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NELI Preschool Formative Evaluation Report

Appendix to the main NELI Preschool Effectiveness
trial report

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Introduction

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) was commissioned by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) to carry out a formative evaluation of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) Preschool programme.¹ The evaluation took place from January to July 2024 and prior to the planned effectiveness trial of NELI Preschool. This evaluation had two primary objectives:

1. To determine the feasibility and acceptability of delivering the NELI Preschool programme in private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings, given that the efficacy trial (West et al., 2023) had predominantly concerned maintained settings. This was in response to concerns raised by the Stronger Practice Hubs about whether it would be feasible and acceptable for PVI settings to be recruited to the effectiveness trial.
2. To pilot data collection tools ahead of their use in the effectiveness trial.

A full overview of the formative evaluation design can be found in the trial protocol (Roy *et al.*, 2025).

Recruitment

OxEd recruited 20 PVI settings between October 2023 and February 2024 through regional in-person events and from informal queries and expressions of interest that were sent to the NELI support team. These settings had to have at least 14 children aged 3-4 years. They must not have participated in the efficacy trial of NELI Preschool that was conducted by the NELI team at the University of Oxford at the time (West et al., 2023). Following a brief phone call with the delivery team to ensure their eligibility and enquire as to their technological needs, settings signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to take part. As settings were still being recruited one to two months into the delivery period, many were not able to complete all 20 weeks of the programme within the allocated timeframe.

Formative evaluation sample

The formative evaluation involved a total of 20 PVI settings and approximately 516 children. The majority of these settings were from the North West and the South West, with a small number from the East Midlands, the West Midlands and the South East. This was the result of particular recruitment opportunities in these areas at the time. The recruited settings included a mixture of full-day and sessional provision, including some term-time only. Settings registered between 14 and 83 children for the programme, and between two and 10 staff to complete the training. Eight of the 20 settings were located in a highly deprived area,² while 10 were in areas with low levels of deprivation and two with moderate levels of deprivation.

From these 20 settings, 10 case studies were selected with the aim of sampling across a range of regions, setting sizes and deprivation levels. Additional settings were then contacted as needed to replace any settings that declined to participate or did not respond. Two settings, including one case study setting, dropped out of the evaluation after providing only baseline child data (name, class, date of birth, English as an Additional Language (EAL) status and LanguageScreen scores).³

Consent to participate in the setting-level data collection activities was sought from the Nursery Manager. Additional individual consent was sought from interview participants.

Settings had the option to request a tablet and/or screen (plus wireless trackpad and trolley) from OxEd if required to administer LanguageScreen and/or deliver the programme, respectively. Of the 20 settings, 16 requested the necessary screen technology (14 of which also requested a trackpad and trolley) from OxEd, and 15 a tablet.

¹ The purpose of a formative evaluation is to uncover any potential shortcoming of the programme as part of the development process in order to generate suggestions for improving it (van den Akker et al., 2013)

² Deprivation level was measured using the Income deprivation affecting children index (IDACI) for each setting's postcode.

³ One of these settings was undergoing significant staffing and structural changes, which led to significant delays in delivery. Unforeseen circumstances also resulted in them being unable to host a case study visit. The other setting provided no reason for their attrition and only dropped out of the evaluation through non-response.

Settings delivered the same programme model as intended for the effectiveness trial, although delivery timeframes were staggered according to specific setting challenges and requirements, and some settings did not get the opportunity to deliver the full 20 weeks. OxEd provided settings with compensation for the time taken to administer the LanguageScreen assessments and for two practitioners to complete the training, but the time for any additional practitioners to complete the training had to come from the setting's budget. A detailed description of the programme can be found in the main evaluation report.

Data collection

The following data collection was collected for the formative evaluation:

- **LanguageScreen scores**

LanguageScreen was administered by staff members in all 20 settings. OxEd then shared these results with the NFER research team.⁴

- **Targeted Group Selection data**

The 'Targeted Group Selection' spreadsheet collects data on child characteristics (including attendance patterns at the setting) for all children participating in the programme. These characteristics inform identification and selection of children for the targeted component. This spreadsheet will inform the data collection templates for the effectiveness trial which will enable NFER to select the ideally targeted sample (NFER's sample of targeted children) for both treatment and control settings to be used in analysis. Of the 20 settings involved in the formative evaluation, 18 shared data on the children's setting attendance patterns, Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) status and whether they had been selected for the targeted group component of the programme.

- **Session Delivery Logs**

All 10 case study settings were asked to complete Session Delivery Logs (SDLs), which collected child-level data on NELI Preschool session attendance. Settings were requested to submit a log every five weeks (four files in total). This is intended to be the primary data collection tool for the compliance and dosage analysis in the effectiveness trial. Eight of the 10 case study settings submitted at least one SDL.

- **Case studies**

Four of the nine case study settings received a visit from an NFER researcher to observe delivery of one whole-group session and one small-group session.⁵ The researcher also observed a period of continuous provision in the nursery to gain some contextual understanding of the process quality in the setting.⁶ As part of the visit, the researcher carried out an interview with the NELI Preschool Lead about their experience delivering the programme, as well as their views on completing the SDL. Remote interviews on the same topics were carried out via Microsoft Teams with the NELI Preschool Lead (and sometimes additional staff members) from the five case study settings that did not receive a visit.

This in-depth focus on practitioner experience was important given the formative evaluation's key interest in the feasibility and acceptability of delivering the NELI Preschool programme in PVI settings. In addition, the observations and SDLs allowed for an understanding of the extent to which PVI settings complied with the programme principles and intentions.

Qualitative analysis of the observation and interview data was carried out through a combination of deductive and inductive coding using MAXQDA. Triangulation of data sources within case studies allowed for more contextualised and nuanced

⁴ In the main trial settings will still be responsible for administering LanguageScreen but the NFER research team will have direct access to the data.

⁵ The setting that dropped out of the evaluation had been scheduled to receive a visit, which would have brought the total number of visits to five.

⁶ Process quality refers to the nature of daily interactions a child has in the setting, with staff, space, materials, other children, their families and the wider community (OECD, 2020).

understandings of the data collected. In addition, the SDLs and Targeted Group Selection data were the subject of light-touch quantitative analysis (e.g., frequencies) with the aim of identifying any clear deviations from intended practice, as outlined in the trial protocol (Roy *et al.*, 2025).

Settings received ‘thank you’ payments of £150 for completing the baseline LanguageScreen administration, £150 for completing and submitting the SDLs, and £100 for facilitating a case study visit. In addition, each setting received a £45 voucher to thank the staff members for giving up their time to participate in the interview.

Timeline

Figure 1: Formative evaluation timeline

Date	Activity
January-February 2024	Recruitment of PVI settings
February-May 2024	Administration of LanguageScreen Training completion Onboarding of case study settings Submission of completed Targeted Group Selection spreadsheets by settings to NFER
April-June 2024	Programme delivery Submission of completed Session Delivery Logs by settings to NFER Case study observations and interviews
July-August 2024	Analysis and reporting of findings to the EEF, OxEd and study participants

Note that settings were recruited for the main trial between January and July 2024, with baseline data collection following in September 2024.

Findings

What did implementation of NELI Preschool look like in PVI settings?

There were high levels of completion of the online training course. In nearly all settings most or all staff members who worked with 3-4-year-olds completed the online training course. Only a small number had just enough staff members trained to provide 'back up' if needed. In some cases, specific sub-groups of staff members were excluded from the training, such as part-time staff or staff members with EAL – primarily out of the nursery manager's concern for the burden this would have placed on them.

Settings took a range of approaches to releasing staff to complete the training. In many cases, staff members were paid to complete the training in their own time (evenings, weekends or half-term), or were given a dedicated non-contact day to complete it. Settings specified that this latter option required child numbers to be sufficiently low to accommodate ratios with reduced staff members. This constraint also applied to other settings that allowed staff members small amounts of time out during the working day to complete the training on-site, on one of the setting's computers, across multiple weeks. This approach could be challenging for settings that only had one computer, which also had to be used for other administrative tasks, although at least one other practitioner reported completing the training on their personal mobile device. Some settings took a range of different approaches depending on staff member preference. One interviewee indicated that they would have preferred to do the training all together as a paid staff training day.

Time taken to complete the training appears to have varied, for example from 5 to 8 hours between staff members within the same setting. This is likely due to variation in learning speeds and level of existing familiarity with the concepts and practices being taught.

There was limited participation in the broader NELI Preschool community of practice. Only three of the nine settings that were interviewed reported having attended at least two of the webinars, with two not having attended any. This was due to a lack of awareness that the webinars were taking place, difficulty finding the time to attend them and/or not having found the first webinar relevant or helpful. On the latter point, some settings found they were at a different stage of the process to what was being covered in the webinar, while others felt that the experiences and situations of the other settings at the webinar were not relatable to their own – in terms of size or levels of Special Educational Needs (SEN), for example. Two settings did, however, report that they found the webinars a helpful opportunity to ask questions, to learn from other settings and to make sure everyone was on the same page.

Levels of engagement with the Delivery Support Hub (DSH) were even lower. Five of the nine settings reported that they had not been on it, while the remaining four said they had just visited it briefly on a few occasions. Settings reported that they found it difficult to find the time to engage with the DSH, did not feel the need to engage with it and/or did not feel there was any reason for them to do so. One interviewee indicated that they would have preferred a more straightforward social media approach to a community platform that was quick and easy to access from a tablet and where participants could post, comment and respond.

Delivery schedules and staffing varied between settings. Staff members primarily took turns delivering the different types of programme sessions through a rota approach. In some settings, it was decided that only more experienced staff members would deliver certain session types - although whether these were the whole-group or targeted group sessions varied. It was also common for the NELI Preschool Lead to deliver the initial sessions to gain an understanding of how the programme worked and to model it for other (more junior and/or less experienced) staff members.

Whole-group sessions were always scheduled for a specific time each day – usually either first thing in the morning (after some initial free play) or around lunch time when the highest proportion of children attending that day would be present.

Whole-group sessions varied in length but were of broadly high quality. Whole-group sessions were reported to last as little as 5 minutes in some settings and up to half an hour in others, with an average across the five unobserved case study settings of around 10-15 minutes. The four sessions that were observed by the researcher tended to be longer, however, lasting between 25 and 30 minutes. It is possible that the sessions were extended in response to the pressures of being observed, although there was nothing to suggest this was the case.

The sessions that were observed as part of the case study visits were generally of high quality, with a variety of children with different ability levels given the opportunity to speak, and practitioners asking a range of questions. However, there were some areas that could have been developed further. Several children in the group would not get the opportunity to speak as more confident children would be more proactive in responding to a question and therefore would be more likely to be chosen to speak. While practitioners asked a variety of questions, particularly in relation to the children's own experiences, they tended to elicit single-word responses. Moreover, while the practitioners would usually model use of the word offered by the child word within a sentence, the children very rarely repeated this back. This meant that use of whole sentences and the Special Words among the children was quite rare. This appeared to be exacerbated where hand-raising was not being practised. Based on these observations, it is possible that the shorter session lengths reported by some of the settings that were *not* observed may have resulted in fewer children being given the opportunity to speak.

Exploration of narrative structure was also relatively limited across all the sessions observed. For example, in one small-group activity where children were required to put picture cards representing pages from the book in the right order, the children were told to match the two images rather than to focus on the order in which the events in the images occurred.

Finally, while the programme emphasises that the quality of interaction is more important than the exact length of the sessions, interviewees were just as likely to attribute variation in length to the content of the session as to the engagement levels of the children. For example, the longest sessions were consistently reported to be those on Monday, when the story was first read.

Child engagement in whole-group sessions was generally reported - and observed - to be high. While a small number of children in each setting would not join the session or wander off halfway through, the vast majority would sit for its duration. One setting reported that engagement levels tended to drop off slightly towards the end of the week, particularly as the story would be regularly recapped for the benefit of who did not attend the setting every day.

Some settings would deliberately take children with higher levels of SEN elsewhere to do a different activity while the programme session was taking place, as it was felt they would disrupt the session. In other cases, or for children with lower levels of SEN, they were free to participate in the session for as long as they wished.

While the 'Best Listener' rewards system was seen by many settings as a very effective way of gaining child buy-in, some reported that it created high levels of distress for children who were not awarded it, which could be particularly difficult for children with SEN. As a result, alternative approaches to rewarding good behaviour were put in place, such as giving all of the children a high five, selecting a number of children to stand and be applauded, or awarding multiple best listeners per session. One setting noted that Best Listener had created challenging reactions among the children to begin with, but over time the children had learnt to manage it better and congratulate each other. Mixed reactions were also reported for the introductory song, with the children in some settings loving it, while at least one setting chose to skip it as they felt the children did not find it engaging.

Many settings introduced additional behaviour supports, such as physical movement before starting the session, markers on the floor or chairs to help children to spread out and remain seated in one place, hiding and/or 'waking up' the Neli puppet, and handing out additional stickers for children who recalled stories or words well, raised their hands to speak, or who spoke up when usually they were hesitant to.

Child engagement in targeted sessions was more challenging to obtain. Several settings reported that children sometimes resented being taken away from their free play activity to participate in a targeted session. This resulted in interviewees emphasising the importance of careful timing for these sessions to minimise disruption, such as first thing in the morning, when the other children are outside or when they are doing group work. They also emphasised the importance of staff being flexible in the timings for these sessions and using their professional judgement to select the right time.

Targeted sessions were nonetheless seen to be important for providing opportunities for quieter children to speak without the presence of more confident children to overshadow them. Some settings reported that children in the targeted group had started to talk more in the whole-group sessions as exposure to the story and activities in the targeted group sessions had built up their confidence that they knew how to respond to the questions asked.

Settings sought to incorporate aspects of the programme into their continuous provision. This included building key words into continuous provision and linking imaginative play and craft activities to the book. Some settings purchased additional resources to support with this, including copies of the book that were available for children to look at throughout the week. Many settings hung the vocabulary flashcards from the programme on the wall at the end of each week. One setting emphasised that integrating the programme into continuous provision was particularly important for children with lower attendance who would not have the opportunity to attend as many of the regular sessions. However, another setting noted that it was important to balance planning around the programme themes with planning activities aligned with children's interests. One setting felt that some of the key words lent themselves to incorporation into continuous provision better than others.

Did NELI Preschool 'work' for PVI settings? What (if any) additional challenges did they encounter compared to maintained settings?

The programme was perceived to lead to improvements among the children across a range of areas. Several settings reported observing increases in the children's vocabulary, sentence formation and confidence in speaking that they attributed to participation in the programme. Improvements in the children's attention spans were also reported by many settings. In addition, some settings mentioned broader behavioural improvements in the children such as turn-taking, hand raising and congratulating each other. One setting saw this as the result of how structured the sessions were, including the NELI rules and the screen, rather than just dialogic reading – which they had done in the past without seeing the same results. Several settings reported cognitive impacts in terms of improved story recall and ability to respond to more complex and open-ended questions. Settings reported having observed positive programme impacts for the language of children with EAL, but views on the perceived impacts for children with SEN were more mixed – some felt it had improved their attention, but at least one setting felt that the programme was not suitable for this sub-group of children. The same setting also felt that the children who benefitted the most from the programme were those who 'tended to be high-flyers anyway' and that the content remained above the level of middle- and lower-ability children.

Several settings reported benefits for the children in the targeted group specifically, including for children with SEN and EAL, particularly in terms of confidence around speaking in the whole-group sessions, as well as behavioural elements such as sitting still. One interviewee attributed increased confidence in whole-group sessions to these children having already had the opportunity to go over the content in the targeted group sessions.

Benefits were also reported for the setting and staff. Several settings reported improvements in staff approaches to supporting language development, including more careful use of vocabulary when speaking to the children, asking more open-ended questions and having more sustained conversations. Self-reflection and consistency in staff practice was also seen to increase. In addition, one interviewee reported broader benefits for their setting in providing structure for group work with the older children in a single-room nursery and training experiences to help apprentices build up their confidence. Another reported a greater awareness of which children were not necessarily being regularly read to at home and consequently could benefit from more co-reading opportunities in the nursery.

Most settings reported finding LanguageScreen straightforward to administer. Some did observe children losing focus during the screening and were split about whether pausing and resuming at a later point resolved this. Use of the tablet was seen to be a key facilitator for child engagement and concentration. One interviewee mentioned that making the screening into a game strongly facilitated child engagement, although others mentioned that playful moods could result in children deliberately selecting an incorrect answer. Only one setting reported finding the process overly time-consuming, and this was largely due to the constraints specific to a single-room nursery (such as limited separate space). Several settings did, however, report that the final listening recall activity appeared to be above the appropriate level for children of that age and that this impacted the children's confidence.

Training was considered to be helpful and of high quality. Nearly all settings reported a very positive experience with the online training course. Those that had completed nursery qualifications reported finding it a 'good refresher' that newer staff members could also benefit from, with the training course catering to different levels of relevant knowledge and experience. Several settings did, however, report finding the course quite long and consequently time-consuming in settings where a large proportion of practitioners were completing it. This appears to have been in cases where the staff

member was less familiar with the concepts being taught. However, elements of accessibility were also appreciated, such as the option to watch videos instead of read text and being able to complete the training in multiple smaller chunks.

Some interviewees reported finding the demonstration videos particularly helpful, although they also noted that the child behaviour and levels of engagement were not realistic points of comparison for their own settings. The split between theory and practice was seen to be well-balanced and provide helpful background for what the setting was being asked to do. Views were mixed regarding the interactive elements of the training – one interviewee found these very helpful, while another said that they had stopped engaging with these elements as no one else appeared to be. Levels of engagement with this element may have impacted perceptions of how time-intensive the training was.

One setting showed interest in a face-to-face training option – either for the whole team in one go or via a ‘champion’ who would then cascade their learning to the rest of the team. Another indicated that they would have appreciated the opportunity to observe session delivery in another setting to help build up their confidence before they started delivery themselves.

Resources were seen to be generous and of high quality, with some tweaks suggested. Several interviewees reported that there was nothing more they could have wanted and appreciated having everything already printed off and available in both physical and digital formats. One interviewee reported that the quantity and quality of the resources provided was a strong drawcard for the programme, particularly among PVI settings, which are more likely to face financial constraints.

Settings appreciated the level and quality of support from the OxEd team, whether in the form of regular catch-up calls, tech support or just knowing they were there to contact if need be. The newsletter was also appreciated as a source for additional activity ideas.

Some minor modifications to the programme resources were suggested. Several settings mentioned the need for a greater number of ‘Best Listener’ stickers, as the number provided did not allow for any flexibility in the number of children who would receive a sticker each session. One setting also reported that the stickers needed to be more adhesive. Views on the press-out characters were mixed, and one interviewee felt that they had been a disappointment after having expected to receive the mini figures that are used in the training demonstration videos.

A small number of settings felt that both the targeted and whole-group sessions could have been more interactive and/or involve books and activities more suitable for the target age group. Additional ideas for incorporating the story into continuous provision were also requested.

Settings that struggled with the internet connection in their setting requested an option to download the slides in advance so that they would not require the connection to be maintained for every session.

Some settings considered the programme delivery schedule to be too intensive, particularly in terms of the targeted sessions. These settings felt that the intensity of the programme schedule made it logistically challenging to fit in alongside competing priorities within the setting, including school transition work, LA responsibilities and other activities like woodworking and forest school. Some interviewees also highlighted that releasing a staff member to deliver the targeted sessions could also present challenges in terms of maintaining ratios, particularly in any cases of staff absence.

The intensity of the schedule was exacerbated in many cases by the need to deliver two whole-group sessions per day, either to account for children who are only in for the mornings or afternoons, or to reduce the size of the group in these sessions to allow for richer interactions. Some settings simply re-read the book for children in the afternoon without any of the accompanying activities, but this also resulted in reduced exposure to the programme. Single-room settings faced the additional challenge of having to find and move into separate spaces for the sessions (both whole-group and targeted), which could increase the time taken to complete each session. Some staff also spent time preparing for the sessions. Finally, additional programme elements such as the Narrative Progress Tracker could be time-consuming and placed additional pressure on the staff and ratios. Many settings did, however, report appreciating the value of the Narrative Progress Tracker in demonstrating the progress the children had made and encouraging staff reflection on where to focus their attention next.

Many settings reported that they did or would adapt the delivery schedule in future to reduce its intensity. One setting moved to delivering only one small-group session per child per week, while another chose to deliver no individual sessions. Two settings reported that in future they would deliver each story across two weeks, while a third indicated that they would prefer new words to be introduced only once or twice per week, with scaffolding to provide additional stimulation for higher ability children. Flexibility around the order in which the books could be delivered was requested by two settings as this would allow them to align the programme with their curriculum and reduce staff workload as a result. One of these settings also requested greater flexibility around when the Narrative Progress Tracker was used to allow for cases of child absence in the designated weeks. At least one setting indicated finding the programme overly prescriptive in its messaging, suggesting that a package with elements to choose from would work better for the PVI context where the set-up can vary significantly from setting to setting.

Attendance patterns affected the targeted group selection. Settings were required to select the six children with the lowest LanguageScreen scores to receive the targeted component of the programme. In order to make attendance of the four weekly targeted sessions feasible, children needed to attend the setting for at least 15 hours per week to be eligible, and their attendance patterns had to allow for a suitable schedule for the small-group sessions. Children who were known or perceived to have SEN that prevented them from working well in a small-group environment were also deemed ineligible.

It is not possible to know the exact number of children who missed out on the targeted component due to their hours of attendance being lower than 15 hours per week as many settings excluded these children from the screening process, resulting in their exclusion from the dataset. One setting reported that around a third of the children in their setting were not screened due to their hours of attendance not meeting the 15-hour threshold, and another noted that nearly all of the children with the lowest LanguageScreen scores had not met the attendance requirements for inclusion in the targeted group.

The six children with the lowest LanguageScreen scores were all included in the targeted group in only three settings, all of which were located in areas with low levels of deprivation and either did not have or did not screen any children with under 15 hours of attendance. A further 10 settings that appear to have followed OxEEd's targeted group selection guidance excluded a total of 13 children from the targeted group who would have been eligible based on their LanguageScreen scores and 15-hour attendance criteria alone.⁷ This means that one in ten children who would have been selected for the targeted component based on need and minimum hours of attendance were unable to access this additional support for other reasons. This appears to be primarily the result of children failing to meet the criterion of their attendance patterns being compatible with the setting's delivery schedule for the targeted sessions. Of these 13 children, seven attended for 15 or 16 hours, but only across two days or mornings. Two more children attended for three days a week, and another was recorded as having unpredictable attendance. Two children had no attendance data recorded. It is not clear why the last one was excluded – although interview data would suggest this could be due to SEN.

While it is likely that many more (unrecorded) children were excluded due to attending for under 15 hours, this demonstrates that even children attending for at or just above the 15-hour threshold are vulnerable to being excluded if their attendance patterns are seen to be incongruous with the requirements of the session scheduling. Nearly a quarter of these children (3 out of 13) were eligible for EYPP, compared to one eighth (13%) of the sample as a whole. Children eligible for EYPP were far more prevalent close to the attendance threshold across the sample, constituting nearly half (35 out of 87) of those children who attended for only 15 hours compared to just 6% of those with attendance of more than 15 hours. This likely increases the chance of disadvantaged children being excluded from the targeted group due to incompatibility of attendance patterns with the session delivery schedule, as compared to their non-disadvantaged peers. At least two settings reported observing that children who had been excluded from the targeted group work due to the attendance criteria appeared to struggle to 'take much in' during the whole-group sessions.

A further four settings selected children across a wide range of LanguageScreen scores, from among the bottom 14 children to even the bottom 30 in some cases. There is evidence from the interviews to suggest that this is potentially the result of high SEN levels, resulting in a large number of children with the lowest LanguageScreen scores being deemed ineligible for

⁷ At least a further six children were excluded due to not meeting the 15-hour minimum attendance threshold.

the targeted component. Another setting selected only three children in one class and five in the other, with the rationale for selection not clear. Two settings (both highly deprived) did not return their targeted group selection data.

Targeted group selection appears to have been particularly challenging in settings with high levels of SEN, where a more nuanced approach than simply selecting the bottom six in terms of ability levels was seen to be required. For example, one setting trialled the targeted group sessions with a range of lower ability children before selecting a final group of those whom they felt would benefit the most. Children with higher levels of SEN tended to be excluded from the targeted group, particularly when their needs related to focus and/or social interaction, although occasionally adaptations were made (such as individual sessions instead of small-group ones) to enable their participation. On the other hand, children with lower levels of SEN, particularly in relation to speech and language and/or focus and concentration, were often included in the targeted group.

One of the settings reported that they did not comply with the OxEd guidance to only select the children that they 'could definitely fit in' as this would mean that the children who would really benefit from it would be excluded, and another three said that they would have liked some of the children with lower attendance to have been able to benefit from the targeted group work as well. Conversely, two settings said they did or would have added additional children who were not in the bottom six from the screening if they felt they would benefit from the targeted group work. One setting did targeted sessions with children outside of the targeted group that expressed interest, and two more said they would do the targeted sessions with all children in future.

Some settings did, however, report that it could be quite intense for children with lower attendance to participate in the targeted group as it would take up quite a lot of the time they were in the nursery. Irregular attendance patterns could also result in them missing sessions during the week. Even for children *not* in the targeted group, sporadic and/or lower attendance was seen to create challenges for engagement as they would not be able to build on work across the week as is intended.

Attendance patterns were also a challenge for scheduling and implementation. Many settings emphasised a key challenge of implementation as being the logistics of scheduling the sessions around complex attendance patterns. Moreover, inconsistent attendance among the targeted group could result in a need to reschedule sessions on a weekly basis.

Younger children were involved in the programme to varying extents – primarily in single-room settings. In two cases, younger children who shared the room were taken to do a different activity during the whole-group sessions. In one setting, younger children joined for the whole-group sessions, although the setting said that in future they would separate them out as they struggled to sit for the full session and distracted the older children as a result. Another setting reported that children aged slightly younger than the target age group were able to join in the whole-group sessions without a problem. However, single-room settings still delivered continuous provision work linked to the story of the week, so would sometimes read the story to the younger children as well to provide context for the activities. Several settings indicated an appetite for a simpler and more hands-on version of the programme that could be delivered to younger children without requiring them to sit down for so long – and one was already delivering a version with just the book and cards to children in their 2-year-old classroom that had been flagged as requiring additional support.

Provision of screens was seen to be a key facilitator for child engagement. Many settings mentioned that using the screen for the whole-group sessions noticeably improved the children's engagement and concentration, particularly given the length of the sessions and the size of the group. One setting reported that children benefitted from getting up to point at the screen, as this reduced the amount of time they were sitting down and made the session more interactive. The 'bringing out' of the screen was also seen as a key part of the programme routine and helped to distinguish it as a distinct activity. Staff reported finding the accessibility of the prompts on the screen to be very helpful. Internet issues did, however, create difficulties in several settings in terms of loading the content and/or it dropping out partway through the session.

One interviewee explained that they had done similar dialogic reading activities in the past without a screen and the children's attention span had been much more of a challenge. Similarly, settings that had to temporarily deliver sessions without a screen (for various logistical reasons) reported that they had to work a lot harder and do a lot more preparation to keep the children engaged. The exception to this was when the session was delivered outside, resulting in more active

activities (such as a scavenger hunt) which helped to keep the children engaged. One setting used a projector instead of a screen and found it to be a suitable substitute.

Three of the nine settings reported that they would not have been able to afford a screen if OxEEd had not provided one, while another said a screen purchase would not have been approved by the nursery board due to a reluctance to allow screen-time in the nursery. On the other hand, one setting purchased a screen for the programme as they wanted one that would be better than what OxEEd could provide. This clearly represents the extent to which settings varied in terms of the physical and financial resources they had available.

Several other key facilitators for implementation were also identified. Along with the screen, building the whole-group sessions into the setting routine was seen to be the most important facilitator for child engagement and concentration – as well as for staff members who may have less experience with this kind of work. Equivalently important was having a dedicated space for the targeted group sessions that was free from distractions. Targeted sessions that were delivered in the main room while the other children were doing free play posed significant challenges for child engagement and concentration. Some settings took the other children outside to play while targeted sessions were happening, but all interviewees were aligned in the preference for a quiet separate space – with the manager’s office being used in some cases to enable this.

Staff members reported benefitting from having a team of people who had completed the programme training as this meant responsibility for session delivery could be spread out, back-up was available in cases of sickness or leave, and there was an internal community of practice to draw on to discuss aspects of the programme and learn from each other. Having a consistent lead and strong manager support was also seen to be important for making sure the time was made available for all the programme elements to be completed. Settings that were over ratio also benefitted from greater flexibility to complete the training and administrative programme tasks throughout the nursery day, while those that had implemented comparable approaches in the past reported that they found it easier to adopt the programme’s scheduled approach.

How well did the proposed trial instruments and processes work in practice?

The Targeted Group Selection spreadsheet did not collect the full rationale for selection. This was due to insufficient alignment with the criteria for selection in the OxEEd guidance, which included whether it would be logistically feasible to schedule in all the targeted sessions with the selected children, as well as whether they are able to access small group work (as a proxy for SEN). The Targeted Group Selection spreadsheet only collected the setting attendance patterns for each child. This means it was not always possible to know why children who were attending for at least 15 hours were excluded from the targeted group despite falling within the range of ability levels.

Compliance with SDL completion was moderately high and the data collection approach appears to be broadly acceptable. Six of the 10 case study settings returned SDLs for all of the programme weeks that they delivered. Two settings returned fewer SDLs than weeks they delivered. Two settings returned no SDLs – one because staffing disruption resulted in very significant delays to session delivery.

Most settings reported finding the SDL process straightforward. They reported using their setting attendance register to backfill the SDL at intermittent intervals. It was highlighted that it would be helpful for the spreadsheet to be more accessible on a tablet or smaller (laptop) screen. Some interviewees indicated that they would have preferred a paper copy to work with and/or a daily checklist. Three interviewees found completing the SDL to be time-consuming and to constitute ‘quite a lot of additional work’.

Communications with settings could be improved in future. A small number of settings reported that the tablets they received from OxEEd were not of sufficiently good size or quality, and that this was counter to what they felt had been communicated in relation to the equipment that would be provided. Moreover, the majority of the settings that received tablets from OxEEd also already had their own, while one setting did not have or receive a tablet so had to use the computer in the manager’s office for administering LanguageScreen.

As mentioned above, there was also some confusion among settings around which children they needed to screen, resulting in some cases where children who attended for less than 15 hours per week were excluded from the screening process.

Conclusion

The findings from the formative evaluation indicate that implementation of the NELI Preschool programme in PVI settings is both feasible and acceptable. Training completion was adhered to as anticipated and whole-group sessions were delivered regularly and with fidelity. Participating staff members were largely positive about the amount and quality of resources provided and reported perceiving benefits for both children and practitioners.

However, there were some aspects of the programme that were less well received and would merit some further reflection. The NELI Preschool community of practice, centred on the webinars and DSH, elicited very little engagement from the setting staff. In addition, the intensity of the programme delivery schedule was perceived by several settings as being too high for the levels of child attendance in their setting, resulting in actual or desired adaptations to the number of sessions and/or amount of content delivered per week. Finally, children who achieved the lowest LanguageScreen scores at baseline were regularly excluded from the targeted component due to their attendance patterns – both not meeting the 15-hour threshold and not being perceived as compatible with the session delivery schedule. Disadvantaged children (those eligible for EYPP) appear to be particularly vulnerable to this situation occurring. These three aspects of the programme require further reflection to ensure they are offering the best opportunity to participating settings and children.

Finally, evidence from this study suggests that the piloted evaluation tools are largely fit-for-purpose, with some revisions required ahead of their use in the effectiveness trial – namely around simplifying the format of the SDL and ensuring alignment between the Targeted Group Selection tool and OxEd's guidance.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the effectiveness trial

On the basis of these findings and for the purpose of the effectiveness trial, NFER recommends that OxEd:

1. Revisit their process for determining whether a setting requires a tablet or not to ensure tablets are not provided unnecessarily whilst ensuring that any setting that does require a tablet receives one.
2. Revisit the model of tablet provided to administer LanguageScreen to ensure it is of adequate quality and clearly communicate to settings in advance the model that they will receive.

In addition, the NFER team proposes to:

3. Revise the spreadsheet for providing targeted group selection data to ensure it is aligned with the exclusion criteria outlined in the OxEd guidance (including whether the child is able to work in small groups) and ensure they provide clear guidance on which children should be screened (including those attending the setting for less than 15 hours).
4. Review the SDL template with consideration for making it less burdensome to complete and more compatible with small screens, including tablets.
5. Conduct additional dosage analysis differentiated by setting type (PVI vs maintained) to investigate the relative prevalence of adaptations to reduce the intensity of programme delivery.
6. Ensure their implementation and process evaluation (IPE) includes a focus on perceptions of and adaptations to the delivery schedule; exclusions from the targeted group due to attendance patterns; participation of disadvantaged and SEN children; the role of screens.

Recommendations for programme development

NFER also recommends that OxEd consider these findings in relation to their programme development, including by:

7. Reflecting on the role of the community of practice (including webinars and the DSH) in the programme's Theory of Change and taking actions to increase engagement if active participation in the community of practice is deemed necessary for programme implementation to demonstrate fidelity.
8. Reviewing the list of suggested programme modifications (see Appendix A), identifying desirable modifications and determining a feasible timeline for enacting these over the short, medium and longer term.

9. Carefully considering the pros and cons of introducing greater flexibility to the number of targeted group sessions required both from the perspective of the effectiveness trial and in the longer term.

Response from OxEd

Programme changes for the effectiveness trial

To address concerns about the provision of tablets, OxEd will:

- Re-evaluate the tablets supplied and engage with providers to address quality concerns.
Implemented.
- Introduce a more in-depth questionnaire and follow-up conversations with settings about their existing technology, with a focus on managing expectations and clearly explaining the benefits of using settings' own devices where available.
Implemented.

To address and support engagement with the 'community of practice', OxEd will:

- Ask settings that participated in the formative evaluation if they would be happy to take part in upcoming webinars.
Implemented.
- Use the first newsletter to remind practitioners of the Delivery Support Hub and to encourage them to make use of it.
Implemented.

To address the session quality and length, OxEd will:

- Add videos to the Delivery Support Hub on what a 'good session' looks like, with multiple examples and prompts on the elements that make them a 'good session'.
Implemented.
- Add further detail to the section in the training course on 'Working together to deliver NELI Preschool' around what to look out for when observing a colleague delivering a session (types of questions asked, response time given, length of session, etc) to help them improve and support collaborative practice.
Implemented.
- Use the four webinars to explicitly cover aspects of 'high quality' sessions including:
 - selecting children for the targeted group (and thinking ahead to what this could look like/how to integrate children who may not be selected due to attendance)
 - extending beyond the sessions (including what the sessions look like and how to use elements of it beyond the programme)
 - reviewing progress (a reflective webinar on progress up to now and what next, how to do progress tracker properly, etc)
 - dialogical reading (how to support children's oral language with dialogical reading further).

Implemented with caveats. Some modifications were made in the final two webinars to allow us to respond to questions from settings, emerging implementation trends, and direct feedback. The timing of the formative evaluation meant that many settings were not yet at the point of reviewing progress. This topic was therefore covered in a light-touch manner. Dialogical reading was also covered only briefly, focusing on strategies to encourage children to be protagonists in these interactions and story retelling. Greatest focus was given to implementation challenges and general questions about the use of the programme components after the formative evaluation.

- Include reminders of what a 'high quality session' looks like in monthly newsletters.
Implemented.

- Clarify in the training course material that the children in the videos are at Week 7 of the programme and props used had been integrated through the setting's own initiative. This will also be mentioned in the first webinar to encouraging thinking beyond the sessions.

Implemented.

To address challenges in engaging children in the targeted intervention, OxEd will:

- Address this explicitly in the first webinar 'Targeted Intervention Guidance', highlighting that it is normal for these children to struggle with the targeted sessions, and just because their expressive language is limited does not mean they are not learning.

Implemented.

- Have a setting experienced in delivering NELI Preschool present in the second webinar on how they integrate children with fewer registered hours, and how they support the engagement of children in the targeted group. I

Implemented.

Changes for the longer term

- Introduce an 'ambassador' programme to support the quality and fidelity of NELI Preschool delivery by drawing on the expertise of settings already familiar with the programme. Local ambassadors will provide advice on appropriate adaptations, respond to common implementation queries and foster communities of practice that extend beyond the virtual space.

Deferred. There was concern that introducing the ambassador programme could increase the risk of contamination in the trial. Plans are now in place to develop this network during the 2026/27 academic year.

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Appendix A: Suggested modifications to the NELI Preschool programme stemming from the formative evaluation

LanguageScreen

1. Review the difficulty level of the final sentence recall activity and its suitability for the target age group.

Training & support

2. Add caveats alongside the training videos to reassure practitioners that their children may not be as talkative or focused as the children in the videos (particularly not to begin with).
3. Clarify that settings will not be provided with the toys seen in the training videos but are encouraged to use their own where appropriate.
4. Consider options for in-person training opportunities and/or observations of other settings delivering sessions.
5. Improve communications about the webinars to increase awareness of what they are, when they are happening, that all staff members are encouraged to attend, and that recordings can be watched at the staff member's convenience where preferable.
6. Ensure webinars are inclusive of setting with a wide range of characteristics (e.g. size, single-room, maintained vs PVI, levels of SEN).
7. Consider alternative approaches to the Delivery Support Hub to increase usefulness and relevance to settings and/or improve communications around its usefulness to settings.

Resources

8. Improve messaging around the option to download digital session material for the week in advance, rather than having to connect and load it for each session.
9. Provide settings with more and better quality (more adhesive) stickers.

Programme structure

10. Introduce greater flexibility to when the Narrative Progress Tracker can be administered to allow for child absence.
11. Develop additional guidance for single-room nurseries, including on managing the (level of) involvement of younger children and finding appropriate space for targeted group sessions to minimise distractions.
12. Provide more ideas to settings about how to establish a routine for delivery (including how to ensure targeted group sessions are not disruptive of child free play) and building it into continuous provision.
13. Consider introducing greater flexibility into when the targeted group sessions are delivered in relation to the whole-group sessions to facilitate scheduling.
14. Consider introducing greater flexibility to the order in which the books are delivered to allow settings to adapt it to their existing curriculum and therefore reduce staff workload by having more integrated activities.

Session delivery

15. Review guidance on the whole-group sessions to ensure sessions are long enough to provide children with sufficient opportunities for quality interaction, and to ensure that staff members have a good understanding of what a session with sufficiently high quality of interaction looks like in practice (and at different stages of the programme journey). This could include guidance around the rhythm of a session, such as how many children to ask for each question, and promotion of hand-raising as a technique for encouraging higher quality interactions with a greater range of children.
16. Consider suggesting different options for rewarding good listening and behaviour, as alternatives to the single 'Best Listener' approach.
17. Consider reviewing the activities to ensure they are sufficiently engaging and interactive for the target age group.
18. Review guidance and training around: exploring narrative structure, asking 'why' and recall questions, getting children to repeat expansions and use full sentences, and providing specific feedback.

19. Strengthen guidance around ensuring all children are given the opportunity to speak during the whole-group sessions and facilitating participation from less confident speakers.
20. Provide guidance around 'getting children started' in individual sessions.

Future recruitment

21. Revise messaging around suitability of the programme for children with SEN to reduce the risk of misunderstandings around the level of ability required for participation.

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