <p>Early Boost talk changed how we shared stories at home. We spent more time discussing the pictures before reading the story</p>
Talking Less	<p>We would have read books every night before starting Talk boost programme, but [the] programme has encouraged us to spend more time everyday reading with my child and talking about the books with her, asking questions instead of just reading the book to her.</p> <p>What I did realize was I was talking too much. Whereas by the time he had done the programme, he was coming back and showing me the words and telling me the story as opposed to when it was just me and him, I was telling him the story. So, he wasn't given as much feedback. And to step back and say he's learning this separate to me and he's now able to tell me what he's learned. You know, so I'm trying to do that now and other things as well, so.</p>
Taking Turns	<p>The way I listen to you and then I talk</p> <p>It is about like giving them an opportunity to tell you a little bit more or just like you let them see what they're seeing in the books. And yea, I'm giving them a little bit more time to like ask a question and wait for the answers within the books and hear what they're saying</p> <p>Let them speak a little bit more or speak around the pictures and explain it now.</p>

The following section discusses how the programme positively impacted the home environment for children with English as an additional language.

Impact for children with English as an additional language in the Home Environment

While English was the main language spoken, the tracker data indicates that 16.8% of children spoke a language other than English as their primary language. As indicated in [Section 2](#), these languages included Arabic, Bengali, French, Italian, Lithuanian, Polish, Romanian and Urdu.

Parents who indicated the primary language in the home was not English, commented positively about the accessibility of, and interest in the Jake and Tizzy books. In one instance, a parent explained that prior to her son's involvement in ETB, "there was no way to read an English language book to my son until 'Tizzy' arrived to our house.' Once Tizzy arrived, "it was love from the beginning."

However, it's hard to say what was the reason for him to like it so much, as there is a fact, he treated it like his homework at the beginning, pretending he is big boy like his older siblings with his homework, but then after while he definitely did have a massive interest in it

It seems that the Jake and Tizzy books also provided choice of reading material for two other families also. Prior to the ETB programme, one parent articulated how she had "been reading (Swedish) bedtime stories every night since about 1.5 years old,". Another parent noted in relation to her son that she "used to read him [sic] in Polish...but when Tizzy and Jake arrived to our house...he's so happy, he's happy to take up an English or a Polish book now."

One parent spoke of the transformative effect of the programme on her daughter's communication and language, noting that she had "seen a big improvement in my child."

Before the programme, I would have acted as a translator for my little girl to family members and others. Even her dad did not always understand everything she said which frustrated her. But after only 2 weeks into the programme, we had seen a big improvement and all family members noticed as well. They now understand her, and she is having full conversation with them.

Because of their positive impact on children's language development, parents for whom English was an Additional Language requested an even earlier introduction to the Jake and Tizzy books.

Just wondering if this program could be accessible to kids before playschool time. I mean advertised in some toddler's groups or so. I know you are only new and settling in but just my own very private opinion, if we had chance to meet "Tizzy" earlier my son would be fluent English when starting playschool.

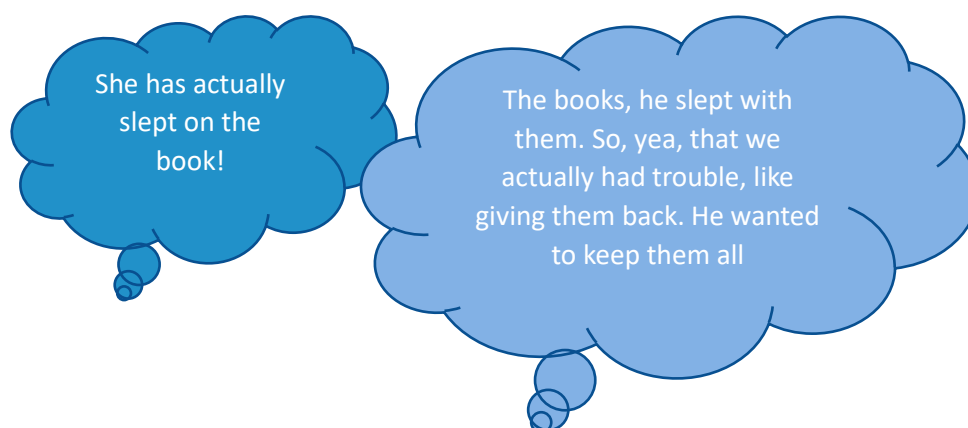
Perspectives on the Jake and Tizzy Books

From the children's and parents' accounts, it is evident that children enjoyed the Jake and Tizzy books. All seven parent interviewees mentioned how much their children had enjoyed these books, indicating also that the books positively influenced the home literacy environment. When asked what they thought of the Jake and Tizzy books, 94% of parents (n=31) suggested they were 'very suitable'. Only 2 parents indicated the books were 'somewhat suitable'.

Noting that "the books were very interesting to all ages," one parent felt they were "relatable to both boys and girls". Several parents noted how their child *loved* the books and were *excited* to read them, with many commenting on their child reading the books *over and over*. Explaining that her child was "very excited and interested in Jake and Tizzy books," one mother said they "have read many several, several times," with another, saying her son "he ask [sic] to read again and again every book."

Another parent, whose daughter "loved reading," articulated her delight that her child "is non-stop talking now, which is brilliant." Moreover, this parent reported that her daughter "is much more confident in her speech now."

Children loved the books so much, that some children slept with them at night, and in at least one case, a child wanted to keep all the Jake and Tizzy books.



Summary

Parent/guardian enthusiasm for the programme is profound. They highlight positive and significant outcomes they observed in their child relating to vocabulary, talking, understanding, listening and telling stories. They also referenced increased confidence, and social -emotional development, as well as wider benefits in the home environment, e.g., child's increased interest in books, and the domino effect on reading, book sharing and relationships with parents and

siblings. Moreover, parents benefitted in terms of the strategies they used when sharing books with their child, commenting on how they spend more time discussing the pictures before reading the story, asking questions and talking about the book, rather than just reading.

Parents for whom English is an additional language were especially positive about the impact of the programme on their child's language development. Indeed, these parents requested an earlier introduction to the Jake and Tizzy books, to help their child's fluency in the English language when commencing pre-school.

Section 6. Educator Perspectives

Educators from 20 of the 23 participating settings (87%) returned a completed questionnaire. Like parents/guardians, educators were predominantly positive about the programme, pointing to significant improvements in children's language and communication, confidence, and social - emotional development.

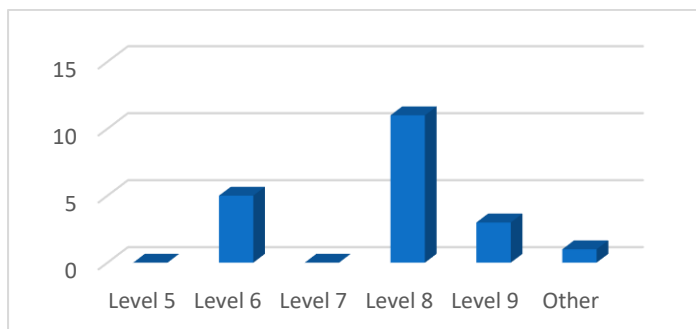
This section begins by providing insight into the qualification levels of the participating educators, followed by a presentation of findings concerning their views on children's language gains. A discussion of educator views on the programme, delivery of the programme as prescribed etc., follows. This section concludes with an exploration of the professional benefits for educators resulting from their involvement in the programme.

Educator Qualification Level

As mentioned in [Section 1](#), in accordance with the [Early Years Services Regulations](#), educators working directly with children in an early childhood setting, must hold at least a Level 5 major award in Early Childhood Care and Education. The evaluation sought to determine the qualification levels of the educators implementing ETB, and whether there was a relationship between their knowledge and awareness of how to support children's language and communication skills, and qualification levels.

The online questionnaire asked educators to indicate their highest level of qualification. Each of the 20 responding educators, indicated that they held a qualification higher than the required Level 5 on the [National Framework of Qualifications](#). Their qualification levels, therefore, ranged from Level 6 to Level 9 (see Figure 18).

Figure 19: Educator Qualification Level



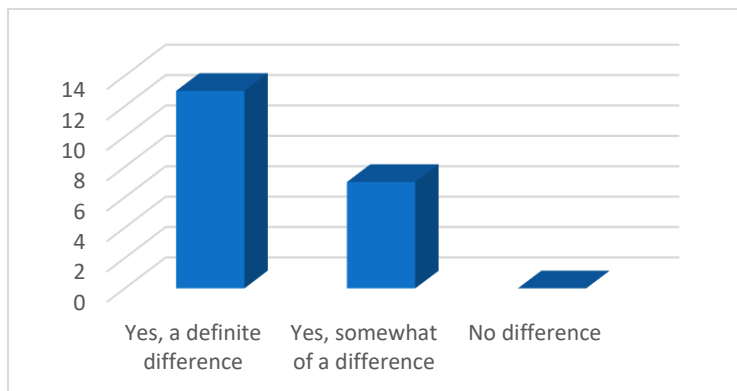
As illustrated, of the 20 responding educators, just over 50% (n=11) held a Level 8 Honours bachelor's degree, with 6 holding a Level 6 qualification, and 3 holding a Level 9 master's degree. One respondent indicated 'other' in response to this question, indicating they held a LINC Level 6 Special Purpose Award⁸. Of the educators who delivered the programme, 80% (n = 16) had more than 10 years' experience working with children in the ECEC sector, with 10% (n = 2) having 6-10 years' experience and another 10% (n = 2) having 1-5 years' experience.

How Early Talk Boost Impacted Children' Language and Communication Skills

Across the online questionnaires, all 20 educators felt that participation in Early Talk Boost had a positive impact on children's language and communication skills. Accordingly, of the 20 responding educators, 13 (65%) said the intervention made a 'definite difference' to children's language and communication skills, with 7 (35%) educators suggesting it made 'somewhat of a difference' (see Figure 20).

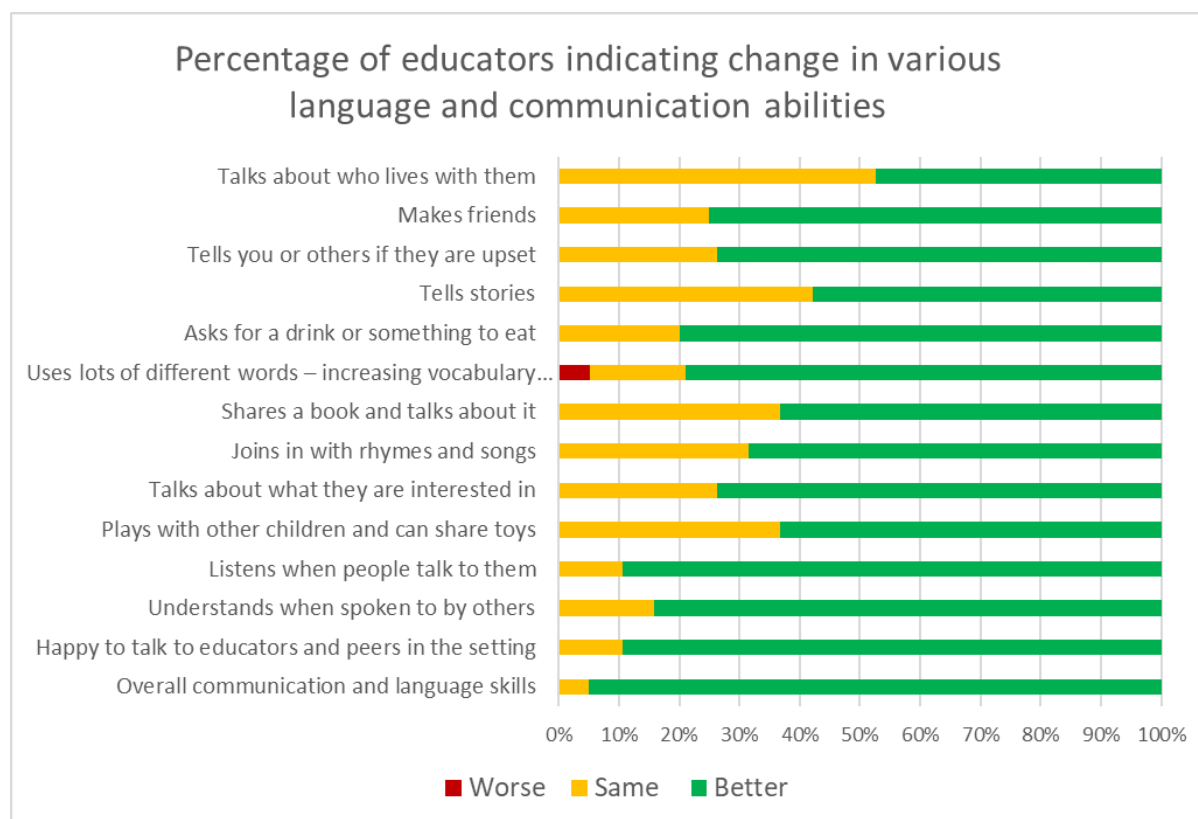
⁸ LINC (Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years) is a special purpose award (Higher Education) designed to support the inclusion of children accessing the Early Childhood Care and Education programme in early childhood settings.

Figure 20: Educator perspectives on whether the Programme made a Difference to Children's Communication and Language



Like parents/guardians, educators were asked to consider some of the ways in which, children use communication and language, and to indicate whether they were *better*, *about the same* or *worse* on a range of indicators following their participation in the programme. Congruent with parental responses, educators indicated that children were better across a range of outcomes: happy to talk to educators and peers in the setting, understands when spoken to by others, listens when people speak to them, uses loads of different words, asks for a drink or something to eat, tells you, or others if they are upset, makes friends (See Figure 21).

Figure 21: Educator Perspectives of Children's Use of Language & Communication Post ETB



Educators described the programme as “very helpful and supportive,” and not just for language skills but overall communication.” Overall, they described the programme as “very beneficial in building up children’s language skills, boost[ing] children’s confidence, enhanc[ing] their communication skills.”

Interview data further points to improvement in children’s communication and language skills, with one educator indicating that, “children who were pointing and using one/two words started to consistently use sentences with a wider vocabulary.” Another educator spoke of children who prior to their involvement in ETB “hadn’t understood the question, to actually giving full explanation and a full story there at the end (of the programme).” She described a “little boy...filling in all the details and all the language being used, from a child that’s stumbled over it and gave it in the wrong order nine week previous. Like it’s huge.”

Educators commented on how parents began to provide positive feedback directly to them regarding improvements in their child’s communication and language:

We started to get really positive feedback from parents and parents were coming to us saying I can't believe what they said and a full sentence...children that weren't previously using sentences... unless they were prompted were just throwing them[sentences] out there

And even parents noted it as well that their vocabulary was getting broader and just even their desire to speak sometimes like more and more. Because one child in particular, it wasn't actually that she didn't have the vocabulary or didn't have the ability, she just didn't have the confidence.

I did have one parent who has noticed considerable change in her child as far as confidence...just he had this huge vocabulary boost, and just like conversationally, like at the beginning of the year you would ask, like he could, he had lots of words, but when you tried to have a conversation with them, you just weren't really getting much back.

This child is “an almighty chatter box now!” with the educator suggesting that his ‘mom is almost a bit like, can he stop? He’s always talking. He is talking about preschool now.”

The children’s expanding vocabulary, sentence usage and confidence is apparent in how they described their drawings and engaged in discussion with the researchers ([see Section 3](#)).

Educator Perspectives on the Most Beneficial Aspects of ETB

In addition to identifying Educators’ perspectives on the benefits of ETB for children’s language and communication skills, the evaluation sought to determine what they found most beneficial about the programme. In this respect, co-delivery of the programme and positive collaborative relationships with Speech and Language Therapists, featured prominently in both the interview data and open-ended questionnaire responses. Educators considered the SLT involvement as “vital” for both themselves, and “the parents”. Drawing upon qualitative questionnaire responses and interview data, Table 5, points to the benefits of co-delivery, including, the opportunity for parents to contact a speech and language therapist, and the ongoing support and advice SLTs provided to educators throughout the programme.

Table 5: Benefits of Co-Delivering the Programme

Benefits for Parents

It's extremely beneficial and useful for parents if they can, you know, make contact with a speech and language therapist

Well, you see because the waiting list are so huge, they're not getting to see anybody anyway...but there's one little kid who was attending speech therapy and wasn't really getting anywhere...speech therapy session[s], they're only once every eight weeks, but with the nine weeks...his mom, she's noticed a huge difference

The thing is, I suppose they're coming here anyway. It's all happening here on site. It's not like they have to go somewhere else

She's seeing like, four or five of the children in the group

It has so much more status and impact for parents. If there's a speech and language therapist involved, and I suppose it's a basic as that

You're connecting with the parents...on a different level. And while they are, you know, open to everything we're saying, I think it's definitely, it communicates a different message. I think when you have a speech and language therapist as part of it

Benefits for Educators

I really couldn't have been as successful as I hope it is without [names the SLT]. Umm, it really couldn't. She's huge support to us as she makes such a difference and I suppose it has boosted your confidence

They were a great support now. I could touch base with them, we could ask questions and they were, you know, emailing me

It's great to have her eye [SLT] on the trackers and to do the trackers before and after because I suppose I would prefer to have, I feel it's best, I feel more confident about them if she was there to do those

It's very important to have the contact with speech and language therapists and that you see she picked on things with other children

As indicated in Table 5, educators mentioned the lengthy waiting lists for speech and language therapy. Noting that an SLT can see 4 or 5 children in a group, educators indicated that ETB may help to free up SLT's time, reduce waiting lists and times. One educator, for example, commented that the SLT is "getting to see them here and work with them, you know, and then that sometimes can clear up a space for maybe two more children that could come to the clinic."

Other benefits identified by educators included active learning, "the whole format of it with the two activities, the song and the story, it's very attractive to children," how the programme enhanced "other areas of children's development" beyond language skills, the use of "small

groups,” provision of resources and the online “trackers.” Table 6 provides an overview of what educators found most useful about the programme.

Table 6: What Educators Found Most Useful about ETB

Active Learning	<p>The programme provided a focus on supporting language development in stages using fun activities, songs and nice stories. Therefore, the children engaged easily and remained interested. The change in the children's confidence in using language was dramatic.</p> <p>There's music, there's songs, there's books...some kids would love the books, some kids love the toys, the objects, and some people, you know, some of them like the song. So, it was a good variety of, you know activities to do with them</p> <p>The activities were simple and enjoyable, encompassing good listening, turn taking and learning along with language and communication building</p>
Moving beyond language skills to overall communication	<p>It is not just about looking for language skills but about overall communication, it allowed us to bring the less confident children out of the room and giving them a chance to communicate. We now use the good looking, good listening and good sitting in our room every day</p>
Small Group Sizes	<p>It's a group session. That's the good part. The numbers of the children were limited, so that was also helpful because the children weren't feeling left alone, and they are... enhancing their other cognitive skills as well and they're working together in a group</p> <p>So, we've all gotten to know each other a lot more in this little group. It is the same 8 little kids that you're doing with umm, so the relationship does just grow faster naturally</p> <p>It was nice having that time for her, in a smaller group and seeing just her being able to stand up and say whatever it was first, or stand up confidently and speak and share her opinion</p>
Provision of Specific Tools	<p>I got specific tools to help the children be part of the programme, but I also got a lot of knowledge and activity ideas to help the whole class group</p> <p>I enjoyed the simple Good Listening, Good Sitting and Good-Looking cards. They were very effective and the plan of the order of activities visual was too</p>
Trackers	<p>The trackers were an excellent tool to really focus on specific areas of the child and where a child may need additional support. The ETB tracker was effective too in determining where the children's language skills are currently at.</p>
Resources	<p>The Tizzy puppet was a nice extra too. The ETB folder with everything included made the daily planning manageable.</p> <p>The Manual and the support from the Speech and language Therapist</p>

The resources were great we did not have to think about any of it. It was all included. Great Resources were **fabulous** and it's a **great parent and teacher partner** activity.

Clearly educators valued the resources which helped them to support children’s language and communication. Equally, the children’s enthusiasm for the resources, especially their love of Tizzy featured prominently in their drawings and their informal chat with members of the evaluation team ([see Section 4](#)). It seems that Tizzy became a focal point within the early childhood settings too, beyond ETB. When completing the online questionnaire, one educator stated, “Tizzy is like a Christmas elf you never know where he will appear.” Likewise, during interview, an educator said, “Tizzy is always kind of...just sitting on the shelf.” In fact, Tizzy is “part of the class...he comes and does circle time with us most days, and the kids are like, can I read a story to Tizzy? So, they take Tizzy out and they put him in there and they read to him, it’s gas!” This educator further articulated how they “use [everything] in the bag...all the time, not just when the programme is finished. I take the animal out and I leave them out for the children, to yeah, play with, you know.”

The following section addresses the educators’ perspectives on the Jake and Tizzy books.

Perspectives on the Jake and Tizzy Books

Questionnaire responses indicate that the majority (70%, n=14) of educators described the Jake and Tizzy books as ‘very suitable’ with the remaining six respondents indicating they were ‘somewhat suitable.’

Open ended responses indicate that the educators felt the books were well-presented, simple, had great vocabulary, held the children’s attention, increased their concentration, and prompted conversations between children and educators after they were read in the ETB session. Table 7 summarises Educator’s perspectives of the Jake and Tizzy books.

Table 7 Educators’ Perspectives of the Jake and Tizzy Books

The books were well-presented and the children really enjoy them
The characters and the story lines held the children’s attention
Simple and helps children in building up their concentration
Great engagement and chat after every time we read them
Some of the books had great vocabulary in them. They provided great repetition. By the time the third session, a lot more general discussion than reading every page
It was very similar to what we have here at the preschool setup, you know, they're getting their drinks, oh, it's spilled because these things happen too here, and then the different colour tables and the outside was very similar...so they could really connect with it here

Although generally positive, three educators commented on the length of the books, suggesting they were “too long” and/or “text heavy.”. While one of these educators noted that “some language presented was not the language/wording used in Ireland, such as *Nursery* for pre-school, *register* for roll call,” another indicated how they “changed the language to make it more suitable to the children's everyday experiences, such as Jake goes to nursery, we used the word preschool.”

Impact on the Home Environment

Educators spoke positively about sharing the Jake and Tizzy books with the children’s parents/guardians, how receptive parents were to receive the books, how they engaged with the books, and their increased interest in reading with their child.

According to educators, parents/guardians saw the programme as “a great opportunity” for their child, and “they are so eager to kind of take part.” They mentioned how the children “took the books home at the end of each week for the weekend and returned them on Mondays”. In one instance, in addition to sharing the Jake and Tizzy books with parents/guardians, the educator “recorded the songs on WhatsApp at the end of every week. So, they all went home, the song for the week, [and] they brought home the books.” Reflective of the parents/guardian’s own reports, educators indicated that “parents made an effort to read them which increased the children's interest and enjoyment.” In some instances where parents may not have had the opportunity to read with their child at the weekend, they requested holding onto the book for another while, or asked to have one of the books from a previous week.

There was an odd week where parents said we only got to it twice. Can we hold on to the book for another day? Another parent...could we have one of the old books? So, we could have a book from week one as well as say book 6. So, that all happened and that came from the parents.

And they'll come back, and they'll look for another book, and we didn't really read it enough times. Could we have it again? That kind of positivity came through

And Bronagh,⁹ the SLT, the first day, she could not believe how well they knew the stories. And I said that's because the parents are doing them. It was obvious the parents were reading them over the weekend.

⁹ Pseudonym

Overall, educators felt that parents “loved bringing the books home, and you know, doing the work at home with them,” with one stating, “this is a great way to, I suppose introduce books.” She felt that parents and children “seem to be much more interested in books...and they loved getting a new one...they’re really enthusiastic.”

Delivery of the programme as prescribed

As discussed in [Section 1](#), ETB is a nine-week early intervention initiative. However, tracker data indicates that while for 74% of the children (n=132) the programme was delivered as required by the manual, for 26% (n=47) it was not. Comparing the total language and communications scores before and after the programme, and the changes in scores, indicated though that there was no overall difference in scores between the two groups (66.46 versus 67.05), $p = .803$.

However, examining the individual aspects of language and communication measured, indicates that where educators indicated the programme was not delivered as prescribed, there were greater gains in some aspects of receptive language for the children. Specifically, there were greater gains in understanding scores over the course of the programme where it was not delivered as prescribed (4.22 points versus 3.01), $p = .028$, and higher attention and listening scores after completing the programme (18.13 versus 16.96), $p = .017$.

Caution is advised in interpreting these findings because of the smaller sample size of those who did not receive the programme as prescribed. However, the findings may suggest that where minor deviations were made to the programme by the educator or SLT that these deviations, for the most part, did not negatively impact on the benefits of the programme overall, and where scores differed, it was to the benefit of the child outcomes. Findings from the interviews with educators shed light on some of the minor changes they made to the programme, either through necessity or through experience.

During interview, two educators explained how between mid-term breaks, Easter holidays, Christmas holidays and Halloween, they “only managed to get six weeks in.” Nonetheless, in spite of running the programme for six, rather than nine weeks, both educators noted significant gains in children’s language and communication. The following interview excerpt provides insight into children’s progress:

All our children did well in the trackers - I had good few that were like working towards their age level or age expectation and they all got bumped up to at their age expectation and I had a couple of children also who were below it and then they got bumped up to working towards it. So, there was definite improvement across the board for all of them

This educator rhetorically asked: if they made that much progress in six weeks...what will nine weeks do?

As indicated earlier, one educator changed the language used in the Jake and Tizzy books to ensure it better reflected the experiences of young children in an Irish context, by substituting the term *pre-school* for *nursery*, for example. Two of the three educators that participated in Phase 1 and 2 of the programme indicated that they had amended some of the ETB activities second time round. One of these educators, explained that “the resources...give you suggestions as far as how to modify things, which are great.”

And then, it's just a little pinch of your own knowledge on what the children like and how they respond to things...you can just do tiny tweaks to make sure that the purpose of the activity is actually being fulfilled.

Second time round, working with the SLT, this educator “did games and songs slightly differently, or we used slightly different materials...because we had found that it was more of a distraction to the children...it took away from the purpose of the actual game or the actual song.” She described how she worked collaboratively with the SLT to amend the parachute game:

Last year, we had like the blanket out, and we were doing all the motions with the blanket or a parachute...the kids were just so preoccupied with this blanket or parachute that they did not even bother singing. They just wanted to play with it, understandably. And so, this time we put actions towards it. We used our bodies to make the motions and that encouraged them to actually sing it better.

In the second case, the educator “developed a poster, using photographs from each week, as opposed to the photobook.” She described how each week, ETB “has one or two focuses, so we wrote little bullet points underneath the poster.” In her opinion, the poster “is definitely a better thing, because it's visible, it's up on the wall now...it's up all year for them, and they can go and they look at it, and they remember...”

Professional Benefits of ETB for Educators

The findings indicate that involvement in ETB enhanced educator knowledge of children’s language and communication, and how to support this. Furthermore, educators indicated increased confidence in identifying children that would benefit from participation in the programme.

Educator Knowledge of Language and Communication

Concerning their knowledge of language and communication in young children prior to their involvement in ETB, 17 of the 20 responding educators (85%) indicated they were knowledgeable in this regard. Of these 17 educators, 11 knew ‘quite a bit’ about language and communication in young children prior to implementing ETB, and six indicated they knew ‘a lot.’ The remaining three educators indicated ‘not very much’ in response to this question. Each of these three educators held a Level 6 qualification, with one having more than 10 years’ experience of working in the profession, and the other two having 1 to 5 years’ experience.

Figure 22: Educator Knowledge of Language and Communication Prior to their Involvement with ETB

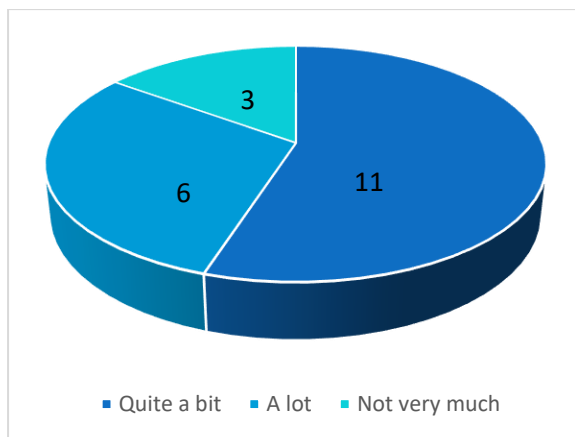
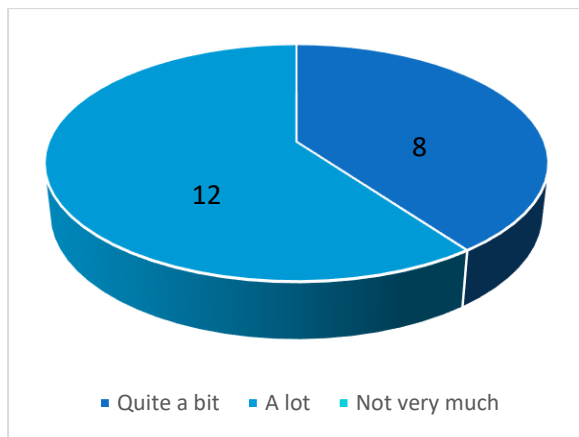


Figure 23: Educator Knowledge of Language and Communication Following their Involvement with ETB



As shown in Figure 23, following involvement in ETB, all 20 responding educators knew ‘a lot’ or ‘quite a bit’ about language and communication in young children.

Educator Confidence in Supporting Children’s Language Skills

When asked about their confidence in supporting children’s language skills prior to undertaking the ETB training with the Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs), 17 educators felt ‘quite confident’ (n=12) or ‘very confident’ (n=5) in supporting children’s language skills. As shown in Figure 21, three educators indicated they felt ‘a bit confident’ with 1 indicating ‘not very confident’ about supporting children’s language skills. Each of these three educators held a Level 6 qualification.

Figure 24: Educator Confidence in Supporting Children’s Language Skills prior to Involvement in ETB Training

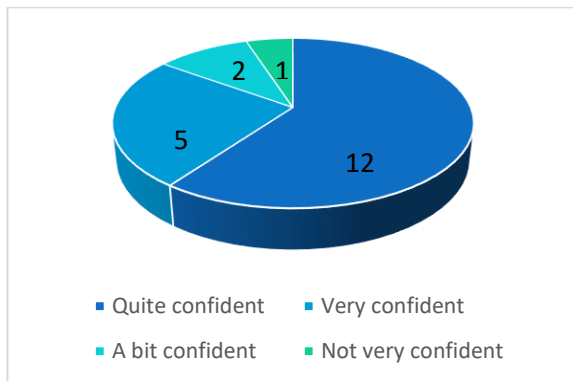
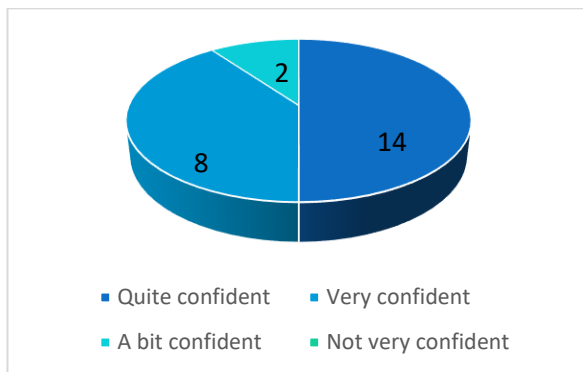


Figure 25: Educator Confidence in Supporting Children’s Language Skills Following Involvement in ETB Training



It is evident that the ETB training increased educator confidence in terms of supporting children’s language skills. One educator noted, “I am more aware of my use of language during informal conversations with children,” whereas another, who “had a good bit of that knowledge already”, felt the training “was a really good refresher and reminder about things. As well as getting updated information like, oh, that’s actually a better way to do it, as to how I’ve been doing recently.”

Ability to Identify Children who would Benefit from Early Talk Boost

Aligned to the question concerning educator knowledge of language and communication in young children, the evaluation sought to determine their confidence in identifying children who would benefit from participation in the programme. Figure 24 illustrates that prior to their involvement in ETB, 17 educators felt ‘very confident (n=11) or ‘quite confident’ (n=6). Three educators felt ‘not very confident’ (n=1), or a ‘bit confident’ (n=2). Of the three educators that indicated low levels of confidence, 2 held a Level 6 qualification, with one holding a Level 8 honours Degree, and had been working in the setting for ‘more than 10 years.’

Figure 26: Educator Confidence in Identifying Children who would Benefit from the Programme Prior to ETB training

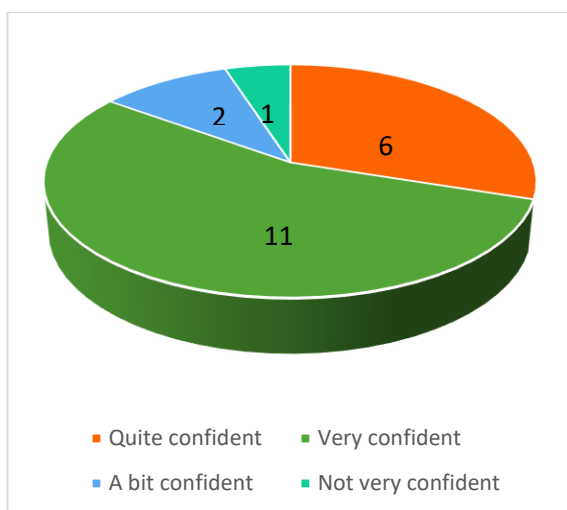
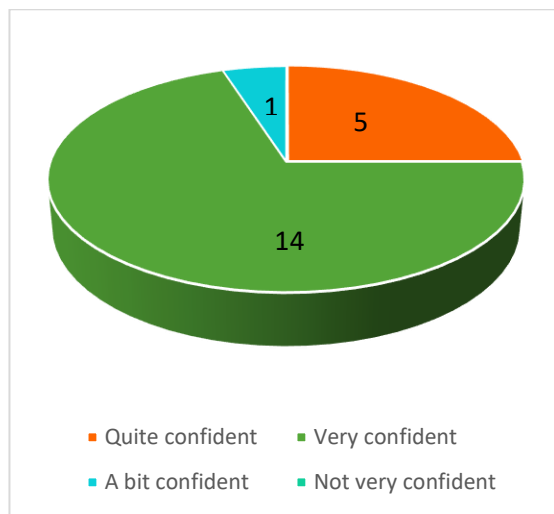


Figure 27: Educator Confidence in Identifying Children who would Benefit from the Programme Following ETB training



During interviews, educators discussed children’s needs regarding language and communication, and how they identify them for participation in the programme. The findings indicate that educators selected children based on a variety of needs, including speech and language delay and EAL. In one setting, there were “a lot of children with speech and language delays, huge issues with attention because they are all Covid babies,” while in another, “every single one of the children had English as a second language.” Yet another setting had “a lot of children with English as a second language.”

In one setting, rather than selecting children for inclusion in the programme, the educator decided “to include every child in the class, the 23 of them.” In this instance, she “didn’t want to make too much of a focus about specific children,” and she also felt that “parents might be more comfortable if everybody’s doing it.” This universal approach “softens it for parents when you know everyone benefits.”

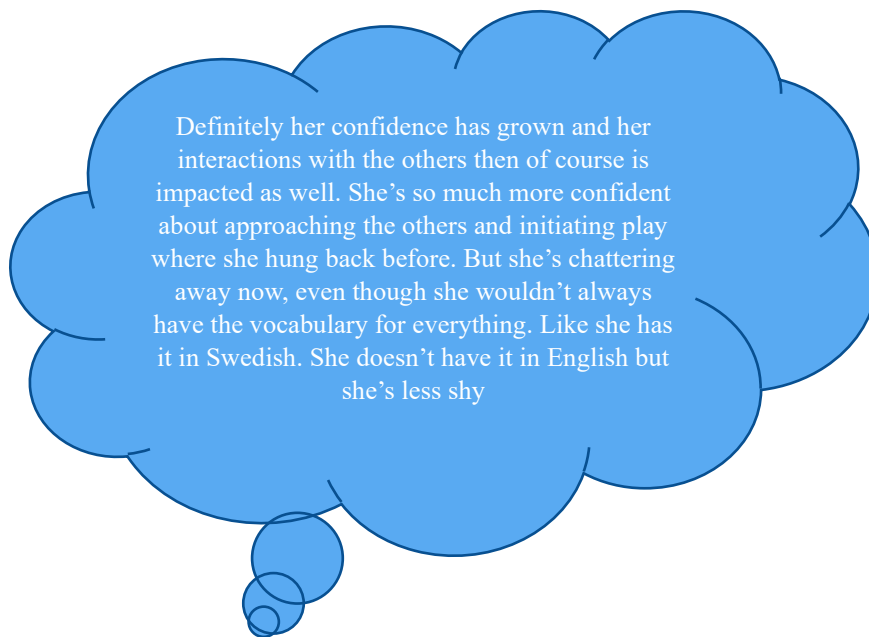
When considering which children would benefit most from the programme, another educator indicated that she prioritised children transitioning to school. Consequently, children were “classified by age, like what children were going to school because that was our main target.” This approach to identifying children “eliminated half my class already. Just because I had a lot of kids who are gonna [sic] do a second year in ECCE.” Based on advice from the SLT, alongside age criterion, this educator, also identified “the most beneficial group,” explaining

We want to make sure that we're just focusing on language that we're not having to take time out to deal with children who just need extra help in behavioural management. It was just a natural course of elimination that I ended up with the group that I did!

In another setting, the educator identified children based on speech delay and other environmental factors,

There's a couple of different things with a couple of different children. Some of them have speech delay and others, their speech was/is unclear and there was a couple who have speech but who are not very confident. You know, when it comes to discussion or if you ask questions, they're very quiet usually. So, I thought they would benefit.

Additionally, this educator also had “a little girl and English is her second language...and a little girl with speech dyspraxia.” Focussing on the child with EAL, she went on to describe how participation in the programme helped.



Definitely her confidence has grown and her interactions with the others then of course is impacted as well. She's so much more confident about approaching the others and initiating play where she hung back before. But she's chattering away now, even though she wouldn't always have the vocabulary for everything. Like she has it in Swedish. She doesn't have it in English but she's less shy

While this educator identified needs, such as speech delay, EAL and speech dyspraxia, that signified some children needed support, she also recognised the potential for ETB to benefit children who lacked confidence in communicating and using language. In her words, she chose children that she “felt needed extra time I suppose to build confidence and...give them the opportunity to speak up and...speak in turn and which, it did, it really did it, it definitely made some huge strides for those children.”

Summary

All educators felt that participation in Early Talk Boost had a positive impact on children's language and communication skills. Congruent with parents/guardians, they indicated that children were better across a range of outcomes: happy to talk to educators and peers in the setting, understands when spoken to by others, listens when people speak to them, uses loads of different words, asks for a drink or something to eat, tells you, or others if they are upset, makes friends - consistently use sentences with a wider vocabulary. Additionally, educators reported increased confidence, and enhanced social and emotional development. This was especially noticeable with regard to children whose first language was not English.

Questionnaire responses indicate that prior to undertaking ETB training, it seems that educators with higher qualification levels (e.g., Level 8 degree, or higher) felt they were more knowledgeable about language and communication in young children, and how to support this. Moreover, questionnaire responses indicated that ETB training resulted in an increase in the numbers of educators who felt they were knowledgeable about and understood communication and language in young children. Overall, ETB training increased educator confidence in terms of supporting children's language skills. Following ETB training, educators also relayed improvements in their knowledge about how to identify children who would benefit from the programme.

In relation to the most beneficial aspects of the programme, educators were particularly positive about co-delivery with Speech and Language Therapists, indicating that they enhanced the success of the programme. SLT involvement ensured that educators had continuous access to support and advice throughout the programme. It provided opportunities for parents to meet and establish relationships with SLTs, reinforced the importance of language and communication for parents, enabling educators to connect with parents in a more meaningful way in this regard.

Section 7. SLT Perspectives

SLTs were invited to attend two focus groups. The first focus group took place in June 2023 towards the end of the first roll out of the programme and was open to all of the SLTs involved. The second follow-up focus group took place in February 2024 and focused on the second roll out of the programme, and therefore, only included SLTs that were involved in both phases. 10 SLTs participated in the first focus group and 4 participated in the follow-up second focus group. Overall, across both focus groups, and consistent with parent/guardian and educator perspectives, the SLTs identified significant benefits of the programme for children directly, but also for educators, and for their own professional work.

Benefits for Children

Consistent with parents and educators, SLTs were very positive about the programme. They highlighted significant benefits that accrued for children, from delivering ETB within the naturally occurring environment of the child's early childhood setting. They commented specifically on children's enjoyment of the programme, noting the many aspects; books, puppets, musical instruments, that appealed to children, motivating them to engage in the various activities.

Kids really enjoyed the books. They enjoyed the puppets and everything and the instruments. They can really get involved with them

SLTs stressed how the programme resulted in significant improvement in children's language skills, commenting that "the preschool staff are noticing all the qualitative stuff and all the functional impact it's having apart from the pre and post tracker data." Like the educator accounts, one SLT described how she "even had parents approach me or ring me and say, oh my goodness, like you know, we had children go from using two-three-word sentences to using 8/9/10 word sentences."

Congruent with parent/guardian and educator reports, the SLTs identified significant improvement in children's confidence.

So, the benefit is huge and even for children who are reluctant speakers, you know, I've I had two or three of them in my group and the change in them in terms of their confidence levels have improved. So, I think its stuff that even aside from the speech and language development, it's things like confidence, you know, they're built up hugely in the group...

The confidence just growing so much. They've done three weeks of it and the preschool teacher was saying to me that one of the parents came in and had commented that they had all noticed at home and even neighbours and relations were like, what are you doing with that child she's come on so much, you know?

Describing ETB as a “brilliant programme” another SLT noted how she had “seen the benefits that it has for the kids and like, you know, the improvements in them, especially last year, I could see it because I was seeing them every week.” While another SLT commented that they could “see a huge difference in the children already [a few weeks in], which is great to see, whereas, another highlighted how the children’s “sentences have got longer and more complicated...and...attention and concentration has improved,” with another expressing her surprise at “how much of an impact...this programme...[had]...on their confidence and their participation as well as just their specific speech and language skills.”

Consistent with the tracker data, and with parent/guardian and educator accounts, the SLTs also indicated that the programme resulted in increased language and communication skills and confidence for children with EAL. As such, one SLT explained how in her group, a child, “where Polish is her first language...even though she’s been in the pre-school for the guts of the year, when I started, she was really reluctant to speak in the preschool.” While the SLT reported a continued *reluctance* to speak at the end of the programme, she described how this child “literally went from nodding and smiling at the first tracker to actually using some little three- and four-word responses.”

Noting how some of the educators “wrote little notes on the trackers...kind of for ones that she’s noticed that difference in confidence or participation,” SLTs felt “it would be nice to capture some qualitative data from the pre-school teachers, because it's not, you know, really captured on the trackers as such.”

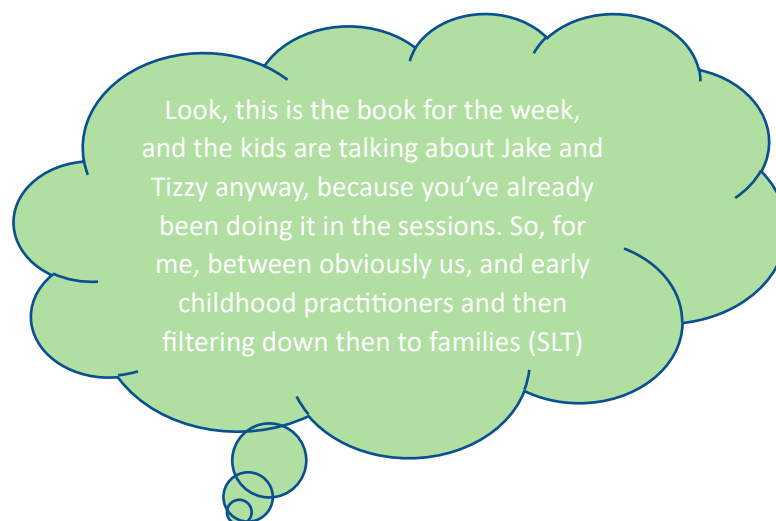
All in all, SLTs stressed the significant impact of participating in the programme, for the children, with one stating, “I don't think I'd have got that benefit in their language development if they had just been coming in for clinic appointments for a start, they'd still be waiting on appointments. But even if they had had been coming in, I don't think I would see that.”

Benefits for the Home Environment

The SLTs corroborate previous findings from parents and educators concerning the impact of the programme on the home learning environment (see Table 8). When asked about potential benefits of the programme, one SLT mentioned that it “gave them a conversation about the importance of reading at a younger age.” While it is “coming from us [SLTs], it’s modelling to families, really, the importance of this [reading] from an early age.” Similarly, another SLT referenced modelling, stating,

Definitely for me, the books and just modelling to families, the importance of reading at such early stage. It's lovely to be in a position to give all that cohort their book to go home for the week, and the kids are so excited then, and they were saying to me last year, Oh, I did this with Daddy. Daddy knows Tizzy and just it was nice.

Another SLT clearly situated the effect of the programme on the home environment within a bioecological context, noting, “we’re setting the combination with the practitioners, and they are passing it on then to the families they work with.” Reflecting on the benefits of this approach, she explained that she “really like[s] that point of view because you wouldn’t typically send, if you’re seeing kids with language delay in the clinic, you might go through strategies, but you’re not actually giving them a book to go home and read. You’re making suggestions, but I just like how concrete that was”.



Benefits for Educators

The SLT responses also validate the educators’ own account about how the programme enhanced their knowledge and understanding of language and communication in young children, and how to identify children for inclusion in the programme. Table 8 summarises the SLT perspectives in this regard.

Table 8: SLT Perspectives on the Benefits of the ETB Programme for Educators

Benefit	SLT Commentary
Attractive resource, and easy to use.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I thought it was really attractive and a really good way to sell it to the preschool that everything was kind of in the pack and that the resources were all new and that the preschool didn't have to go out and buy anything. - And for the preschools, well, you could, it was very easy for them to follow the programme because they had everything that they needed and...stuff was lovely as well. - the resources they worked really, really well and it definitely was a bit of a carrot kind of for the preschools for them to be getting the kit definitely
Enhanced Educator Understanding of Language Development, including English as a Second Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We now have staff who know the difference between receptive and expressive language or the difference between speech and language or know how important it is, you know, for a child to have good play skills and good attention and listening skills. - SLTs identified the Educators learning around children with English as a second language as a significant benefit. They noted that educators may have wondered if children had language difficulties or problems with English fluency. They suggested a possible way to assess this – “if you have a kid and you're not sure, just throw them into the group, do the group with them, and then if they're still really struggling at the end, then maybe it's more indicative that they need a referral into me”
Educator Confidence in Referring a Child for SLT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Look at their progress pre and post and if they still haven't made progress then come to me and do a referral. - With their early talk boost training EYP's might observe specific reasons for referral - In the past, that they were unsure ‘to refer in sometimes’ but now there is a greater awareness and ‘it’s just something that they [educators] enjoyed’ now - That we're looking more at comprehension...and even though a child's chatty, they might not have the expressive language. So, I feel that they've learnt a lot.

Benefits for SLTs

Beyond children, educators and the home learning environment, the SLTs identified professional benefits for themselves. These benefits included:

- enhanced relationships with educators,
- the potential for ETB to reduce caseloads
- the opportunity to support and promote language development for children, beyond those selected to take part in ETB

Enhanced Relationships between SLTs and Educators

In terms of their working relationship with educators, many of the SLTs indicated they had previously worked with some of the educators. Consequently, the programme further enhanced these existing positive relationships. For example, one SLT reported, “I’d have already had very much quite a strong relationship with the preschool.’ This SLT therefore, “kind of chose that preschool...I thought maybe by getting this programme up and running, it might require less of me over time.” Another explained, “we’d be used to linking in with this preschool... it was just kind of like linking up again... we hadn’t seen one another since before COVID,” while another said, “we’re not unused to working with the early childhood providers because we work with them all the time as part of our job anyway,” while in another instance, the SLT had “actually worked with the two practitioners that I trained.” Accordingly, the SLTs found the educators “always to be very, very...I suppose involved, interested, enthusiastic.”

Every time I come down, they would have everything organized and ready, the space set up with all the resources and you know, they could email me and ring me kind of week to week if they had any questions. So, we were definitely well able to be in kind of communication with one another and to kind of support one another.

Having an existing relationship with the educator, “having the familiarity of having known me before maybe that’s a little bit easier than somebody completely new.” In another instance, the SLT referenced creating a new link with the early childhood settings, stating, “it was nice to have that link with the preschool and that has kind of fostered other easy phone calls.”

So, having that link and getting that communication going has been lovely...for me. It’s that working relationship I feel I have now with the with the preschool manager

One SLT felt that the voluntary nature of educator participation was important, resulting in “more buy in.” In the past, she had previously run the programme “with services that were told this is what we’re running, and this is how we’re doing it.” She articulated how this didactic approach “doesn’t work nearly as well.”

Potential of the Programme to Impact Referrals to SLTs and Reduce Caseloads

A recurring theme across both SLT focus groups related to the potential for ETB to reduce referrals to SLT clinics, and in turn, reduce their caseloads. In both focus groups, the SLTs noted that the time involved in ETB was somewhat of an investment with potential to save time in the long run – “I think it would-be short-term pain for long term gain.”

Describing how two children would possibly have been referred to an SLT clinic after she “had seen them at the start of the year,” one SLT stated, ‘toward the end, I think they were actually fine.’ Accordingly, “even though it takes a lot of time now,” this SLT felt that ‘down the line, it probably does help the overall kind of caseload, things like that. You know, kids coming in that maybe aren't completely necessary referral and things like that.’

Another suggested that in the future, as educators were trained, it may be easier to refrain from taking every single referral.

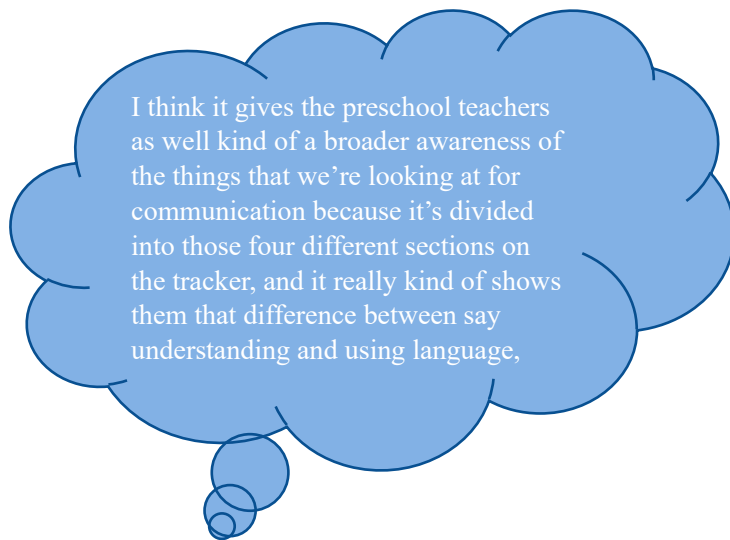
Instead of just blindly accepting loads of referrals from them every September, it might be a case of...[being]...a little more confident in saying...hold off on making that referral

She would advise educators to “do the group thing, look at [the children’s] progress pre and post, and if they still haven't made progress then come to me and do a referral...”

This SLT further referenced the need to encourage educators to trust their professional judgement, “to be able to say to them, well, I know you have the training. I know you've done the group; I know you can see the outcome from this time round.” From her perspective, this approach might be “a better way of working” with educators, supporting them to become more involvement in decision-making regarding referrals.

Instead of just kind of always being the expert and accepting all of the referrals, that they take a bigger role in deciding who does need the support and who would just do well in the group and who's language deprived versus language disordered...I'm hopeful that that's what will happen next year.

Likewise, another SLT expressed her hope that the programme would help educators “to kind of almost screen out.” She suggested getting the programme “rolled out in more of the preschools, I think it should take some workload from us.” Noting that “even though we are initially putting in the training,” she hoped that “the referrals you get, will be really appropriate referrals then.”



This SLT felt that the educators' increased awareness might help them "in terms of making referrals or recommending children for referral, because they might just have a more specific reason for referral maybe."

SLT Perspectives on ETB Training

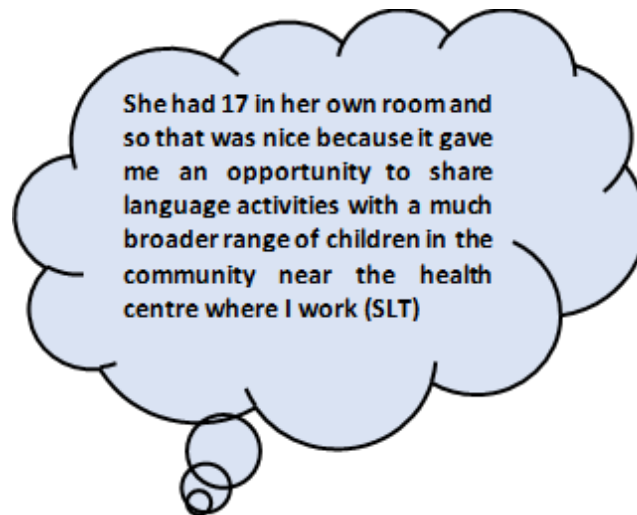
SLTs spoke positively about the training they received themselves, to introduce them to the programme, as well as the training they provided to educators. They commented upon the pace and content of the training they received, noting, "the content itself was not going to be difficult, and it was pitched really well at the SLTs". The success of the training was attributed to the trainer whom SLTs described as "a good speech and language therapist...she gave us all the salient information to run the course without go spending, you know, in in the shortest amount of time." The SLTs also underscored the importance of having a basic understanding of the underlying goal of the programme, remarking that the trainer did not need to go into all of the content because "it's all there in the folder and it's really well laid out." Regarding the training they themselves gave to the educators in advance of the programme commencing, SLTs were again, positive, and enthusiastic. They commented on the pace and content of the training, the group size, and the interactive nature of the training. As illustrated in table 9, group size significantly impacted the time required for SLTs to train the educators.

Table 9 SLT’s Perspective of the ETB Training of Educators

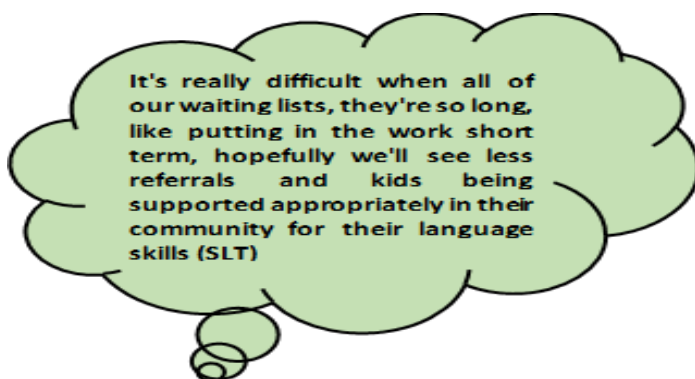
Pace and Content of Training for Educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We're actually talking about...language...versus speech and what you need to target first and all that. One educator was really surprised by...the level you have to start at and where you moved. So, I think the training covered that quite well with the pyramid and things that we did. So that was a good piece to get that in first for her to even understand why we were doing it and what we were trying to work on
Interactive Nature of Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It was nicely interactive as well - I think it's important to just always tell staff I'm going to go through the tracker with you with real children, because I think, they feel if they don't get it all in the training session that they'll never be able to do it, or to run the group
Group Size	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - One SLT who only had two educators in her group for training, felt she had to put in a lot of work. On the second session, the training flowed better, and they were more interactive - There was general agreement in the group that with larger numbers, extra time was needed for training - There was a balance required re numbers participating and having enough time

Potential for SLTs to Support Language Development for All Children

Consistent with educator perspectives ([see Section 6](#)), SLTs also mentioned how ETB provided them with the opportunity to support and promote language development in children, beyond those selected to take part in the intervention. In one setting, for example, where the SLT and the educator were implementing the programme with a group of 8 children, the educator advised that she had “come away with lots of ideas for my whole room.” This educator suggested she was “going to do this with my whole group.” As noted in the focus group excerpt here, there were 17 children in the group, thus, enabling the SLT to share language activities with a larger group of children.



The idea of supporting children within the community featured in other SLT's commentary too. As illustrated in the excerpt below, while commenting on the potential for ETB to reduce referrals, another SLT, also mentioned working with children in their community.



Other benefits identified by SLTs, included early intervention while working within the wider community, “getting in...at the ground level might help us in the long run.” In one case, participating in the programme, meant that the SLT was part of a wider team in the community, which helps “more than just in the clinic” where SLTs can feel a ‘bit isolated.’ The benefits of having a universal reach in the preschools was also noted from an *accessibility* perspective. In this respect, SLTs felt that children whose parents “might be reluctant” to attend a clinic or a primary care centre would benefit from accessing ETB in the preschool setting.

Summary

As discussed, the SLTs recognised how the programme resulted in significant improvements in children's language and communication skills. They highlighted its positive influence on the home environment, as well as benefits for educators, including increased knowledge, and confidence in identifying children for inclusion in the programme, which may result in more targeted referrals to SLTs, over-time. The respectful positive regard for the educators featured prominently in SLT commentary.

It seems that implementing the programme within the early childhood settings provided an opportunity for SLTs to reach a larger group of children, not just those chosen to participate in ETB. In this way, SLTs can support and promote language development and communication in children, beyond those involved in ETB. The universal reach in the early childhood settings, helped children access support with language and communication, especially in circumstances where parents may be reluctant to attend a clinic or a primary care centre. Moreover, implementing ETB within the wider community helped SLTs feel they were part of a wider team, readressing the isolation that can result from working alone in a clinic.

Section 8. Enablers and Barriers

A key aim of the evaluation was to determine the effect of the programme on children's language and communication abilities. The findings identified that the programme was a success in this regard. However, an additional and important aim of the evaluation was to also highlight factors related to the implementation of the programme that might act as enablers or barriers, to the successful running of the programme. This section, therefore, focuses on findings from the online surveys, interviews and focus groups, where participants were specifically asked about any changes they might recommend for the programme, anything that worked well or could work better, and anything that arose as an issue for the successful running of the programme. Accordingly, this section draws together some of these implementation barriers and enablers, some of which, have been discussed in earlier parts of the report.

Parental Insights on Key Enablers and Barriers

From a parental perspective, findings indicate that they identified accessibility and ease of use of the resources, and the implementation of the programme within their child's early childhood setting, as key enablers. [Section 5](#) of this report discusses the parents' overall positive perspective of the programme. This positivity permeated their response to questions concerning aspects of the programme that worked well, i.e., the enablers of ETB.

As highlighted in [Section 5](#), all parents mentioned how much their children enjoyed the Jake and Tizzy books. In terms of enablers then, parents described the programme as "very straightforward," "it was all done in a very nice, exciting way," and "the books were lovely." They commended the appealing layout, images and colours, highlighting that the books were 'relatable' and connected with home life: "some of the books, like, you know, where Jake wants to help out and all that kind of stuff... I can't do anything now and she's like, I'll help you'. As mentioned previously, many parents stated that their children wanted to keep the books, and the children often requested rereading of the books. Children were also keenly aware if they had missed a book in the sequence. One mother explained how her little boy "was sick and he missed one, and he knew the picture was missing, and he knew he'd missed one in the series, and he was upset that he missed one."

In common with the SLTs, parents also identified implementation of the programme in their child's early childhood setting as a key enabler. They were happy to have this support for language and communication located in the early childhood setting.

It took place at the preschool. So, I didn't have to take him out for an appointment or anything like that. It all happened when he was at the preschool, and it was very handy...

In addition to the convenience of not having to remove their child for an SLT appointment, parents also commented on how the group interactions within the early childhood setting further supported their child's language, communication and social skills, "you know, they're all sitting and looking at the same thing and they're all interested in the same...I definitely think socially it's helping and conversation skills like, that's a great skill to learn." Another parent mentioned how the programme gave children a common interest, which supported conversation and social skills development.

He was going into school, and he was wondering did they read the book with their Mammy last night and he was going to ask the friends that gives them an interest, the same interest. I suppose the confidence as well like you know, you can see that stuff, but he was able to talk about it, gave them common ground to come and talk about.

Based upon their positive experience of the programme, and the benefits they witnessed for their own child's communication, language, confidence and social-emotional development, parents suggested a broader roll-out of ETB across the early childhood sector.

Yes, but it's only in *this* playschool and there are other kids around who could benefit from it... I hope it will be implemented and you could offer that for more kids. I think it would be better. I think it would be beneficial... for it to be spread wider, hopefully

One parent, whose child had English as an additional language, felt the programme "would be beneficial for it to be spread wider." She noted, "there's probably plenty of parents that would be in the same boat as me...I can see it helping other kids as well."

Another parent commented 'Yeah, I think there's a lot of young parents as well that might be like I don't know, will they all read? ... So, I think it's lovely when they do it in preschool and all together'.

Parents cited very few barriers or challenges when discussing the ETB programme. Indeed, any challenges identified reflected their desire to engage even more with the programme, to further support their child's language and communication, in the home environment. Suggestions for improvement therefore related primarily to the provision of additional

information, such as “information leaflets with ideas for other activities related to the resources...” Noting that her child liked the *songs*, one parent stated, “I didn’t know what songs they would have been doing that week, but we’ve got them now as a booklet at the end.” While appreciative of now having the booklet of songs, this parent felt that “maybe if you’d had that information on the week, they were doing it, I might have been able to incorporate a little bit more at home.” More broadly, some parents felt that while the manager of the early childhood setting, initially told them about the programme, they were unaware of what was “happening week, week to week.”

One day she [child] told me no, we’ll play this game, and I didn't know what she was -it was basically you had been doing opposites – big, small...and like she was explaining it like ‘you say big, and I say small,’ and I didn't guess that it was opposites. We tried it, and it was positive that she was trying to tell me what was happening, but maybe if I'd known, if I'd known that you were doing opposites or big and small or that this week, then I would have picked it up before then...

One parent therefore, called for “a little bit more involvement with the parents.” While she felt “everything was very well explained...[and]...we got to take home the book and it was lovely”, she suggested that “maybe, if we got to be there on the day it was read.” Acknowledging that “it’s not possible for all parents to be there,” she wondered about the possibility of “an event where we could all get together with the kids.”

Further reflective of parents’ desire to support their child in the home environment, other suggestions included provision of online resources, such as videos that would model “how to do your nursery rhymes,” or “how to interact, how to read a book differently rather than just saying the words.”

Educator Insights on Key Enablers and Barriers

In a similar vein to the parents, the educators were predominantly positive about the programme, highlighting significant gains for children, the home environment, and their own professional practice ([see Section 6](#)). This sense of enthusiasm continued when asked about what worked well for them in the programme and what advice they would give to other people running the programme in the future. Table 10 summarises the key enablers identified by educators relating to **organisation** (educator preparation and readiness); **timing** (when best to implement the programme); **professional support** (internal from management and external from SLT); **staffing** (adequate numbers of staff to support programme implementation).

Educators indicated that these enablers for the successful implementation of the programme, also act as barriers when they are not in place. Clearly, participating educators were acutely aware of staffing obligations (i.e., adult: child ratios) under the [Early Years Services Regulations, 2016](#). As such, they noted the need to maintain adult: child ratios as a particular challenge for the successful and continued roll out of the programme:

We're trying to figure out the barriers of just how to cover staff and how to make sure that while I'm delivering this programme that the rest of the children in my room have adequate child to staff ratios

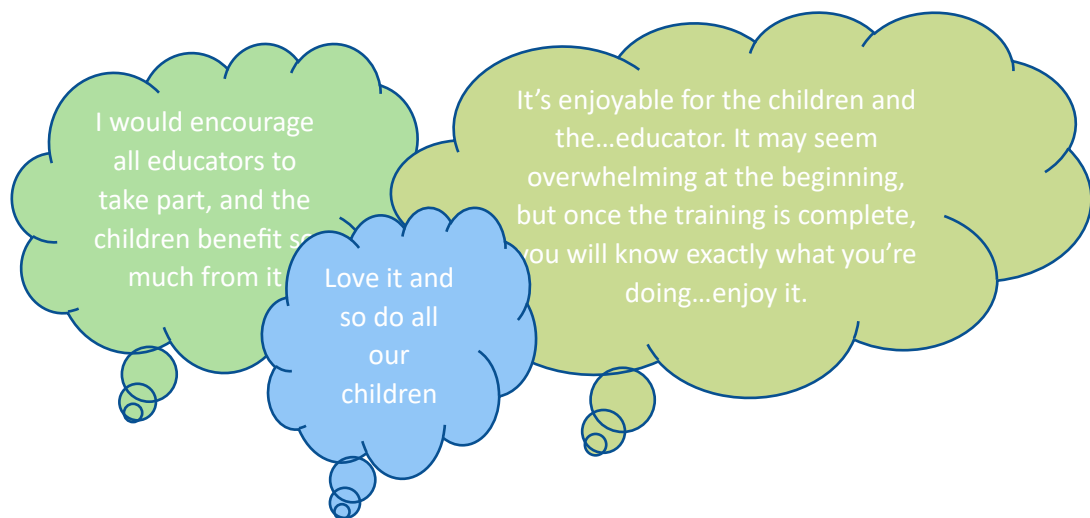
The biggest struggle that I think there is just making sure that there is a support in place for the staff and the team, whereas like obviously in a class of I've 18, I've reduced ratio this year cause I've a child under AIM. It's just making sure that while I'm running the programme that the other children and the other team member is like suitably covered for ratios, so that they're just covered themselves that you have the time, that you can actually focus on your [children] and you're not worried about leaving someone else in the lurch.

Table 10: Key Enablers as Identified by Educators

Enabler	Educator Commentary
Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Aim to be organised with preparation so that the programme is delivered consistently but without taking time from other activities – Study programme first and prepare before each session so you have everything at hand. – Take a breath, as it seems very intimidating at first but it's a lot more manageable then, it seems, organisation is key! – Be organised and have all the props laid out, encourage the children to use the toilet beforehand to avoid interruptions and involve as many children and staff as you can to maximise the benefits. – Do not be daunted by the preparation. There is a lot of photocopying and organising photographs. On a daily basis, just make sure to read through each 'lesson', have props to hand and be familiar with the sequence each day. Ensure that the children use the toilet beforehand to avoid interruptions and do not go overtime as some children may lose focus. – Be well prepared, read through and have all resources ready for the activities. – Take the time at the start of each week to gather all materials/resources needed. Photocopy or laminate resources used for longevity of use. – Stick to the programme week by week. Be prepared, on each Friday prepare for the following week. and complete the photo evidence at the end of each session. Set the same days and time for the programme as this develops consistency for the children also. – Make sure that someone is free and available to set up and plan the activities of the week.
Timing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – As I was delivering the programme in the last term to children who are mainly Transitioning to primary school they were quite far ahead with language and listening skills...Next year however I will implement it with the younger children. – I have no negatives but will roll out the programme at the start of the preschool year in future so we can hopefully maintain the good practices throughout the year. – I would recommend starting this program in the Autumn..., we started in April and quite late in the term year.
Professional Support from Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – I would make sure my manager/supervisor is on board and communicate practical needs in implementing the programme as their support is required. – Thankfully, my manager, has been very supportive of it and we have many extra team members that we can slot into different places to make sure that everyone is covered. But there is definitely that ownership as well of like, management needs to be on board with it. And obviously, your team members need to be on board with that as well in order for it to be effective
Professional Support from SLT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – This is our 2nd year to deliver this intervention. We rely on the support of a very committed SLT who has provided training and support throughout. – I do feel confident in running the ETB independently but believe that the programme is enhanced by the supervision of the excellent SLT who [was] involved my preschool
Staffing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Ensure that there is ample staff to complete the programme – Train and involve as many staff members as possible. This will ensure that more children have access to the intervention and that the positive practices learnt through training are implemented throughout the session. – We see this as a great opportunity and the main thing was just the logistics of how this was gonna affect our staffing, cause...we need a member of staff to deliver it. How will that affect ratios?

As attested to in Sections 6 and 7, participating educators and SLTs indicated that, at times, early childhood settings found it was not possible to commence or continue with the programme due to staffing issues, i.e., attrition, and/or absences due to illness.

Despite the challenges, educators seemed energized by the programme, describing it as a “wonderful time to build relationships with the children,” as a “very worthwhile and enjoyable programme for teacher and children,” and “overall excellent and all preschool should be trained in it.”



As mentioned in Section 2, of the 23 participating early childhood settings, two settings were privately run. As their settings were in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, both settings participated in the programme at the invitation of the SLT. An educator from one of these settings pointed to the challenges of supporting a child with speech and language delay within the context of private provision. Even though “we are private, but still, we have children...a huge need in this area to support language...there is such a need.” She felt that “sometimes we find these children aren't being, it's not being picked up and at home parents are...they chose not to go to speech and language.”

Commenting that “parents are extremely busy working,” this educator suggested “some parents don't, they don't see it, they don't see the little red flags, or they don't see when children don't meet, you know they don't identify these children are going to school and at a disadvantage.” She further explained, “I don't have, I have zero contact with any intervention group, or specialist or therapist...they just don't contact you, so it's, you know...”. Expressing her appreciation for ETB, and the support and advice provided by the SLT, she stated, “at least you

know there's extra work being done, you know? Consequently, she expressed her hope that the programme would be made “available to all children.”

SLT Insights on Key Enablers and Barriers

Like the parents and educators, SLTs were predominantly fervent in their praise for the programme ([see Section 7](#)). While the SLTs did not directly experience barriers themselves during programme implementation, they did acknowledge barriers for educators and early childhood settings, reinforcing the findings reported earlier. The barriers identified, however, did not relate to the programme *per se*, but rather, to wider contextual factors within individual early childhood settings.

Due to the targeted nature of the programme, one SLT highlighted the challenge of having designated space within the early childhood setting, when implementing the programme:

you can't just include everyone because they're all in the room. You have to only pick the ones [children] that it's appropriate for because there will be like a few left and they'll be like, oh, can we not just throw them all in together and, you know, you kind of have to be like, no, it's for these people specifically

Consistent with the findings from educators, SLTs identified the timing of the roll out as a potential challenge. For example, one SLT commented that the “Easter to Summer run-in, is...just a really bad time of year, they [settings] find it particularly busy.”

School trips, different parents' days and things like that. So, we ran it as suggested, apart from week nine didn't happen. The parents' week didn't happen...

Although she felt that “the run-in from September to Christmas is much better,” for another SLT, the setting was unable to run the programme again due to competing demands on time and resources in the Autumn timeframe. SLTs remarked that “because it's quite a long programme, it's hard to kind of decide on a good time to start it”. As noted by one SLT, ‘it's the practical things that are either going to make it or break it.’

Some SLTs highlighted challenges involved in the second roll out of ETB. For one setting, the SLT reported that the setting just did not have the time and capacity to engage in the programme for a second time despite being very positive towards the programme. SLTs discussed a range of conflicting issues such as timing for settings within the calendar (e.g., Christmas, Easter, Bank Holidays) to roll out the programme, staffing issues: changing personnel and staff turnover, staff on sick leave, and other demands such as inspections and first aid training. One SLT noted that the manager of the early childhood setting said, “there's just too much going on

and until I get my staff cover back in, I can't even, you know, talk about it.” This SLT felt that because of the staffing challenges, the programme “just wasn't a priority” for the setting. As a result, while it was intended that SLTs could reduce the level of support they provided second time round, for this setting, the SLT had to continue “coming in weekly”.

Likewise, staff absences meant that on occasion, educators were unable to implement the programme on the intended days or for the full nine-week duration. From a SLT perspective, “continuity of staff in early years settings” enables the smooth implementation of the programme.

If you have the same person co-running it with you every week and they're then co-running it with the same staff member on days two and three, it just works so much easier for us because you just have that continuity of staff.

As reported previously, SLTs commended the ETB training they received, and the training they delivered to the educators. Nonetheless, they alluded to ‘an imbalance’ between SLTs and Educators in terms of flexibility in organising time to engage with the training. SLTs highlighted their ability to balance their case load with delivering the training. However, they were acutely aware, that participating educators retained their responsibilities towards children while undertaking the training. Therefore, as explained by one SLT, when she was “going out to do the training with them [educators], I just didn't book any appointments in here in the clinic”. Conversely, the educators “still have the kids in the preschool, they still have to be minded and everything you know.” Although the educators “made it work and were really enthusiastic,” this SLT felt this ‘was a definite barrier to begin’.

SLTs expressed concern also, that several educators availed of the training in their own unpaid time. They appreciated the effort made by the educators, noting, “that was really a big commitment for the preschool, and they didn't get extra pay for coming in”. In recognition of the educator’s commitment to the training, and cognisant that they undertook it in their own unpaid time, the SLTs organised training at a time that worked best for the educators (see Table 11). Thus, ensuring that the ETB training took place at the most convenient time for educators.

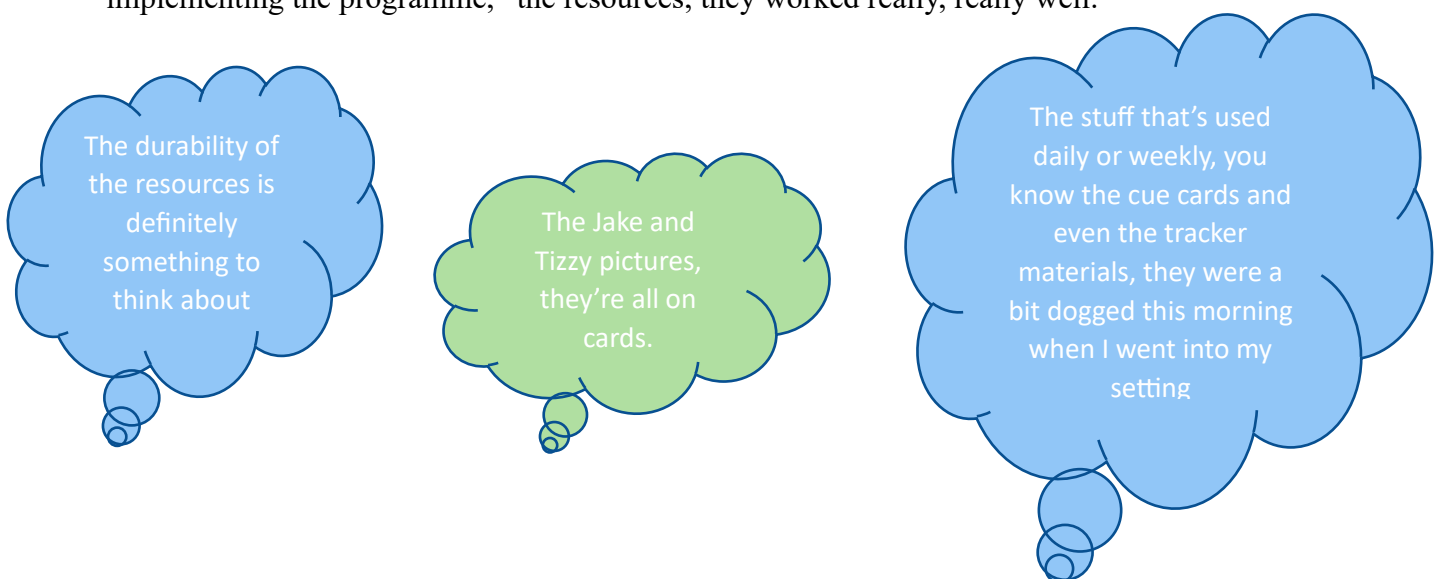
Regarding challenges SLTs encountered directly themselves during programme implementation, it seems their experience overall was positive. When reflecting on the trackers, which they felt were very beneficial, both in identifying children for the programme, and in highlighting changes in children’s abilities over the 9 weeks of the programme, one SLT, suggested that for ease of administration “all of the sections that involved asking the child to

complete any activity should be together in one section”. Nonetheless, she stated that “the programme overall is very good, and I hope to continue running it in the Autumn”.

In relation to the second roll out, one SLT noted that the early childhood educator “was quite happy” to input the tracker data, and ‘didn’t see that as a problem. She thought that was also very straightforward.’ Two other SLTs felt that they were much more “hands on” than they had anticipated for the second roll out, mainly due to staffing challenges in the early childhood settings.

While all stakeholder groups widely commended the ETB resources, SLTs expressed concerns regarding their durability over time. There was a general sense that when used regularly, “materials could get worn.”

One possible solution is “to laminate” the resources, with one SLT indicating, she “will [laminate] for the next time.” SLTs were keen however, to reiterate that in the context of implementing the programme, “the resources, they worked really, really well.”



Consistent with the educators, SLTs identified key enablers (see Table 11) to implementing ETB, relating to **organisation** (SLT and educator preparation and readiness); **timing** (when best to implement the programme); **professional support** (from their own manager). Additionally, they identified the critical importance of **positive relationships** (notably respect for educators), **voluntary participation** (of educators and SLTs), **dedicated space** to implement the programme, and the **quality of the ETB resources** as key enablers to implementing the programme.

Table 11: Overview of the Key Enablers from the SLT Perspective

Enabler	SLT Commentary
Organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - And we're talking beforehand preparation. I just feel like the time element can't be underestimated for us [SLTs], but also, for the early years settings to look through each week and even just to know...OK, next week I need bubbles or I need Jelly or I need this or I need that, just so, that there is lots of work done to prepare beforehand and that doesn't mean that you know they [educators] open the book out on Monday morning...
Professional Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I've got a very understanding manager who encourages us to go and do this and we all really enjoy it, it's very hard to show that in your stats even though you know that you're doing something that's of great benefit.
Positive relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Constantly negotiate with the staff [educators] to make sure...that training times suit them. The time that you're delivering the program suits them so that you're...accommodating them rather than us coming in and saying, well, I can only do 9:00 o'clock in the morning and that's the time when all the kids are coming in and might be dysregulated or whatever. - One thing I was really, really conscious of, and so I was running mine at half nine on a Tuesday morning, and I literally just made absolutely 110% sure that I was down there on time. And because I know then, my preschool they were, they were really, you know, accommodating. - I just thought it was really important in my part to be on time and just get stuck in and be gone on time as well because I was very conscious that the other staff and children in the room were kind of being put out for that time. And I thought they're going to start getting really frustrated if I'm running 10 minutes over or if I'm arriving 10 minutes later or anything. - So, I thought that was really, really important because, you know, everyone knows you go into the clinic, sometimes you need to get out for something and then somebody calls, or somebody comes into the office. Whereas, I was just like I have to go. I just have to go. - So, having that link and getting that communication going has been lovely [the benefit] for me is that working relationship I feel I have now with the with the preschool manager.
Voluntary Participation (SLTs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We volunteered...it was completely optional. So, anyone that you have on the session had to opt in basically (we) didn't have to...some therapists sort of put their names forward and others probably due to workload constraints, didn't. - I think, yeah, your outcomes would probably be different if this is something you were trying to squeeze in. - So, I think if I hadn't kind of volunteered, I could imagine being quite resentful. [However], once you kind of have the training done and you have the preschool staff trained, it's not a huge time commitment, you know, but it's just that those early stages are quite tricky.
Voluntary Participation (Educators)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Like no more than us volunteering to be part of the project, I think it was really important that services are also volunteering because then you get more buy in. - I've done it before with services that were told this is what we're running, and this is how we're doing it, and it doesn't work nearly as well.
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It was really attractive that everything was kind of and a really good way to sell it to the preschool that everything was kind of in the pack and that the resources were all new and that the preschool didn't have to go out and buy anything. - And for the preschools, well, you could, it was very easy for them to follow the program because they had everything that they needed, and stuff was lovely as well. You know, the kids really enjoyed the book. They enjoyed the puppets and everything and the instruments they can really get involved with them. - I felt like Santa Claus going in. I literally felt like Santa Claus coming in and they were so excited to see what was in the bag.

Overall, as indicated in [Section 7](#), SLTs felt it “was lovely to be involved in something that was such a fixed and focused piece of work”, and where they felt they ‘really could make a difference’ to the children.

In terms of the time and commitment required by the SLTs themselves, they stressed that the time taken to engage in the programme is an investment. One SLT summarised this idea as follows:

And when we're trying to balance it out with our caseload and you know, we're all probably inundated with referrals and trying to make sure we're seeing the children that would get the most benefit from us. And I think a lot of children won't benefit from coming into us, but they will definitely benefit from our input in preschools. **And if your research can show that, then that would be brilliant...**

SLT Suggestions for the Future of the Programme

Drawing upon their own positive experience of the programme, and the significant language gains for children, SLTs proposed strategies to further support programme implementation into the future. Table 12 summarises these suggestions, which address planning, training of undergraduate SLT students, links to local primary schools, and developing an Irish language version of the programme.

Table 12 SLT Suggestions to Support Programme Implementation in the Future

SLT Suggestion	Purpose/Benefit
Planning/Organisation: Agree target dates with the setting mapped out in advance, ‘definitely the dates, having them all planned out from day one training dates tracker dates, start date and it is consecutive weeks after that	More organised and streamlined roll-out for SLTs and Educators... “those things make a big difference.”
Training: Train final year undergraduate SLT students to roll out the programme potentially on their practicum placements	Facilitate future wider roll out.
Establish Connections: Link to local primary schools	Possibility of longer-term roll-out with children.
Research: Undertake a long term follow up in terms of asking primary school teachers “who are getting feeder children from potential early talk boost preschools”	To see if there is a long-lasting impact of the programme and if teachers are “noticing anything from the point of your attention listening or completion of task or turn taking or interaction. Are they noticing any changes there?”
Gaeilge: Translate the ETB pack as Gaeilge/in the Irish language	Useful for children attending a Naíonra (An early childhood Irish language immersion setting).

Summary

All stakeholders (parents, educators, SLTs) were predominantly positive and enthusiastic about the programme (as were children, as discussed earlier). Parents identified very few challenges regarding how the programme was implemented. Indeed, parents expressed their wish to engage even more with the programme to further support children’s language and communication, in the home environment. They commended the programme resources and highlighted the importance of implementing the programme in the child’s early childhood setting, which reduced the need for them to attend SLT clinics, and because it involved children’s peers, it also enhanced their social development and confidence in communicating and using language. Parents, educators and SLTs were united in their call for a broader roll-out of the programme to benefit more children.

Both the educators and the SLTs identified overlapping barriers and enablers relating to being organised and prepared to implement the programme, timing in terms of when best to offer the programme, and what age group benefits most (year 1 or year 2 of the [ECCE programme](#)) professional support, and staff capacity. In this respect, given their own caseloads, and the pressure on educators to balance implementing the programme with their responsibilities toward other children, while also complying with the adult: child ratios in the [Early Years](#)

[Services Regulations](#), the SLTs further pointed to the need for both educators and SLTs themselves to voluntarily participate in the programme, for “maximum buy-in”.

As mentioned, the barriers to programme implementation do not relate to the programme itself, but to wider contextual factors within individual early childhood settings, in the main. Accordingly, the micro-environment of the early childhood setting must be conducive to programme implementation.

Some of the issues in early years settings raised by the educators and SLTs are not specific to the running of the Early Talkboost programme (e.g., staff turnover, managing staff: child ratios, covering staff absence due to illness or holidays). Rather, these issues, which have been reported on previously (e.g., [Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2024](#); [SIPTU, 2023](#)) are pervasive within the early childhood profession, and point to broader issues in early childhood provision in Ireland related to expectations for staff, pay levels, working conditions and how the profession is funded. While changes have occurred in recent years (e.g., [Partnership for the Public Good](#); [Nurturing Skills](#)), and there is ongoing interaction with the government, additional work is needed at the macro- policy level to better support those professionals who choose to work in this important field, laying the foundations for lifelong learning and development (see [First Five](#)).

The next and final section of the report considers key recommendations to support the continued roll out and expansion of Early Talkboost in Ireland.

Section 9. Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no doubt that ETB works for young children. The evidence from the tracker data illustrates that the programme has a profound effect on early language skills – listening, understanding words, speaking, and building vocabulary – the vital foundation that enable children to learn to read (Feldman, 2019).

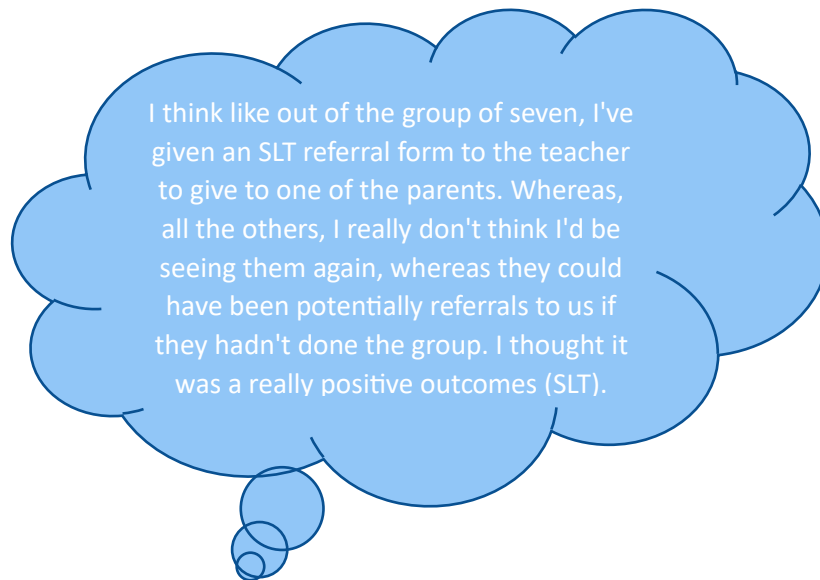
At a micro level, the evaluation found a statistically significant increase in each of the language areas measured: **Attention and Listening; Understanding, Speaking and Communication**, and a significant increase in overall language and communication. These significant increases were present in each of the age groups, with the largest overall gains in the 36-42-month-old age group (i.e., children availing of year one of the ECCE programme). Before beginning the programme, children with EAL had significantly lower scores in all aspects of language and communication measured than children without EAL. The gains made by children with and without EAL over the course of the programme were similar, except for understanding skills, where the children with EAL made a larger gain. All other stakeholders, children, educators, SLTs and parents confirm these findings concerning children’s language and communication. Alongside this, parents/guardians and educators also highlighted significant improvement in children’s social-emotional development and confidence levels.

The findings overall, across all stakeholder groups highlight the benefits at multiple levels when early intervention occurs within the child’s naturally occurring environment. As evident from this evaluation, the programme benefits extend beyond the children, to educators, SLTs, and parents/guardians in the home environment. Table 13 provides a summary of the key findings from the evaluation.

Table 13 Summary of Key Findings

The evaluation found	
1.	A statistically significant increase in each of the language areas measured: Attention and Listening; Understanding, Speaking and Communication , between the children’s scores before and after the programme
2.	A significant increase in children's overall language and communication
3.	These significant increases were present in each of the age groups, with the largest overall gains in the 36-42-month-old age group (i.e., children availing of year one of the ECCE programme)
4.	Both boys and girls benefitted from the programme, with boys making greater gains than girls
5.	A significant improvement in each of the four areas of language skills for children with English as an additional language before and after the programme
6.	The programme contributed positively to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Children’s confidence and social and emotional development ✓ The Home Learning Environment
7.	Educators’ knowledge and understanding of language and communication in young children increased, as well as their ability to support this, and select children who would benefit from the ETB programme
8.	The programme provided SLTs with the opportunity to support and promote language development for all children in the ECCE setting, beyond those selected to take part in ETB
9.	SLT involvement was an important factor in the success of the programme. Accordingly, co-delivery, involving speech and language therapists and educators was especially beneficial. This approach is transformative, with the potential to redress Speech and Language waiting lists, expedite therapy, and in turn, reduce SLT workloads

Congruent with others (e.g., Finnegan et al., 2015; McKean and Reilly, 2023), the evaluation highlights the importance of early intervention in boosting young children’s language and communication skills. However, as discussed in [Section 1](#), recent research in the Irish context indicates that provision of speech and language therapy in Ireland is insufficient to meet the needs of children (McConkey et al., 2021; Rafferty, 2014; Wright and O’Donoghue, 2018). Moreover, the Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists (IASLT, 2017) suggest that SLTs have limited capacity to provide guidance to primary caregivers and teachers as to how they can assist children’s speech and language development. The evaluation attests to the potential for ETB to redress Speech and Language waiting lists, expedite therapy, and reduce SLT workloads.



While learning language is an effortless process for most children, it can be challenging for others (Feldman, 2019; McKean and Reilly, 2023; Reilly and McKean, 2023), and even though some children do not experience socio-economic disadvantage, they can struggle to develop good language skills (Feldman, 2019). The present evaluation supports this claim. Across the 23 participating settings, children presented with delayed speech and language and EAL. Early childhood provides a short window when “the critical foundations are built to support child language development and provide a platform for children’s future life chances (McKean and Reilly, 2023, p.2259). Accordingly, as noted by Finnegan et al., (2015) and McKean and Reilly (2023), early intervention, is critical to boosting young children’s language skills (Finnegan et al., 2015; McKean and Reilly, 2023). In keeping with Ireland’s ratification of the UNCRC in 1992, it is incumbent upon policy makers to ensure that children who need support do not slip through the cracks. This evaluation provides an evidence base that supports integration of SLT services into the micro level of the early childhood setting. Consistent with Wright and O’Donoghue (2018), the findings suggest that such integration ensures that interventions reach all children who need them.

The evaluation indicates that children’s experiences within the micro level environment of the early childhood setting, and home are enhanced by knowledgeable, confident, and supportive adults (parents and educators). It found that ETB served as a valuable form of CPD for educators, increasing their knowledge of language and communication in young children, as well as their ability to identify children who would benefit from the programme, and/or refer to a SLT. Equally, in the home environment, parents reported greater understanding of how to support their child’s language and communication during story time. Additionally, findings

signify enhanced relationships between parents and SLTs, between parents and educators, between SLTs and educators, and indeed, between children within early childhood settings. These enhanced relationships emerged as a direct result of offering the programme within the early childhood settings, rather than in a clinic. Thus, further consolidating the need for, and the benefits of integrating SLT services at a local micro-setting level.

All evaluation participants would recommend ETB to others. Children, enjoyed the programme so much, they repeatedly asked their educator to “do more Tizzy time.” These findings have considerable implications for policy, notably the proposed [Equal Participation Model](#), and the [ECCE programme](#) more generally. They also have implications for practice, in terms of programme delivery and capacity building (see Table 14).

Table 14 Summary of Key Recommendations

	It is recommended that:	Benefit
Programme Delivery	SLTs and Educators continue to co-deliver the programme with early childhood educators in the short to medium term.	Ensure high quality delivery and closer connections between professionals.
	Speech and Language UK adapt the age ranges of the ETB tracker to enhance its suitability for use in the Irish ECCE context.	Given the age range accessing the ECCE programme in Ireland (i.e., 2 years 8 months and 5 years six months), the tracker must cover the full age range within early childhood settings in Ireland.
	Align the roll out of Early Talkboost with Talkboost programmes in Junior Infants.	Ensure continuity of provision in young children's experiences of language and communication supports.
Future Evaluations	Undertake an evaluation of a wider roll-out of ETB in a greater number of early childhood settings, involving more children, educators, SLTs and parents.	Add to the evidence base in an Irish context.
	Utilise the revised tracker tool (see earlier recommendation re programme delivery) in any future evaluation	Improve reliability and validity of findings with children aged over 54 months.
	Consideration of a wait-list control group.	Improve reliability and validity of findings in the Irish context.
Capacity Building	Incorporate ETB training into undergraduate SLT and ECCE degree programmes, with the purpose of including the programme in their practicum experiences, in the short term.	Upon graduating, these professionals will have the knowledge, skills and competencies to implement ETB into their practice.
	Offer ETB training to other professionals within the ECCE support infrastructure nationally, such as Better Start, County Childcare Committees, and Non-Governmental ECCE Organisations.	Both recommendations would over time, help to reduce waiting lists, and free up SLT time. In the longer term, SLTs could reduce support for early childhood settings who may be able to run ETB independently, thus ensuring the sustainability of the programme.
Policy	ETB is integrated into young children's naturally occurring environments at Micro-level.	This is essential to supporting children in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, not just in language and communication, but more holistically.
	In keeping with the thrust of Government policy, vis a vis targeted and universal supports, it is essential that the Government ensures that ETB is a central pillar of wrap around therapeutic supports (e.g., play therapy, occupational therapy) within the proposed Equal Participation Model . Additionally, it should be integral to the ECCE programme, notably in year one, when children appear to make the most significant gains in language and communication.	Rolling the programme out through the ECCE programme reduces the risk of children in need of support falling through the cracks, ultimately reducing SLT waiting lists and workloads. In keeping with First 5 these measures will ensure a good start in life for all young children, ensuring equal participation for all.

Language and communication permeate every aspect of a child's development. As Feldman (2019) indicates, when young children face challenges in language acquisition, they are more likely to struggle with learning to read when they start school, with the poorest children being most at risk of falling behind from an early age. Children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds tend to have more limited language skills than their more advantaged peers (Locke, Ginsborg and Peers, 2002), a difference that may emerge as early as 18 months (Fernald, Marchman, and Weisleder, 2013), and persist across the lifespan (Reilly and McKean, 2023). However, in common with Feldman (2019), the evaluation findings suggest that regardless of circumstances, many children can struggle to develop good language skills. Speech and language difficulties that extend into adulthood can have lasting consequences for children's social and emotional development (Hancock, et al., 2023), educational achievement (e.g., Chow, Ekholm & Coleman, 2018), affecting mental health (Hancock, Northcott, Hobson and Clarke, 2023; Lanbecker et al., 2020), and occupational status (Durkin et al., 2011; Schoon et al., 2010).

The best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children (UNCRC, 1989: Article 3). Furthermore, Article 12 states that the child's views must be considered in all matters affecting him or her. In addition to the participating children themselves wanting 'Tizzy' (ETB) sessions, as highlighted through the findings, the outcomes point to many children with a speech and language delay being supported to find their voice, both in the evaluation and most importantly in their everyday lives in their early childhood setting, and their home. In line with bio-ecological theory, these spaces where children spend most time (e.g., home/early childhood setting) have the greatest influence on their development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).

The findings from this evaluation cannot be ignored. The child cannot wait. The recommendations in this report are a political imperative and central to realising positive outcomes for all children in the context of the proposed Equal Participation Model specifically, and the ECCE programme and school contexts more broadly.

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