Laura Molway 0:00

Welcome to the Oxford Education Deanery podcast. In this series, we explore the latest research from the Department of Education at the University of Oxford and discuss the real-world implications for teachers, parents and policy makers. Each podcast is accompanied by a deanery digest, a short, plain language summary of the research, which can be downloaded from our website.

Joe Bullough 0:26

Welcome to the Oxford Education Deanery Podcast. I'm Joe Bullough, and today I'm here with Professor Kathy Sylva, who is an Honorary Research Fellow at the Department of Education, University of Oxford. Today, we're going to be speaking about brand new research, which Kathy was co-investigator of, which sheds light on the benefits of coaching as part of Early Years' Continuing Professional Development. Kathy, it's really wonderful to have you with us today. Thank you so much for joining us.

Kathy Sylva 0:53

Well, it's a pleasure to be here, Joe. I have a bad cold, so I hope everybody can hear me.

Joe Bullough 0:58

No problem at all. I wonder if you could start by telling us how this research came about and why it's important.

Kathy Sylva 1:07

Well, in 2021 the Department for Education announced the Early Years recovery funding, and this was £180 million pounds, and it was to support the Early Years sector to help them to recover from Covid but especially to support children. Research has shown that children's development during lockdown and the various stresses of the Covid epidemic, that children's development in two areas especially was really knocked back. The first area, no surprise to a parent, would be personal, social and emotional development (PSCD). The other area of development that had been knocked back was communication and language. And so the Covid recovery programme for early years sector was to support the sector to improve children and help them in these two areas of development that were especially affected. One of the government programmes for recovery is called 'Experts and Mentors'. And the podcast today is about an evaluation of did the ‘Experts and Mentors’ programme work? But before I go into the details of the evaluation, I think I must say a little bit about the programme. It was a programme that supported settings, both the setting leader, but also the educator, and it offered targeted support by coaching to that setting manager - might be a head teacher - but was often a manager in a private, voluntary or independent setting, and so the manager got on-site coaching of up to six hours in a term, and most of this coaching took place on site, but there was an online element if settings preferred it. But often most of the work took place in site, but sometimes the consolidation took place afterwards, with some online support from the coach. The setting educators got support from mentors, and this was all online. So that was the programme, and the goal of the evaluation, which was funded in 2022 by the DfE, and the main grant went to Ecorys to evaluate the Experts and Mentors programme. And my role within this was to advise on research methods, on their comms strategy, with the settings and also interpretation of the findings.

Joe Bullough 3:59

That's really interesting. And now I wonder if we could talk a little bit about the investigation you did.

Kathy Sylva 4:05

Well, the plan of the evaluation was a mixed methods design. There were 1309 settings who were approached. They were already signed up. They were going to have the experts and mentor programme, and we approached them to see if they would take part in the evaluation. More than 400 said yes, which was good, and about half of them were randomly assigned to get the intervention very soon the term long intervention, and the other half were to get their intervention, but a term later, so the group that got it and we studied while they were getting it, we call the intervention group, and the group who were waiting to get it next term, we call the waiting list control group. So all the settings, all 400 did get the programme, but we studied the first group who got it, and we studied them pre and post to see if they changed during the time of getting it. But we also studied the control settings over the same period, because we wanted to see if any changes were happening to them. So with this kind of randomised control trial, if the intervention settings actually are improving their practice and their confidence in reporting it, well, then we're pretty sure that it was the intervention and it wasn't something else that a television programme or a new online support somebody else has given. There were two arms to the study. One was a quantitative element, and I've talked about that was the randomised control trial. And we had survey that went to staff and to centre leaders, pre and post, and, of course, to the controls at the same period of time. But then there was another arm of the study, which was qualitative, and more than 101 interviews were conducted with people, educators in the settings, with the setting leaders who got the coaching. Interviews were carried out with the coaches and the mentors themselves. Remember the coaches who coached the leaders and the mentors who mentored the staff, but only online, and then also observations were made of some of the training. So the qualitative got really, really deep, because if the programme was a success, and the quantitative results indicated that practice really had been lifted, we really wanted to know what motivated people to do it, what did they think about it? What were the best elements of it? So by having both quantitative data, so we're secure that confidence and practice has changed, but the qualitative data which really explained what worked, what didn't work, and why people were motivated to do it.

Joe Bullough 7:15

That's really interesting. So I wonder if we could talk a little bit more about the moving into the results and what you found, perhaps what the participants said.

Kathy Sylva 7:24

Sure, and we found, when we looked statistically, quantitatively at the questionnaire findings, there was a positive and statistically significant impact of the programme on confidence in supporting personal, social and emotional development. This was a very secure finding. There was also strong evidence that the programme had a positive impact on practitioners' confidence in supporting children's communication and language development. This was not quite as strong and not wholly conclusive, but strong evidence that that too improved, it just didn't really improve as much. Unfortunately, the programme didn't have any meaningful impact on likelihood of staying in the Early Years' sector, although the primary aim was to really change practice, the secondary aim was to increase the likelihood that practitioners, educators, leaders, would really stay in the Early Years' sector. And so questions were asked about their likelihood of leaving. And unfortunately, there was no evidence that this programme changed the likelihood that people would stay in the sector. We'll come to that in a moment.

Joe Bullough 8:43

That's interesting, that that was a focus, and you could see what would be particularly at that time, and is still relevant, maybe even more relevant at the moment. But yeah, in a sense, whilst there were benefits for children, mentors, teachers, experts involved, those didn't translate to benefits in terms of recruitment and retention in the sector of staff, and there were probably other levers that need to be pulled.

Kathy Sylva 9:09

Yeah, I think six hours of coaching, although it may be enough to improve practice, it's not going to really change the status, the pay, the conditions of a workforce, which is really much less paid than teachers and so other interventions are going to have to really happen in the future to really motivate the workforce to stay in the sector.

Joe Bullough 9:41

So much more to do there. Yeah, so I wonder if we could talk a little bit more about… I know that you had some really interesting feedback from mentors and experts and those that were involved in the investigation, and to dig into a little bit of the qualitative work that you did and that you mentioned.

Kathy Sylva 9:59

Sure. I thought it would be interesting for our listeners to hear what kinds of strategies and skills that the practitioners and the leaders felt that they had improved, and so in PSCD, some of the items that people felt they really had learned through this programme: "I am confident that I can get children to believe they can do well in their learning", "getting children to follow the settings' rules", "calming a child who is disruptive", "establishing an effective daily routine with each cohort of children" and "motivating children who show low interest in play". These are the kinds of practices that the programme aimed to improve and which the evaluation showed some evidence of improvement in communication and language. What was improved here? And I'll give you some of the items that were on the questionnaire: "helping children with English as an additional language make good progress in English while recognising the importance of their heritage language". So that's really worthwhile practice, uplift, "crafting good questions for your children", "supporting children to be good listeners", "suggesting activities that families can do to support children's language development at home". So these are some of the items that showed improvement on the qualitative side from the 101 interviews as well as observations, as well as admin data, which I haven't really talked about. I'll give some really interesting quotes that will illuminate what the programme was and why it was successful, why the mentors and the experts, when they were interviewed, it turned out that they felt they got the most from the programme, although the setting leaders and the setting educators reported that they found a lot of benefits of being in the programme, the biggest benefit, it turned out, from the qualitative finding, was really being a coach or a mentor, these people felt that the very role of coaching and the relationships that they formed with this setting, with the setting leaders and the educators, actually had transformed their practice and their professional lives. So I think that's something really important about a coaching programme, the benefits are not just to the people getting the coaching, the enormous benefits to the coaches themselves. Then what do coaches actually do? And here's a setting leader who told us, "while the underlying objective was about post Covid and helping children with problems, our expert was also able to help us with additional topics, topics we suggested to her, and these were really helpful, like rearranging our outdoor space", and that gives a sense that the experts did not come in with a menu of topics that this is what we're going to improve. They really went in with the programme of working and co-constructing the improvement of practice in that setting. And so settings had some, some kind of say over what was going to be the focus of the coaching so here's another setting leader who talked about she said: "at the end of every coaching session, there was always quite a detailed action plan, which was really helpful, because the coach is going to leave, and we have that action plan with us to keep us going over the next week or two". And then what did the coaches think about their role? And here's one of the coaches: "You can go in and you can do a face to face visit with the setting. This is really great. How can we expect to build a relationship with people in settings and support them if you never fully meet them, if you can't really sit in their practice and work with their children and really look them in the eye". And that's why we think that being an expert helped the settings that we worked with.

Joe Bullough 14:39

Wow, those are very poignant and really, really interesting, in a sense, because, you, when you think of a coaching programme like this, you immediately think of the benefits potentially for children and for the teachers involved. But you know, immediately you might not think of it having such strong benefits for the coaches themselves and the experts involved. There's an intuition, I think, held, which many teachers will know, which is that teaching actually makes the best learners. It's a learning process in itself. So it has all of these implicit benefits for mentors and experts as well in being involved, very interesting. So now I'm really keen to talk a little bit about what the implications of this work are for wider practice, for those that work in policy and those that build programmes of CPD, in a sense, what it all means for teachers and leaders and those within the Early Years' sector. Could we talk a little bit about that?

Kathy Sylva 15:39

Sure, I think the findings and the digest will - well, I hope - be useful to some different groups of people. First of all, people who are planning CPD. I think the experience of this programme, with coaching in centres, the fact that CPD cannot just happen on some ring road outside a market town where people get in their cars and spend a whole day. That's kind of not going to happen in these times of stress and also low funding. I think actually having the coaches go into the setting to co-construct that action plan for what's going to happen in the next week and how we're aiming at improving practice. I think that there are a lot of learnings about coaching, and that will be for people developing CPD. I think for policy makers, either local or national, the fact that the Experts and Mentors programme has been shown through the most rigorous of all evaluations, it's been shown to lift practice. I think it means that for not very high amounts of investment, we really can have meaningful improvement in practice. Ecorys also included a value for money assessment and the Experts and Mentors programme cost £75 pounds per child, which is considered a low cost intervention. So the Early Years' workforce is in crisis. We have new family entitlements for free childcare, which are really putting pressure on supply, and we have young people and untrained people coming in to work in the sector. So we really need to find ways to support the development and the improvement of practice in this sector, and so a relatively low cost intervention like 'Experts and Mentors', has been shown through a rigorous RCT to enhance practice, but it's also been shown through the qualitative findings that the coaching element actually inside the setting is probably the engine room of change. So that's for policy makers, that this programme, that CPD can work and that this is one of the promising programmes. There are other promising programmes out there too. I think for researchers, what can they take from this study? I think that we did the research design, although was rigorous, it wasn't innovative in any way. But what I think was very good in the qualitative working was the way that the evaluation itself and the evaluation team and all of the comms that were part of the evaluation were really attractive, respectful and engaging, and so that carrying out an evaluation can be done in a way that makes those who are being evaluated find it interesting to take part and find that the evaluation itself can enrich the experience. Some of the people interviewed thanked the interviewers. The interviewers are thanking them: "Thank you for giving us your time. You're a busy setting leader", but the setting leaders said back to the evaluator: "Thank you for coming in. Talking to you has helped us understand our practice more". And I think there really are lessons for how to do a respectful evaluation that is done alongside. It will make people more willing to work with you, but it also will make for a better evaluation and stronger data. The last, final thing that I'd like to say is that we have a crushing need to find out whether improvements in practice, such as seen in the Experts and Mentors intervention, actually feed forward into improvements in children's outcomes. If we go back to the beginning of this discussion, the programme was intended to make recovery, allow children to recover from the deleterious effects of Covid-19, we will only know for sure if programmes like this really help children recover and help them get back on course in their child development, especially disadvantaged ones, if we assess child outcomes, so that will be the next stage in this fascinating story.

Joe Bullough 20:46

That's very interesting to hear. So a call for more research and longitudinal work, specifically also linked to learning outcomes as well. Well, this has been a fascinating discussion. Thank you so much for joining us today, Kathy.

Kathy Sylva 21:05

I've really enjoyed it, Joe, thank you very much. I've enjoyed it too.

Joe Bullough 21:08

Oh, wonderful to have you. Thanks again.

Laura Molway 21:10

You've been listening to the Oxford education deanery podcast to find out more about the research featured in today's episode and everything else the Deanery has to offer, visit our website and sign up to our newsletter. You'll find the links in the show notes.