

Deanery Digests are short, plain language summaries of the Department of Education's research outputs. This Deanery Digest is based on the following published research article: Huang, R., Siraj, I. & Melhuish, E. (2024). Promoting effective teaching and learning through a professional development program: a randomized controlled trial. *Journal of Educational Psychology*: <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000851>

## Adapting Fostering Effective Early Learning (FEEL) intervention to improve outcomes for pre-school children in Shenzhen, China

### What is this research about and why is it important?

Growing concerns about the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) and the aspiration for improved child outcomes have highlighted the need for enhancing teacher professional development to raise standards. However, this focus has been predominantly on regions with well-established educational systems. There is a notable scarcity of randomized controlled trials of professional development programmes in China. Despite investment of over one billion Yuan in China's National Teacher Training Programme, this national programme has had minimal impact on teaching practices, due to deficient programme design and execution. This has led to a perception in China that professional development is costly and yields minimal benefits, thereby stifling research into such interventions.

In response to this, our study aimed to bridge this gap by adapting the successful Leadership for Learning (Lfl) professional development programme used in the Fostering Effective Early Learning (FEEL) study (Siraj et al. 2023), originally developed in Australia, to fit the educational and cultural landscape of China. The research evaluated the effectiveness of this adapted model in enhancing teaching quality and influencing children's outcomes in Chinese kindergartens, thereby addressing a crucial need for tailored and impactful professional development in diverse educational settings.

### What did we do?

We tailored the Lfl professional development programme to align with the educational and cultural nuances of the Chinese context. This adaptation involved integrating global pedagogical principles with specific practices relevant to Chinese educational settings. Key modifications included:

- **Localising Educational Materials:** We translated materials into Chinese, and engaged Chinese experts to present domain-specific knowledge, ensuring the content resonated with the local audience and context.
- **Incorporating Diversity:** Recognizing the need for enhanced awareness of gender and racial equality in Chinese kindergartens, we included a dedicated training session on diversity.
- **Fostering Collaborative Learning Environments:** We invited educational leaders, such as directors and curriculum coordinators, to participate alongside teachers. This approach aimed to cultivate a shared understanding of quality teaching and foster a community committed to collective improvement.
- **Promoting Reflective Practice:** Teachers were encouraged to bring recordings of their teaching sessions to the PD events to facilitate in-depth discussions and reflections on their teaching methods in the light of the training.
- **Optimising Support Mechanisms:** We replaced online discussions with one-to-one mentoring, which has been found to be more effective in supporting teacher practices and ensuring the sustainability of the changes introduced.

These strategic adjustments were geared towards creating a PD programme that was culturally sensitive, practical, and impactful in the context of Chinese kindergartens. The adapted LfL programme was structured into three phases. The first phase consisted of a one-day, intensive face-to-face training session, introducing educators to the essential elements of quality teaching, quality rating scales, and techniques for sustained shared thinking during child interactions. The second phase comprised six bi-weekly half-day sessions, focused on domain-specific content knowledge in literacy, maths, science, self-regulation, diversity, and assessment. The third phase involved bi-weekly on-site mentoring.

Participants were 202 teachers, 547 children aged between 3 to 5 years, and 95 classrooms across 24 kindergartens in Shenzhen, a leading city in ECEC reforms in China. Kindergartens were randomly allocated to receive either the intervention or continue with business-as-usual (12 kindergartens in each group).

## What did we find?

The results indicated that the intervention was positively associated with classroom quality and child developmental outcomes in literacy and executive function skills.

### *Classroom Quality*

Using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale: Extension, teachers who participated in the intervention showed significantly higher quality in literacy, numeracy, science, and diversity instruction compared to those in the business-as-usual group. They offered more opportunities for children to engage in activities related to these areas. Furthermore, they enhanced children's thinking and expression regarding words, print, numbers, and scientific concepts by employing intentional pedagogy. The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being scale showed enhanced support in the development of trust, confidence, and independence, as well as in fostering language and communication, and encouraging learning and critical thinking. Teachers bolstered children's problem-solving abilities, curiosity, concept development, and higher-order thinking through improved quality of teacher-child interactions.

### *Children's Literacy and Executive Function Skills*

Children in the intervention kindergartens exhibited improved literacy and executive function skills compared to their peers in the business-as-usual kindergartens. Notably, these children demonstrated advanced levels of emergent writing, expressive vocabulary, word sounds, word identification, story comprehension, and print awareness. Children in the intervention group also improved working memory and inhibitory control, relative to the business-as-usual group.

## What does it all mean anyway?

The outcomes of this research hold substantial implications for both educational practice and future research. The findings advocate for policymakers to adopt an evidence-based approach in national professional development programmes, ensuring more efficient allocation of resources. Secondly, while professional development has been established as a potent means to enhance classroom quality and child outcomes, most successful programmes have been developed in regions with sophisticated education systems. This study's cross-cultural and cross-national programme underscores the potential of adapting effective professional development models to diverse contexts. Such adaptations can significantly contribute to bolstering education quality and promoting equality across various educational environments.

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