

PROJECT TITLE	Tales Toolkit
DEVELOPER (INSTITUTION)	Tales Toolkit Ltd and the Unit for School and Family Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London.
EVALUATOR (INSTITUTION)	Institute for Employment Studies (IES)
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR(S)	Becci Newton
EVALUATION PLAN AUTHOR(S)	Becci Newton, Ceri Williams, Olivia Garner
PUPIL AGE RANGE AND KEY STAGE	3-5 years old
NUMBER OF SCHOOLS/ SETTINGS	30
NUMBER OF PUPILS¹	300-900 Approximately

Evaluation plan version history

VERSION	DATE	REASON FOR REVISION
1.0 [<i>original</i>]	28/09/2023	

¹ Adapt as needed to relevant sample for the pilot (e.g., number of teachers)

Intervention

Study rationale and background

Recent research has shown that the disadvantage attainment gap starts in the early years, becomes larger over time (Education Endowment Foundation - EEF, 2018) and has long lasting impacts (de Sylva et al 2010). The attainment gap has stayed largely the same since 2013 and was evident in the data before COVID-19 had affected the education system (Hutchinson et al, 2020).

COVID-19 has only exacerbated the communication and language gap among children from deprived socioeconomic backgrounds (González & Bonal, 2021).

The development of language skills in the early years is an important determiner of outcomes later in life, including academic achievement, employment outcomes and mental health (Law et al 2017).

The development of early language skills provides a foundation for learning and is an important driver of later life outcomes. One in four children who struggle with language at age 5 do not reach the expected standard in English at the end of primary school. Children with a poor vocabulary at age five are more than twice as likely to be unemployed at age 34. (Kerr and Franklin 2021)

Early intervention has enormous potential for eliminating the attainment gap in the early years (Stewart and Waldfogel 2017) and the strengthening of language and communication skills is crucial in closing the attainment gap. A central tenet of a number of interventions is the use of stories and storytelling to encourage language and communication skills (EEF 2023). Play-based learning is integral to Tales Toolkit and this pilot has the potential to contribute to the existing body of evidence supporting its effectiveness. While play-based learning is widely acknowledged as important, as highlighted by Bruner (2020) and Vygotsky's theories, the current evidence in this area remains limited (EEF 2021b).

The evidence supports high-quality interactions between children and staff in early years setting: *“High-quality early years education, with a strong focus on communication, is good for every child. It is especially positive for disadvantaged children. Children who have lived through difficult experiences can begin to grow stronger when they experience high-quality early education and care. (Department for Education - DfEa 2021)*

Approaches such as Tales Toolkit, which includes practitioners responsively interacting with children through storytelling-based oral language approaches, have shown promise in supporting children's language development (Hussain 2021).

The literature shows the importance of professional development (PD) to enable practitioners to learn how to apply and embed high quality interactions in their early years practice. Approaches like Tales Toolkit, involving practitioners engaging with children using responsive oral language approaches, have demonstrated potential in enhancing children's language skills. Additionally, existing literature emphasizes the significance of professional development (PD) as a means to equip practitioners with the skills needed to incorporate high-quality interactions into their early years practice (Husain et al. 2020) - an aspect that Tales Toolkit also addresses.

A quasi-experimental study (Jones Bartoli, 2018) including approximately 500 2–5-year-olds in 10 settings found that pupils receiving Tales Toolkit made more progress than a business-as-usual (BaU) comparison group pupils in all seven areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage levels. The overall effect size was 0.16 (equivalent to 2 month’s additional progress). This was a small QED and there was some evidence of imbalance between the two groups at baseline (accounted for in the analysis). However, the study provides tentative evidence of promise that warrants further research.

As part of the DfE Early Years Recovery Programme, the Stronger Practice Hubs (SPH) and the EEF are working together to fund Early Years settings’ access to evidence-informed programmes and study the programmes’ influence on practice and children’s outcomes. The aims are to support education recovery following the pandemic, whilst also developing our understanding of effective professional development in the early years. Tales Toolkit is one of a number of projects being funded through the SPH network which aim to close the attainment gap for disadvantaged children through improvements in language, communication and literacy.

The Tales Toolkit pilot will help Tales Toolkit Ltd refine their programme and allow EEF to find out whether the programme is ready to be provided to more settings and children. The research will focus on how Tales Toolkit is delivered in practice, the feasibility of delivering the programme and on early years practitioners experiences of using the programme. Additionally, this pilot evaluation is anticipated to enhance the existing evidence base concerning play-based learning.

The Tales Toolkit Programme

Intervention name

Tales Toolkit

Why (Theory and rationale)

Tales Toolkit is a package of training and resources supporting early language and social development through child-led oral storytelling activities. The activities are child-led and little planning is required for the sessions. In Tales Toolkit sessions, practitioners guide children through the process of creating their own story. Children are supported to identify ideas for four key parts of their story: character, setting, problem and solution. Over time, staff support children to create stories more independently and in later stages of the programme children are supported to write or draw parts of their story. Through storytelling, staff have opportunities to responsively interact with children, developing their language and communication skills. The activities are also expected to develop children’s confidence, creative thinking, problem solving and self-regulation skills. The language and narrative skills children develop are also expected to support children’s writing development.

Who (recipients)

This intervention is aimed at 3-5 years olds. Although there are no selection criteria, the programme is designed to focus on those who are at risk of poorer outcomes in the Personal, Social, and Emotional Development (PSED) and Communication and Language Development (CLL) domains of the EYFS, including those with EYPP/SEND and EAL.

In this pilot, we are aiming to recruit up to 30 settings from the private, voluntary and independent sector (PVI) or maintained nurseries. Settings in the following local authorities in the Thames Valley Early Years SPH's region have been invited to take part in the research:

- Bracknell Forest
- Oxfordshire
- Reading
- Slough
- West Berkshire
- Windsor and Maidenhead
- Wokingham

Maintained school-based nursery settings are also encouraged to deliver the programme to Reception classes as well as nursery classes.

What (materials)

Early Years practitioners receive access to:

- Five 50-minute online training videos, which they are encouraged to use in PD meetings within their setting (training is designed to run over 3-4 months in a team context with time for shared activities and discussion plus activities in between designed to embed best practice).
- Physical resources to use in the delivery of Tales Toolkit sessions (big bags; small kit; apron; hanger; shuffle book; big book).

What (procedures)

In Tales Toolkit sessions, practitioners guide all children through the process of creating their own story. Children are supported to identify ideas for four key parts of their story: character, setting, problem and solution. The training also sets out an expectation that settings will make the Tales Toolkit resources available for the children to use when they chose.

Who (providers)?

Early Years setting staff who have participated in Tales Toolkit training provided by Tales Toolkit Ltd will deliver the intervention in settings.

How? (mode of delivery)

Staff who have undergone the training take the lead in conducting Tales Toolkit sessions for **all children** in the room/class. These sessions are guided by five 50-minute training video. Schools are provided with login credentials to access these videos, along with clear instructions on the recommended schedule for viewing them. Staff should work through the videos as a group, in order to facilitate discussion, collaboration, and the completion of the short exercise collectively.

Training sessions should take place over a three to five-month period. Each video includes footage of sessions with children, interviews with experts, ideas for activities, and discussions between staff. While one designated staff member is responsible for leading these training sessions, their role primarily involves gathering necessary resources and distributing handouts. We promote this as an opportunity for the leading staff member to monitor the level

of staff understanding for their group and identify areas for support. Sessions are typically take place during staff meetings.

The training sessions cover the following topics:

- i) The process of developing quality interactions through child-led activities
- ii) Principles of Tales Toolkit, its theoretical base and how activities can meet its key aims of language, empathy and creativity development
- iii) Developing independent storytellers, evaluating your class-space and using resources to their full potential
- iv) Marking and writing
- v) Reflection and thinking about celebrating children's successes in story-telling

Following each training, practitioners are expected to lead Tales Toolkit sessions at least once a week for all children in the room/class. Each session will require a space for all children to sit together – either inside or outside – and the Tales Toolkit kits, each containing teacher-chosen prompts. Teachers will ask children to reveal the prompts from each kit in term, and together they will create a story based on the Character, Setting, Problem and Solution prompts. Through completion of all the tasks during the training session the teacher should have provided support for children to tell stories independently. Practitioners are expected to set up their provision so that children can access Tales Toolkit resources independently along with props they can use to create stories.

Where (Location)

Participating children receive the intervention from their Early Years setting staff during their usual attendance at their Early Years settings.

When and how much (duration and dosage)

The intervention happens during term time and consists of at least one weekly session of Tales Toolkit storytelling for **all children** in the room/class alongside opportunities for children to access Tales Toolkit independently in the provision.

Tailoring and adaptation

No tailoring or adaptation is planned however, Tales Toolkit is set up so that settings have the flexibility to adapt the programme to their children (and wider community) For example, a setting may lead groups that are differentiated according to need – and so can scaffold the storytelling to the group. Another setting may choose to have more than one representation of a prompt to allow children with additional needs to participate on their own terms – allowing for sensory exploration of the prompt for that child.

How well (planned)

- Additional support includes: research articles linked to each session; a social media group for participants; an archive of webinars with early years experts; and downloadable resources.

Tales Toolkit Logic Model

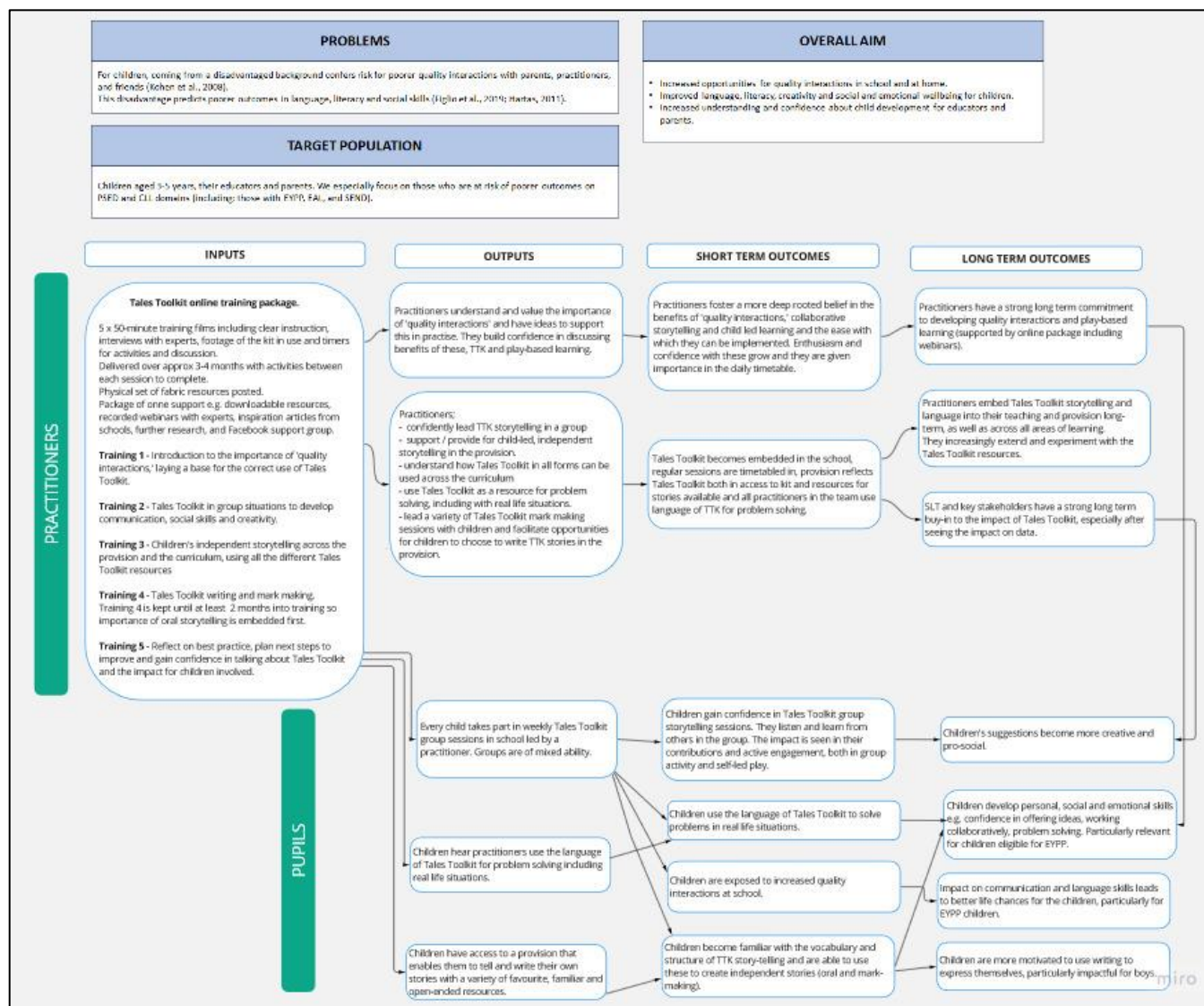
The logic model was developed during the trial set-up phase and is displayed below in Figure 1, with a target population of children between 3 and 5 years who are at risk of poorer outcomes for PSED and CLL.

The logic model describes the intervention activities and illustrates the causal mechanisms underpinning the intervention as well as the anticipated short-term, intermediate and longer-term outcomes. The model suggests that the intervention changes and improves practitioner behaviour around interactions and reading practices and that because of these changes, children will have improved attainment in communication and language.

The logic model shows how practitioners will receive training and resources for Tales Toolkit and how they go on to deliver this to children in their setting. This leads to a change in the way practitioners engage with children in the short term by having a greater understanding of quality interactions and how to support it, modelling language and interaction skills, using strategies to improve language, and tracking children's progress. Longer term outcomes will continue as a greater understanding of the importance of language and communication and quality interactions and play-based learning.

For children, the inputs are taking part and enjoying the weekly Tales Toolkit sessions, being exposed to story-telling opportunities, and experiencing the foundations of character, setting, problem and solution and associated activities in the setting. This allows children to experience models of communication and story-writing with positive feedback, and to practice these new skills. This leads to improved confidence in storytelling, vocabulary, and language and improved social interaction and behaviours around solving problems in real life. Longer term outcomes include accelerated progress and attainment in language and communication, improved personal, social and emotional skills and increased creativity.

Figure 1. Logic model



The full ToC developed by the Tales Toolkit team and EEF is included in Appendix A along with the associated contextual and causal assumption logs in Appendices B and C.

Evaluation

The aim of the pilot evaluation is to establish whether there is evidence to support the programmes' ToC and if Tales Toolkit can be implemented and delivered with fidelity. Our examination will focus on the implementation and engagement aspects of the Tales Toolkit program. We aim to identify the factors that influence the successful delivery of the program and the level of engagement from practitioners and children. Additionally, we will investigate how these factors may either facilitate or hinder the overall impact of the program. In line with the ToC, we will examine the experiences and behaviour of the key stakeholders: practitioners and children, as well as interviewing the delivery team. The research will also assess whether the intervention can be scaled up to a full trial and undergo a full evaluation.

Using a mixed-method design, the IPE will explore the following dimensions: fidelity, adaptation, dosage, quality, reach, responsiveness, perceived impact, context/moderators, programme differentiation and any possible mediators. We present the research questions under the broad headings of fidelity, implementation and outcomes here but a full mapping of IPE dimensions to research questions and methodology is provided in Table 3 at the end of the IPE section.

Research questions

Following the Implementation, Delivery and Evaluation Analysis (IDEA) Workshop and Set-up Meetings with the Tales Toolkit team and the EEF, the following research questions were agreed in accordance with the three aims of this evaluation:

Whether there is evidence to support the theory of change

1. Does the programme lead to a change in practice (as per the short-term outcomes in the logic model)?
 - a. Is there evidence of collaborative storytelling, quality interactions and child-led learnings?
 - b. Is there evidence of practitioners using the resources in their classrooms/other learning environments (e.g., outside)? How do they use them and does this vary by type of setting (e.g., PVI vs. maintained settings)?
2. Do practitioners perceive the intervention has led (or will lead) to positive outcomes for children (e.g., their language and communication skills, PSED, creativity and writing), especially for children with EYPP, EAL and SEND?
3. Do practitioners have confidence and motivation to deliver the intervention?
4. Are there any unintended consequences or negative effects? (e.g., pushing out other programmes, activities widening the attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils, perceived burden)
5. How do pupils engage with the different activities/aspects of the programme?

Whether the approach is feasible to implement and deliver

6. Is the intervention feasible for practitioners to engage in and implement?

7. Can settings deliver with fidelity and within routine practice? Is there variation in delivery across settings? e.g., embedded into the curriculum, planning, practice, resources and language or in separate sessions/activities)
8. Does the delivery method of the training (context and mode) have an impact on engagement with the programme? (practitioners)
9. What are the potential barriers and facilitators of the programme?
10. What support is needed and how can a useful support model be developed?

Whether the programme is ready to be evaluated in a trial (and if so, what would be needed)

11. Do the training and resources constitute a standard intervention that can be replicated and scaled up?
12. What, if anything, should be updated or changed for a trial evaluation (e.g., ToC/logic model, materials, delivery method)?
13. Are there any key contextual factors that appear to facilitate or impede successful implementation at a larger scale, e.g., setting types?
14. What will the cost of the intervention be to settings? Are the costs considered affordable? What is the willingness of settings to pay for the programme and commit the time, beyond the pilot? How does the cost and affordability vary by type of setting?
15. Are changes in key outcomes (e.g., communication and language) measurable?

Evaluation feasibility

16. Is it feasible to involve practitioners in research activities? In particular, support in the collection of primary outcome data/depth interviews (e.g., due to time-burden)
17. Would it be feasible to collect child outcome data? What outcome measure(s) might be used?

The table below describes the success indicators for each of the three pilot criteria and linkages with the relevant research questions (RQs).

Table 1. Research questions and pilot success indicators

Pilot criteria	Research question	Success indicators
Evidence of promise	1, 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 4, 5	Changes in practice Increased pupil engagement Positive perceived impact from practitioners
Feasibility of implementation	6, 7, 8, 9, 10	Programme delivered with fidelity Programme is affordable to settings Programme content is appropriate to settings Training accessible for practitioners
Readiness for trial	11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17	Core programme elements identified No or minor modification of the programme required for scaling to more settings

Recruitment

The pilot evaluation does not intend to be representative of the English early years population. However, the target number of 30 settings enables the intervention to be delivered and evaluated across a variety of settings. This will allow the exploration of acceptability and delivery across different setting types and subset of pupils. The figure also allows for a small amount of potential attrition.

Information being used to select providers has come from settings themselves (via fields in the Memorandum of Understanding - MoU) or the intelligence from the Thames Valley Hub and includes:

- Type (private, voluntary, and maintained nurseries/school-based).
- Size (based on average daily attendance).
- Location (Local Authority)
- Age-range (including the ability to deliver to Reception classes)
- Levels of deprivation (setting postcode level, taken from IDACI)²

Early Years practitioners receive access to the training and resources set out above, which would usually cost approximately £800 plus VAT. Each of the settings received at least one pack of the physical resources, and settings with a larger EY cohort and/or operating over multiple rooms/sites received up to five sets. Additional sets of the physical resources can be purchased for £100.

Settings will have access to the online resources for a year and can keep all of the physical resources at the end of the project. Settings can also continue to have access to the online platform and resources at the end of the project, at a reduced re-subscription rate.

In recognition of the staff time costs associated with undertaking professional development, additional funding is available to cover approximately 50% of staff time costs for attending training: settings will be provided with £7.50 per hour per staff member who completes the 5 hours of training, for up to a maximum of 10 staff members.

Furthermore, settings who are part of the case studies will receive £100 in the evaluation year (2023 - 2024) for completion of evaluation measures. Additionally, practitioners who complete the surveys and provide their details will be entered into a prize draw. This draw will feature one prize of £50 and two prizes of £25 each (more details on these research activities is provided below).

Some settings are excluded:

- Early Years settings can only sign up to receive one programme funded through the SPH initiative between 2022-2025.
- Settings taking part in the evaluation of the DfE Early Years Professional Development Programme are also not eligible to take part.
- If settings have delivered Tales Toolkit before, they are not eligible to take part.

² Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>)

Research methods

Measures

The research will collect qualitative data on practitioners perceived changes in children's language and communication skills, PSED, creativity and writing. A specific focus will be perceived differences among disadvantaged children, including those with EYPP, EAL and SEND.

Children will not be directly recruited to the study and no data will be collected directly from children. The evaluation will focus on practitioners working with children of this age group in recruited settings.

Data collection

Drawing on the EEF IPE guidance (Humphrey et al., 2019; EEF, 2022), we will use a multiphase design to examine the research questions, based around triangulation of mixed methods. This includes:

- One IDEA workshops and reviewing programme materials; two set up meetings.
- Online surveys for practitioners (baseline and post-treatment).
- Case study visits to 12 intervention settings towards the end of the programme to observe delivery and conduct interviews with practitioners, room/language/Early Years leads and the setting manager.
- Interviews with settings or practitioners that have dropped out.
- Interviews with delivery team at the end of delivery.
- Collecting and analysing data from the delivery team on fidelity.

Surveys of practitioners

Data will be collected in the form of online surveys with practitioners at all settings, at baseline and endline. The surveys will be developed using online survey software, SNAP, which allows completion on mobile devices via hyperlink or QR code and can be provided in a paper format if needed. The baseline survey will take place in September 2023 as most children will have started the term and classes/rooms will be established and somewhat settled-in. The endline survey will take place in June-July 2024 at the end of the delivery period when practitioners are able to reflect on their experience with Tales Toolkit.

The baseline survey will be short, capturing information on usual-practice; practitioner characteristics, experience and knowledge; and broader approaches to supporting language and communication, and child-led play. We will draw upon a Practitioner Confidence and Skills questionnaire co-developed with researchers at the University of Oxford³ as part of the Coaching Early Conversation, Interaction and Language (CECIL) study (Dawson, Huxley & Garner, 2022) designed to capture staff confidence, knowledge and practice to support children's language and communication development.

The endline survey will repeat questions about language and communication practice, and cover experiences of taking part in the intervention as well as the time and resources participation required. It will also include questions on engagement with different elements and

³ Survey attached in [Appendix 3](#) - Dr Ariel Lindorff, Professor Kathy Sylva, Dr Katharina Ereky-Stevens and Allen Joseph.

adaptations made to the programme (beyond expected differentiation to meet the needs of individual children).

Case study visits

The research team will visit a selection of settings for one day, during the summer term of 2024 at a time that is convenient to the settings. See the project timeline in Part III of this document for more information. IES will select 12 settings to represent a diverse range of types, sizes, and locations. A small number of settings will also be identified as potential replacement in case any of the initially selected settings drop out before the research visits.

Interviews with staff

During the case study visits, the research team will conduct interviews with two staff members in each setting, for example, the setting manager/head of EY and a practitioner delivering the intervention. We anticipate separate interviews to ensure open/honest discussions. Interviews will last around 30-45 minutes and will be at flexible times to allow all staff to participate outside of ratio restrictions. In cases where it is not feasible to conduct an interview with a staff member during the visit, we would provide the option to conduct the interview at a later more convenient time through phone or video-conferencing. When arranging case studies, we would let the settings know the elements we are requesting, (e.g., observations, interviews) and the setting could then suggest timings for these as suits them (e.g., attending morning and afternoon sessions separately across two days). Evaluators would also seek to be responsive and adaptive on the day so as not to interfere with the setting's normal delivery.

Interviews will explore:

- Experience and engagement with training, as well as materials.
- Workload/time requirements of delivery.
- Implementation costs.
- Facilitators/barriers to implementation.
- Adaptations and reasons (including views on how children with SEND/EAL/EYPP respond and engage).
- How Tales Toolkit compares to usual-practice.
- Children's perceived outcomes.
- Suggested improvements.

The plan is to also interview the same staff towards the end of the intervention, by telephone or video-conferencing. These interviews will focus on perceived impact of the pilot, costs (including time) incurred by settings including whether this was manageable and acceptable, and any issues which would need to be considered for wider roll-out.

Observations of practice

The research team will also carry out observations of practitioners delivering the intervention with children in the case study settings. This would measure fidelity, allow a triangulation of data (with the surveys and interviews) and shape questions for follow-up interviews. The observations will be focused on feasibility of delivery of the intervention and child engagement during Tales Toolkit sessions. Our approach involves developing a semi-structured observation framework based on the AEIOU model (Robinson et al., 1991). This model, rooted in ethnographic methodology, organizes information into five key elements: Activities, Environments, Interactions, Objects, and Users. By using this framework, we can effectively

identify key components of the intervention and observe how children are engaging with its delivery. Data collected using the framework will be qualitative and will be incorporated into the analysis framework with other qualitative data from the case study.

Delivery team data

Although there will be no observations of the training sessions themselves as these are done online at a time that suits the setting, we will review the learning materials. This will enable the evaluation team to gain an understanding of the intervention. This understanding will serve as a foundation for preparing our observation protocols, interview guides, and survey instruments.

We will conduct telephone interviews with the Tales Toolkit delivery team towards the end of intervention delivery. These will explore training delivery, setting engagement and participation, as well as enablers/barriers to successful implementation and scaling up of the programme. We will also collect and analyse data on fidelity from the delivery team, including data on who completed and/or delivered the training sessions, support provided to staff and other relevant information collected by the delivery team on engagement and participation. This will also include a review of any other relevant project materials.

In the final analysis, both qualitative and quantitative data collected from case studies, interviews, surveys, and delivery information will be integrated. This integration aims to create a comprehensive and detailed depiction of the program delivery, participant experiences, and perspectives of the setting staff. The data will be used to investigate the mechanisms of change outlined in the logic model and inform impact analysis.

The different research methods will capture different perspectives and levels. For instance, survey and delivery data will provide high level overviews and broader patterns across participating settings, whereas interviews and observations provide in-depth information regarding a limited number of settings/individuals that can offer insights into what factors may contribute to broader trends. Information from different sources will be compared and analysed. Consistency across multiple sources will be used to validate findings, while discrepancies will indicate the need for further investigation into variations in minority perspectives/experiences, differences among stakeholders, or disparities between reported and observed/measured experiences. These findings and data will be synthesised to create robust and nuanced conclusions that test mechanisms of change set out in the logic model.

Data analysis

The 'Framework' approach will serve as a key tool for synthesizing findings across multiple sources of data (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). This approach allows us to draw themes and messages from an analysis of interview transcripts, observations of delivery, and other materials collected by evaluation and project teams, such as attendance at training/support sessions. It will be used primarily for qualitative data and focusing on the context of individual case study settings, but key quantitative findings can also be incorporated to provide context, such as setting specific information.

Framework is an excel-based qualitative analysis tool that ensures that the analytical process and interpretations from it are grounded in the data and tailored to the research questions. It is designed to ensure a systematic and consistent treatment of all units of data (e.g., transcripts of interviews) and allows for the analytical framework to be refined and modified in

the early stages of its use. The analysis and coding process would involve a mixed approach. Information would be extracted from, for example, interview transcripts and relevant information summarised under key areas of interest. Within these areas of interest, thematic analysis would identify key themes and variation in experience/perspective. Findings from observations or monitoring information, where appropriate, can be added under the appropriate headings to provide further context or information regarding a case study setting.

Framework allows full within case analysis (looking in detail at each individual case) and between case analysis (comparing individual cases and groups of cases), as well as thematic analysis. This will facilitate analysis at a case study level to understand broader impacts and experiences within an individual case study context, as well as being able to compare individual experience across a specific characteristic (e.g., role, setting type). The context of the information is retained, and the transcript location is noted, so that it is possible to return to a transcript to explore a point in more detail or to extract text for verbatim quotations. Organising the data in this way allows us to compare the full range of experiences and accounts and patterns across different groups of people.

Data from the surveys will be analysed using SPSS, a statistical software program commonly used for data analysis. Frequencies will be calculated to examine the distribution of responses for each survey question, and cross-tabulation can be employed (if sample size allows) to explore relationship between different survey variables. Open text questions will be included in the surveys to gather further information.

Table 2 presents a summary of the data collection methods against the research questions, including a brief description of sampling, participants/data sources, data collection and analysis information.

Table 2. Summary table of data collection and analysis

Research methods	Data Collection methods	Evaluation dimension	RQ addressed	Sample size and sampling criteria	Data analysis methods
Theory of change development	IDEA workshop	Evidence of promise	1, 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 4, 5	NA	Theory of Change
Material review	Reviewing intervention material		1, 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 4, 5		Material review, thematic analysis
Practitioner survey	Online questionnaires (baseline and post-treatment)		1, 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 4, 5	At least 2 in each setting N = 60+	Descriptive frequencies, cross-tabs if sample size allows
School case studies	Semi-structured observations, semi-structured interviews		1, 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 4, 5	12 settings (sizes/types, deprivation, 12 setting managers/EY Leads, 12 practitioners, 12 intervention sessions)	Observation framework, thematic analysis Extraction framework, thematic analysis
Delivery team interviews	Semi-structured interviews		1, 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 4, 5	2/3 members of Tales Toolkit delivery team (programme managers & developers)	Extraction framework, thematic analysis
Monitoring Information	Analysis of intervention data collected by Tales Toolkit		1, 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 4, 5	All programme	Thematic analyses, frequency counts
Withdrawal interviews	Interviews with practitioners / settings that withdrawn from the study		1, 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 4, 5	10 practitioners	Extraction framework, thematic analysis
Practitioner survey	Online questionnaires (baseline and post-treatment)	Feasibility of implementation	6, 7, 8, 9, 10	At least 2 in each setting N = 60+	Descriptive frequencies, cross-tabs if sample size allows
School case studies	Semi-structured observations, semi-structured interviews		6, 7, 8, 9, 10	12 settings (sizes/types, deprivation, 12 setting managers/EY Leads, 12 practitioners, 12 intervention sessions)	Observation framework, thematic analysis Extraction framework, thematic analysis
Delivery team interviews	Semi-structured interviews		6, 7, 8, 9, 10	2/3 members of Tales Toolkit delivery team (programme managers & developers)	Extraction framework, thematic analysis
Monitoring Information	Analysis of intervention data collected by Tales Toolkit		6, 7, 8, 9, 10	All programme	Thematic analyses, frequency counts

Withdrawal interviews	Interviews with practitioners / settings that withdrawn from the study		6, 7, 8, 9, 10	10 practitioners	Extraction framework, thematic analysis
Theory of change development	IDEA workshop	Readiness for trial	11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17	NA	Theory of Change
Practitioner survey	Online questionnaires (baseline and post-treatment)		11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17	At least 2 in each setting N = 60+	Descriptive frequencies, cross-tabs if sample size allows
School case studies	Semi-structured observations, semi-structured interviews		11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17	12 settings (sizes/types, deprivation, 12 setting managers/EY Leads, 12 practitioners, 12 intervention sessions)	Observation framework, thematic analysis Extraction framework, thematic analysis
Delivery team interviews	Semi-structured interviews		11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17	2/3 members of Tales Toolkit delivery team (programme managers & developers)	Extraction framework, thematic analysis
Monitoring Information	Analysis of intervention data collected by Tales Toolkit		11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17	All programme	Thematic analyses, frequency counts
Withdrawal interviews	Interviews with practitioners / settings that withdrawn from the study		11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17	10 practitioners	Extraction framework, thematic analysis
Evaluator/ EEF judgement	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA

Ethics and registration

This pilot evaluation has been reviewed under IES's ethics process and approved on March 3rd, 2023. Due to the nature of the data processed, a full review by the IES ethics committee was not deemed necessary. Further information on this decision is available on request from IES.

Data protection

The research adheres to the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. All data will be treated with the strictest confidence. All data will be transferred securely and saved in secure locations only accessible to the evaluation and delivery teams. We respect any personal information which is under our control and to keep it safe. We aim to be clear when we collect personal information about what we will do with it and let subjects know of any material changes to this notice.

IES and Tales Toolkit are each independent data controllers for the data they are collecting as part of this project. Their legal basis for processing personal data is 'legitimate interest'. Goldsmiths, University of London are a data processor for Tales Toolkit. A detailed data processing agreement is in place between Tales Toolkit and Goldsmiths' to ensure any data shared between them will be processed securely.

All participants are given access to Privacy Notices which explain in detail what data are collected and why as well as how data are stored, transferred and deleted. Contact details are also provided in case of queries or complaints. Please find Privacy Notices here:

<https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/evaluation-tales-toolkit>

<https://talestoolkit.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Tales-Toolkit-Ltd-Privacy-Policy.pdf>

Tales Toolkit will collect personal data of key staff and practitioners (i.e., name, job role, email address and telephone number) only where it is necessary. These details will be collected from settings in a password protected email form and shared securely with the evaluation team. In the process of signing settings up to the wider programme (e.g., a general mailing list), some personal data (in the form of contact details) may be transferred and stored on servers located internationally (in the case of Google docs, this will be in the USA).

Personnel

Delivery team

Tales Toolkit is being jointly run by Tales Toolkit, led by the founder of the programme Kate Shelley and supported by Rhys Bevan (Deputy CEO), and a team at Goldsmiths, University in London ('the delivery team') including Dr Alice Jones- Bartoli. Goldsmiths' will oversee elements of the contractual and administrative elements of the project while the Tales Toolkit team lead on recruitment activity, provision of the programme to settings and supporting settings to engage with Tales Toolkit.

Evaluation team

The IES team consists of [Becci Newton](#) (PI), [Dr Clare Huxley](#) (Project Director), [Ceri Williams](#) (Project Manager), [Olivia Garner](#) (Deputy Project Manager) and [Jade Talbot](#) (Research

Officer). Ceri will manage the project day to day with advice and quality assurance (QA) input from Becci and Clare. Olivia will manage the field work process including the staff survey and case study setting visits, with support from Jade. IES also have the support of a Project Support Officer, who will programme the survey and support with recruitment, case study arrangements, and report QA.

Risks

Table 3. Key risks and mitigating actions

Risk	Action to reduce risk	Likelihood	Impact
Staff turnover	Starting activities in September will allow for (most) staff changes to have been made before the beginning of the new academic year. It will be important to maintain good lines of communications with project leads (SPH and settings) to promptly alert them of any changes early on.	Medium	Medium
Recruitment and attrition	<p>Long lead in time to recruit settings, with strong support, input and guidance from Hub lead and delivery team including introductory sessions (webinars), clear communications and information for settings.</p> <p>For recruitment, the communication strategy employed involved frequent emails to those settings who had expressed interest. This was followed by phone calls to gain a signed MoU (where necessary). The delivery team also used an advertisement on EYTV and a mass email campaigns targeted to existing members. Regular communications and updates from Hub lead to delivery and evaluation teams will reduce the risk of attrition.</p> <p>Employ an oversampling strategy to allow for substitution if any drop-out.</p> <p>Incentives in the form of prize draws for practitioner survey submission (£25 and £50) and settings who take part in case study visits (£100).</p>	Medium	High
Further COVID-19 outbreaks causing lockdowns, restricted access to settings, staff/child absences, and possible reduced	Our team has experience supporting recruitment and delivering impact and IPE research throughout the pandemic. Impacts will be managed through: regular meetings with EEF; adaptable method (potential to move resources to different tasks or increase focus on particular strands, change	Low	Medium

engagement with the intervention/evaluation.	timing, moving to virtual fieldwork); realistic lead-in time to fieldwork and an understanding approach recognising current challenges; close monitoring of progress by PI/PM to ensure milestones are achieved, resources are sufficient, and quality standards are maintained		
Reluctance of practitioners/settings to participate in case studies, interviews or surveys	<p>Settings will have their responsibilities clearly laid out in a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). Not all practitioners will be aware of the detail of the MoU so we will produce a clear, concise research briefing explaining the requirements and timings of the evaluation and providing a point of contact for questions. We will reduce burdens on participants keeping surveys short and offering flexible interview/case study times and dates.</p> <p>We mostly proposed conducting interviews with telephone/Microsoft Teams where possible, to make it easier for staff to take part.</p> <p>Maximise survey response through short questionnaires; engaging invites; good design and smartphone compatibility; keep surveys in field for at least three weeks at each point, send reminders, not overlap with holidays. Paper surveys could be considered although are not costed for currently.</p> <p>Incentives in the form of prize draws for practitioner survey submission (£25 and £50) and settings who take part in case study visits (£100).</p>	Low	High
Practitioners/settings do not provide the data/information required	<p>Responsibilities laid out in an MoU. We will work to reduce burdens on settings with clear guidelines on requirements, with long lead-in times to help planning.</p> <p>Incentives in the form of prize draws for practitioner survey submission (£25 and £50) and settings who take part in case study visits (£100).</p>	Low	Medium

Timeline

Table 4. Timeline

Dates	Activity	Staff responsible/ leading
Nov 2022	1st set-up meeting and IDEA workshop	Delivery team, evaluation team
Jan 2023	2nd set-up meeting	Delivery team, evaluation team
Jan-Mar 2023	Ethical approval; develop recruitment materials	Delivery team, evaluation team
Mar-Jul 2023	Recruitment of settings	Delivery team with support from evaluation team
Sep 2023	Baseline survey of practitioners	Evaluation team
Sep 2023– Summer 2024	Intervention period	Delivery team
Autumn 2023– Summer 2024	Collection of programme data from delivery team	Evaluation team
Feb–Apr 2024	Case study visits - observation of delivery to children, interviews with practitioners	Evaluation team
Jun-Jul 2024	Case study interviews with practitioners (end of intervention), delivery team interviews	Evaluation team
Jun–Jul 2024	Endline survey of practitioners	Evaluation team
Jul–Nov 2024	Analysis and reporting	Evaluation team
Sep 2024	Emerging findings presentation	Evaluation team
Nov 2024	First draft of evaluation report	Evaluation team

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Appendix 1 Original Theory of Change

The original ToC was initially developed with facilitation from EEF in a ToC workshop. This was then adapted into a more focused logic model during the IDEA workshop with the evaluation and delivery team at the set-up stages of the evaluation (see Figure 1). The initial intervention included work with parents however it was decided as this was still at a development stage, these aspects of the provision would not be included in the pilot evaluation. The Tales Toolkit team are currently working to develop parent training and resourcing and are piloting these in a small number of schools. They are also keen to develop a Tales Toolkit community and support model, to enable settings to more easily interact with the Tales Toolkit team and access support.

It is hard to view the ToC in this document. Please use the following link to appreciate the ToC in a larger format: https://miro.com/app/board/uXjVOhIfMXw=?share_link_id=949208276456

PROBLEMS

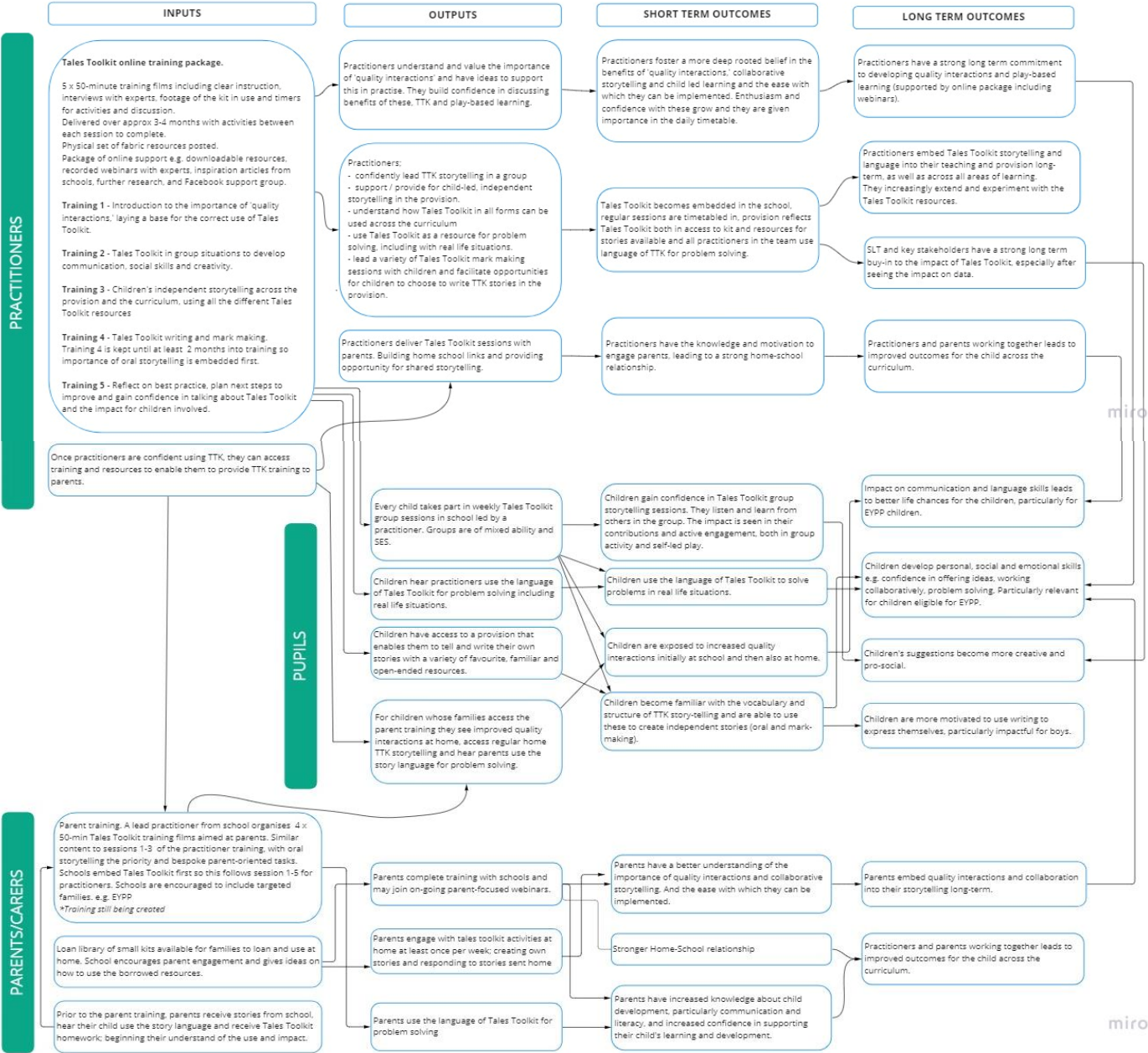
For children, coming from a disadvantaged background confers risk for poorer quality interactions with parents, practitioners and friends (Kohn et al., 2008). This disadvantage predicts poorer outcomes in language, literacy and social skills (Figlio et al., 2019; Hartas, 2011).

OVERALL AIM

- Increased opportunities for quality interactions in school and at home
- Improved language, literacy, creativity and social and emotional wellbeing for children
- Increased understanding and confidence about child development for educators and parents

TARGET POPULATION

Children aged 2-5years, their educators and parents. We especially focus on those who are at risk for poorer outcomes in PSED and CLL domains (including those with EYPP, EAL and SEND)



Appendix 2 Assumptions Logs

The assumed causal mechanisms are detailed in the table below. Evidence strength was assessed by the delivery team.

Note: (i) **green**- the evidence base is very strong, (ii) **green/amber**-the evidence base is strong, (iii) **red/amber**-the evidence base is developing (iv) **red**- the evidence base is limited.

#	Assumption / Causal Mechanism	Where in the ToC does the assumption apply	Evidence	Evidence Strength
1	Pupil-teacher relationships are key to academic and social outcomes in EY	Input/Activity	Miller-Lewis et al., 2014; Torres et al., 2015	Amber/Green
2	Embedding literacy materials within play settings in kindergarten classrooms is related to children's increased engagement with these materials and the practice of literacy skills	Input/Activity	Christie & Enz, 1992; Justice & Pullen, 2003; Stone & Christie, 1996	Amber/Green
3	Teachers are open to a play-focused way of learning, but require support	Input/Activity	Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Pyle & Danniels., 2017	Amber/Green
4	Play based pedagogy enhances learning outcomes	Output	Ashari & Baharuddin, 2017; Zosh et al., 2017; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009	Green
5	Access to Quality interactions with teachers impacts social emotional development and academic learning	Output	Nutbrown et al., 2005; Melhuish et al., 2008; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004)	Amber/Green
6	Practitioners confidence in practice related to quality interaction leads to more effective settings	Output	Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004	Amber/Red
7	Rooting activity in children's own stories can contribute to the development of a shared classroom-climate where children are valued for the narratives and strengths that they can demonstrate in these sessions	Output	Nicolopoulou & Richer, 2004; Wright et al., 2012	Amber/Red
8	Narrative and imaginary play are valuable strategies for the development of spoken language and literacy within early years	Short-term outcome	Cremand et al., 2017	Amber/Green
9	Play-based learning where children can be imaginative is associated with more advanced language used by children	Short-term outcome	Bergen & Mauer, 2000; Weisberg, Zosh, et al., 2013	Amber/Green
10	Parent-teacher co-operation is associated with better learning and socioemotional outcomes	Long-term outcome	Cook et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2013; Jeon et al., 2021	Amber/Green
11	Response and structured parent-child interactions associated with increased school readiness (esp for children growing up in disadvantaged SES) (school readiness e.g. language, communication, personal, social and emotional skills)	Long-term outcome	Connell & Prinz, 2002; Dodici et al., 2003; Justice et al., 2019	Amber/Green
12	Tales Toolkit focuses on the behaviours for learning that underpin school readiness, giving children skills that will make a difference in later life; improving behaviour, concentration, using story as an effective way to facilitate interactions and develop skills associated with school readiness (e.g. socio-emotional skills, language and communication)	Long-term outcome	Duncan et al., 2007; Hillman & Williams, 2015; Curenton, 2006	Amber/Green
13	peers are powerful forces for learning - impact of mixed-SES and mixed-ability groups on those who are starting off in a disadvantaged position	Short-term outcome	EEF, 2018; Ghandour et al., 2021; Curenton, 2006	Amber/Red
14	Familiarity with Tales Toolkit structure leads increased motivation to write, narrowing the early gender gap in Literacy	Output	Henry & Rickman, 2007; Reid & Ready, 2013; Wright et al., 2012	Amber/Green
15	Children from disadvantaged backgrounds particularly benefit from quality interactions in their early years	Long-term outcome	Edwards & Jones (2018); Jones Bartoli & Shelley (in prep).	Amber/Red
16	Parents increased knowledge and confidence about child development supports learning outcomes	Overall aim	Sheffield Morris et al., 2017	Amber/Green
17	Tales Toolkit encourages playful learning by upskilling teachers providing knowledge and a method of delivery that supports with competing pressures	Short-term outcome	Conrad et al., 1992; Reiner Hess et al., 2004	Amber/Red
18	Storytelling activities can help support development of problem-solving abilities	Input/Activity	Baker (2014); our own research	Amber/Red
19		Long-term outcome	Curenton (2006)	Red

The assumed contextual assumption are detailed in the table below. Evidence strength was assessed by the delivery team.

Note: Assumption strength: How strong do you think the assumption is?

(i) **green** – this assumption will hold in the vast majority of circumstances where the programme is delivered, (ii) **green/amber** – this assumption will hold in most of the circumstances where the programme is delivered, (iii) **red/amber** – this assumption will often not hold in the circumstances where the programme is delivered, (iv) **red** – there is a good chance of this assumption not holding / do not know whether this assumption will hold or not.

Assumption risk: If this assumption does not hold, how much of an impact on programme delivery with fidelity to the original design?

(i) **green** – the programme could continue to be delivered with very minor impact, (ii) **green/amber** – the programme could continue to be delivered, but the impact would be substantial, (iii) **red/amber** – the programme could continue to be delivered, but without fidelity to original design; (iv) **red** – the programme could not be delivered.

#		Contextual Assumption	Assumption Strength	Assumption Risk
1	Training	Time and resources have been allocated for training and implementation	green	Red
2		Practitioners understand and implement the training sessions in order	green	Red
3		Schools have access to the internet and training films	Green	Red
4		Schools have access to resources to use in kit and for Tales Toolkit activities	Green	Red
5		School have scope to train together	green	Amber/Red
6	Implementation	Practitioners put training into practise with regular storytelling sessions	green	Red
7		Practitioners have a good understanding of writing development	green	Amber/Green
8		Schools have well moderated assessment systems in place	Amber/Green	Amber/Red
9		Schools have funding available to purchase additional materials needed to enable all classes to use Tales Toolkit effectively	Amber/Green	Amber/Red
10		Practitioners explore the additional material in the Tales Toolkit members area outside of training sessions	Amber/Green	green
11		Practitioners have already built a good rapport with their children and have behaviour management strategies to help manage group sessions.	green	Amber/Green
12		School provides time in the day for children to engage freely and make choices within the provision	green	Amber/Green
13		School has provided staff with safeguarding training and they are able to deal with any sensitive discussions that arise	green	Amber/Green
14		Practitioners are familiar with the EYFS curriculum and expectations	green	Amber/Red
15		Practitioners continue using Tales Toolkit after the end of the training.	green	red
16		Practitioners use the language of Tales Toolkit as outlined in the training outside of group sessions to make links with everyday problems	Amber/Green	Amber/Red
17		Practitioners follow the training and ensure Tales Toolkit sessions are a safe space for the children, no pressure, where all suggestions are valued and storytelling is an enjoyable, fun experience.	green	Amber/Green
29		Practitioners stay consistent through the training and the trial	green	Amber/Green
30		Research	School engage with us to provide feedback	Amber/Green
31	Schools are able to provide the data we need based on their current reporting and understanding		Amber/Red	Amber/Green
32	SLT	SLT show interest in whats happening in early years and value the opinion of the team	Amber/Green	Amber/Green

Appendix 3 Practitioner Confidence and Skills Questionnaire

This short survey is designed to find out how confident you feel now as an early years practitioner. It should only take around 10 minutes to complete. Your answers will be kept confidential and used only for research purposes by the research teams. Your name and your setting's name will never be used in any report of results.

The first set of questions are designed to find out how confident you feel as an early years practitioner aiming to support children's language development. Most of the statements use wording like this: "How confident are you that ...?" We want to find out the extent to which you feel you have the knowledge/skills needed to produce a specific outcome (e.g. increased children's vocabulary). There are no right or wrong answers and practitioners vary a great deal in their confidence. Please be as honest as you can, because we are keen to learn about staff confidence across a broad range of skills.

How confident are you in your knowledge and skill at each of the following	Scale 1-5*
1. Helping typically developing children make good progress in their language skills	
2. Helping children with language delay make good progress in their language skills	
3. Helping children with EAL make good progress in their language skills	
4. Crafting good questions for your child	
5. Enabling children to ask their own questions	
6 Supporting children to be good listeners	
7 Suggesting activities that families can do to support children's language development	
8. Supporting children to be confident in communicating their wishes and ideas	
9. Motivating children to want to communicate more with peers and adults	
10. Assessing children's language to identify their need for support	
11. Engaging other early years staff in changes to language practice	
12. Making referrals for extra support for a child with language difficulties	

This next section asks about how you interact with individual children. Please rate the extent to which you do the following things, answering as honestly as you can.

What you normally do when interacting with a child or group?	Scale 1-5*
1. Wait for child to start the talking – with words, sounds, gestures or looks	
2. Follow child's lead in play	
3. Join in with child play	
4. Position yourself to be face to face with child	
5. Use a wide range of questions	
6. Encourage child in turn-taking	
7. Imitate what child has said or done	
8. Comment on what child is doing	
9. Repeat what child has said, using the correct form of speech	
10. Extend what child has said, e.g., by linking to a previous event or providing another example	

11. Model a wide variety of words, e.g., adjectives and connectives such as 'because'	
12. Praise child	
13. Talk slowly enough for child to understand	

*Scale: 1 - Not at all, 2 – Slightly, 3 – Somewhat, 4 – Fairly, 5 – Very much