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Chapter

A Childcare Social Enterprise: The London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) Model

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Abstract

This chapter explores the work of London Early Years Foundation, the largest childcare social enterprise in the UK and how it is led with its social purpose at the heart. It recounts the rationale for developing the model which is framed within the three pillars of sustainability the first of which ensure nursery places are provided to children from disadvantaged background using a cross-subsidy fee business model. The importance of a social pedagogy is highlighted to ensure the organisation delivers its social purpose at every level of delivery and do so to build cultural and social capital.

Keywords: early childhood education and care, disadvantaged children, social Enterprise, social pedagogy, sustainability

1. Introduction

Our first five years profoundly shape our future life outcomes. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has the potential to transform children's lives, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The early years are acknowledged as crucial for children's outcomes; the poorest of whom will start school already 11 months behind their more affluent peers. Attendance at high quality early years provision offers a vital opportunity to narrow a gap that will only widen as the school years advance [1]. Education for children in their early years provides significant benefits in determining life chances and increasing social mobility.

Longitudinal studies show that participation in high-quality ECEC programmes has a long-lasting impact on educational outcomes and attainment, as well as on their overall social, emotional, and physical development; and overall well-being. This would imply that society should take greater care of its children because generally what is good for the child is good for society and that extends even further when applied to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. ECEC, described in national policy as childcare is also considered a means of supporting parents' access training, employment and social networks, which in turn improve the quality of their children's lives and reduce the risks of child poverty [2, 3]. These benefits are even stronger for disadvantaged children, and those living in poverty [4, 5]. Studies in the US show that high-quality early learning can be especially beneficial for children with a migrant background, particularly those who speak a minority language at home.

However, investment in early years' education and childcare will only benefit children if the provision is of good quality [6].

Despite the research about the benefits of Early Childhood Education and Care for children, the UK Government has not had a formal strategy since 2007 and relied on the market to provide most early education services. The consequence of the mixed market is that children from disadvantaged backgrounds and communities have seen their access to good quality ECEC limited either because there are fewer settings available, the quality is poor, or the fees are too high [7, 8]. This struck me as very unfair and the reliance on the market to solve the problem of access to high quality services appeared to entrench poverty through the very system. Observing this it seemed absurd to continue with the same approach given the benefits to the whole of society of supporting all children but especially those living in poverty. Left unaddressed, poverty can alter the trajectory of a child's entire life increasing the likelihood of long-term poverty, poor educational outcomes, developing obesity, mental health issues as well as dying early. Poverty is the strongest statistical predictor of how well a child will achieve at school. At the end of primary school, pupils living in poverty are often over nine months behind their peers in reading, writing and maths. For example, in the UK, children with a high persistence of poverty, those children on free school meals for over 80 per cent of their time at school have a learning gap of 22.7 months – twice that of children with a low persistence of poverty (those on free schools' meals for less than 20 per cent of their time at school), who have a learning gap of 11.3 months [9]. If poverty is to be reduced or eliminated, the next generation must be our focus.

Shocked by this, I was determined to show that we could do things differently and I designed the London Early Years Foundation (LEYF), to be a social enterprise with a business model that would ensure that children from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds could access high-quality ECEC. The organisation would be shaped by a strong pedagogy with cultural and social capital weaving through its very core. Community engagement would underpin our work and we would provide local employment opportunities, staff and parent training, apprenticeships and local business partnerships in order to drive the widest possible social impact. The organisation would be underpinned by the 3 pillars of sustainability: economic prosperity social equity and environmental integrity economic, social and environmental, also described as the triple bottom line; people, profit and planet and our strategy would be shaped by the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed by the United Nations (2015).

LEYF would offer a high quality, ambitious service using a hybrid business model, blending the power of market exchange with the best of commercial business rigour and efficiency and government innovation to create a business that would be centred by its social purpose to provide the best-in-class nursery provision that could support all children including over one third of the children from disadvantaged backgrounds. I wanted to demonstrate that social and commercial goals could be blended together in the pursuit of a fairer society. Ultimately, I wanted to show that providing high quality nurseries could address one element of the poverty that remained a significant determinant of a child's future.

There was limited research about such a model in childcare but there were discussions about social enterprises in a range of other sectors wishing to provide alternative business models that could drive change, raise the standards of achievement and increase economic sustainability. To be successful, the LEYF model needed to be scalable and replicable so that many more childcare social enterprises could be created

particularly as in increasingly complex societies social exclusion becomes resistant to simple solutions like fiscal measures and standardised services [10]. It gave me confidence to believe that I could create an independent, sustainable and equitable method of delivering childcare to challenge the existing two-tier system, in essence state or private settings and shine a light on what might be done differently. This was also a decision taken at a time where children from poor backgrounds tended to be in the depleting number of state-funded or voluntary-run subsidised services, while there was a corresponding increase in private nurseries, often funded through private equity and investment and situated in affluent areas using higher fees to fund the investment. When I began, the system seemed intractable but social entrepreneurs share the view that most problems can be reshaped into a model for change through the hard work needed to confront the societal structures that leave too many behind [11].

Fifteen years on, the task of creating an independent and sustainable social-enterprise childcare model should not be underestimated but given the unfairness of the situation facing so many children, I was inspired by the words of the social entrepreneur Mohamed Yunus who reminded us that indifference is the enemy and if it matters to you then do something about it or as President Obama said in his campaign speeches in 2010, if not now, when [12].

2. Challenges getting established

Building a social enterprise begins with the governance structure which includes leadership. This can be difficult as there is no legal definition of a social enterprise in the UK. Businesses and organisations which describe themselves as such all operate under the 'third sector', an umbrella term which refers, but not exclusively, to charities, Community Interest Companies (CIC), cooperatives and mutuals, fair-trade organisations and social firms. The Department of Trade and Industry describes social enterprises as a business with primarily social objectives where surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners. The membership organisation for social enterprises in the UK describes social enterprises as businesses which trade for a social or environmental purpose. There are more than 100,000 social enterprises in the UK, contributing £60 billion to the economy and employing around two million people. Social enterprises demonstrate a better way to do business, one that prioritises benefit to people and planet and use the majority of any profit to further their mission. Social enterprises contribute to reducing economic inequality, improving social justice and to environmental sustainability. After some discussion at LEYF we chose to retain our charitable status so we could use our Articles of Association or the rules of the LEYF charity as an asset lock. That meant we would be more assured that whatever we decided to do would be aligned to the rules of our charity and support the aims and purpose of the organisation which were to provide high quality nurseries, support staff with training and development and campaign for the rights of children and their families.

We rebranded as LEYF and started to operate as a social enterprise and put together an incremental plan to develop a sustainable and independent business by providing nurseries across London, selling places directly to parents, businesses, local authorities and other organisations using a cross-subsidy fee strategy which would allow us to support up to 35 per cent of children from disadvantaged families to attend the nurseries. I was keen we did not develop a traditional fundraising charity

approach but make sure the offer to the children was built into the very business model we designed.

Choosing where to site nurseries was an important factor. Most nurseries would be situated in neighbourhoods where families from both professional backgrounds and more disadvantaged backgrounds lived, so the children could be educated together in order to build trust and social capital and reduce social segregation. Several studies find desegregation to have a positive effect on outcomes of marginalised students, including pre-school age children. Studies point to several mechanisms which could evidence the relationship between social mixing in schools and attainment, including improved quality of teaching, exposure to diverse peer groups, positive peer effects, and raise expectations in home learning environments [13, 14]. However, we would also run nurseries in areas of high deprivation, as these were often forlorn neighbourhoods, characterised by high levels of economic exclusion without nurseries or where the quality of the nurseries was poor. These were areas where we noticed families were struggling with adverse childhood experiences and the resultant intergenerational outcomes of what is often called the toxic trio; mental health issues, substance abuse and domestic abuse, compromising a child's chance to thrive. Today, up to 77% of the LEYF nurseries are situated in these areas because every child matters and has the right benefit from the economic wellbeing that a nursery will bring into a neighbourhood through the direct provision of ECEC but also the additional economic contribution through employment and local spending [15, 16].

3. The LEYF pedagogy

A social enterprise childcare business model needs to be able to deliver a pedagogy which ensures every activity across the organisation supports and anchors its social purpose. Therefore, the business and pedagogical needed to combine seamlessly to shape the organisation and ensure that every aspect of the organisation's delivery was underpinned by an understanding of the factors that limit children's horizons, especially those from disadvantaged families and communities. We wanted to design a service with socially just practice at its very core and recruit, retain and train staff to have the theoretical and pedagogical knowledge to provide a rich pedagogy based on the context of what it is like to be growing up now [17, 18].

We understand pedagogy to be the understanding of how we lead children to learn and develop ensuring we use the teaching practices that will help us best deliver and enhance that learning. Pedagogy is rooted in values and beliefs about what we want for children [19]. Pedagogy means ensuring staff are able to teach children in a way that is developmentally age-appropriate and requires them to have an understanding of the importance of play and be able to employ relevant, creative and flexible teaching approaches and practices.

We took the view that this works best when we have favourable staff-child ratios in place that can positively impact pedagogy. Having good ratios that allows for effective interactions and relationships in an organisational climate of collaborative innovation which enable staff to contribute their own ideas and having their ideas heard and valued was predictive of classroom quality and better children's outcomes. In addition, it supported staff to form collaborative teams, build a stronger sense of the shared purpose and work on continuous quality improvement which also made a significant difference to the children's outcomes. Building organisational systems which moulded a culture of collaborative innovation proved to be an excellent way to connect and

reconnect staff with a sense of shared purpose. For example, using home learning cook a meal activities to support families struggling with food poverty.

We used the social pedagogy approach to shape the LEYF pedagogy because it focused on finding solutions to social problems, framed by relationships and social context while concentrating on the whole child, their families and their communities. Social pedagogy is essentially concerned with well-being, relationships and empowerment including children's rights. It reflects cultural attitudes and traditions including attitudes to modern childhood and children's upbringing, the relationship between the individual and society, and how society supports its disadvantaged or marginalised members. As a social enterprise created to support all children but especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, we have developed a pedagogy that gives the child and the adults a strong voice and rejects the often deficit position associated with settings focused on the poorer and more deprived communities. This is a pedagogy underpinned by children's rights and participation. Given the importance of sustainability at LEYF, we were also very influenced by the social pedagogy notion of the theory and practice of creating a "thriving garden for children", a fertile self-sustaining ecosystem connecting the child's well-being and learning and resources to their surroundings [20].

That social pedagogy continues to evolve as a pedagogical response which identifies educational pathways to promote critical consciousness in all children so they can respond to societal changes that affect the relationship between the individual and society especially when there are risks of fragmentation and social exclusion remains important at LEYF. Our story of social pedagogy continues to be shaped by social pedagogues who courageously embrace a level of pedagogical fluidity that is driven by continual discussion and reflection as we observe and understand the changing world faced by our children [21]. Pedagogy needs to be updated, recreated and renovated within the changes of the new times, otherwise it loses its function and education will not be fit to support children as they navigate rapid social change and anticipate the unfolding future. Pedagogy is never about reproducing an educational model. The LEYF pedagogy incorporated the EYFS but in a way that is culturally contextual and situated within the whole LEYF approach. The LEYF pedagogy, in the spirit of social pedagogy, is dynamic, creative, and process-orientated rather than mechanical, procedural, and automated and this pedagogical fluidity has shaped our approach as we discovered more about children's development and adjusted to the changing context of their lives. The pedagogy is built on an understanding of knowledge as something in constant movement. It assumes that a connectivity between thinking and doing is of crucial importance to respond to social challenges [22].

The LEYF pedagogy fitted very comfortably within the concept of social pedagogy and our ambition to provide people with well-being and happiness recognising everyone's intrinsic worth and ability to reach their full potential. We were committed to promoting people's social functioning, inclusion, participation, social identity and social competence as members of society [23]. The guiding ethos of social pedagogy anchored the social purpose and the values of LEYF despite the many changes and shifts we implemented to develop a workable model. We were also influenced by the social pedagogy head, heart and hands approach to practice led by people who understand and were willing to share their professional, personal and private selves with the organisation for the good of the social purpose.

The role of the staff aligned very much to the social pedagogy approach where the curriculum was designed to support children to develop across the life course which included family and the wider community rather than the narrower focus only on

learning targets laid out in the UK and increasingly commonplace across the world. The LEYF approach very much sees the ECEC professional as someone who walks 'alongside' the children, teaching, guiding, reassuring and extending their learning.

We believe that pedagogies that are tightly linked to social purpose provide educational pathways to promote academic excellence for all children. Every LEYF teacher must be fully aware of the LEYF pedagogy and understand why each strand matters and how they interweave together to provide a framework for excellence. We strengthen the system by providing Pedagogical Coaches for each setting who help develop practice in the settings as well as providing staff training, coaching and support. Progress is measured termly using a self-reflective process of evaluating the LEYF Pedagogical Development Scale (LPDS). The data collected helps the Learning and Development Team monitor confidence of delivery and then use the information locally and centrally to identify what needs to happen to ensure quality is delivered consistently through all the pedagogical processes.

The resulting LEYF pedagogy is made up of seven interwoven strands, each one made from thousands of threads, all of which combine to form a strong learning rope which supports children, families and staff (**Figure 1**).

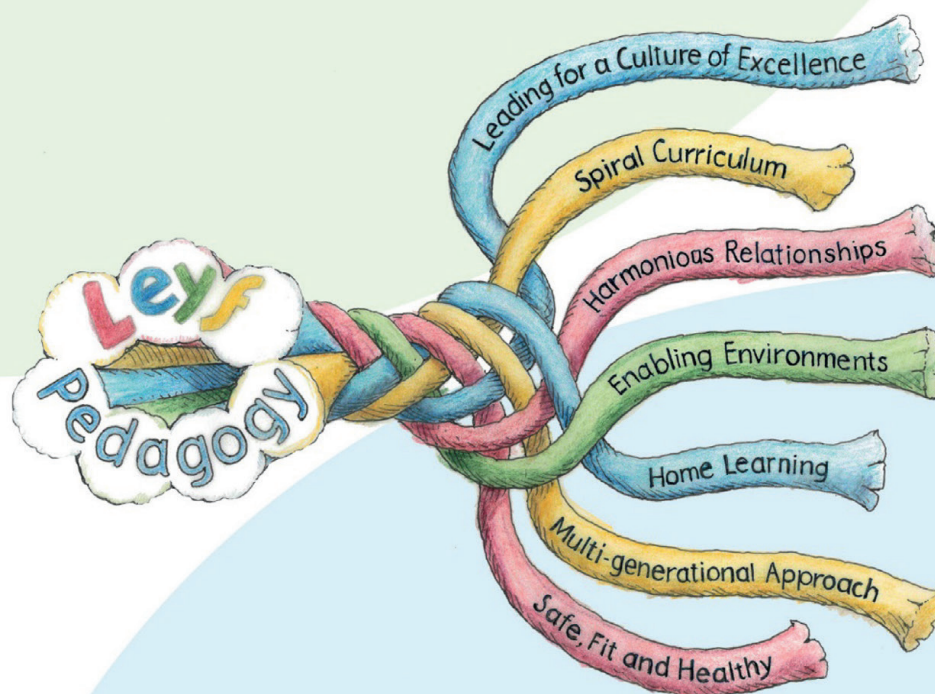
3.1 Leading for excellence

The leadership model was designed to recognise the centrality of our social purpose and the need to deliver and sustain excellent practice right across the organisation. Good social enterprises are not just values-led but also lead for excellence. LEYF set out a big ambition for children from the disadvantaged communities as central to leadership. We cannot assume that all adults in ECEC share our view about cultivating social justice through education as there a deficit attitude to teaching children from poorer communities is commonplace among children. Teachers often saw poverty as the result of personal negative attitudes towards education and an unwillingness to work hard. They were surprised to discover that poor people had similar educational aspirations to their more affluent families but believed the structural factors that led to poverty overwhelmed their abilities [24].

As well as thoroughly researched pedagogy and solid monitoring, good childcare social enterprises drive quality and improvement through practitioner-led action research, reflective practice and innovation. Leading using action research as part of the continuous cycle of improvement has led to many research projects which have progressed the service. Action research can be used at different levels in the organisation – from an apprentice interested in growing an area of pedagogical practice, to a nursery manager wanting to spread more sustainability across the organisation. It has been a success factor in how staff understand and generate knowledge about education and transform teachers' practice. Building quality is dependent on staff who understand their role in this and there is much benefit from involving staff in the delivery of a service – not just trying out something new but questioning why, what and how things are done, a pedagogical tango [25]. Action research has changed our practice and influenced the wider sector through our work on men working in childcare, the LEYF Early Years Chef Academy and the development of our Sustainability Strategy.

Doing action research has also helped us develop a self-reflective loop to create a culture where staff can continually both drive and respond to changes and use the emerging evidence to shape everyday practice and reframe their theories within a praxeological paradigm by connecting our head, our hands and our hearts. For many, social leaders action research is the space where staff question why, what and how'

The LEYF Pedagogy Rope represents how teachers at LEYF lead learning to provide the very best outcomes for our children.



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Figure 1.
LEYF Social Pedagogy.

things are done and use these questions to gather evidence to gain a greater knowledge of their impact on the service. In doing this, they build confidence, understanding and the capacity to make constructive changes for the better. Social leaders often use action research to develop a growth mindset among staff enabling them to have the courage to explore the pedagogical fluidity that is driven by continual discussion and reflection as we observe the changing world faced by our children.

The LEYF approach reflects leading a nursery through six key areas, each of which are of equal value to leading successfully (Figure 2).

To ensure we consistently deliver high quality ECEC for all children we need to build and retain an emotionally resilient workforce. This is particularly important where staff are routinely engaging in high levels of emotionally demanding work especially in the current context of recruitment shortages and insufficient funding. Interestingly, we found that shared purpose is often the reason that people join



Leading at LEYF

Social leaders in Early Childhood Education and care (ECEC) lead with a social purpose to create an organisational culture and pedagogical approach that fosters a fairer society for children and families, framed within economic, social and environmental sustainability and impact.

O'Sullivan & Sakr, 2022



Figure 2.
LEYF Social Leadership Model.

an organisation and stay. It outranks opportunities for professional growth, work environment and relationships with the team.

Staff are often attracted to work with children with high levels of need because they want to make a difference. We therefore need to ensure we build a culture of ambition, hope and empowerment for both the children and staff. Staff need to operate within a growth mindset thereby challenging the deficit attitude to teaching children from disadvantaged and poor community was commonplace among teachers [24]. Therefore, social leaders must encourage their staff to share their interests and enthusiasm for the life of the setting. This might be their music skills or ability to garden and share this with the children and colleagues.

This supports their underlying emphasis on building equitable relationships where each person whether adult or child is given a voice and empowered to use it through their practice. The underlying assumption is that everyone has a right to be heard and the opportunity to participate and the resulting relationships (which we refer to as harmonious relationships in LEYF) are not just with the children but with team colleagues, parents, other professionals, members of the local community and more recently through defining our relationship with our natural environment.

LEYF has designed a career pathway for staff, beginning with apprentices and learning all the way to a full Honours degree. This is in recognition of the importance of supporting staff, many of whom may have come from the local communities where ambition for them was also low. Providing staff with relevant training, coaching, wellbeing support and generous benefits is important especially emphasising a deep respect for human dignity.

One of the most effective ways of supporting leaders is through coaching. The LEYF approach to coaching is to allow staff to find their own solutions to issues in partnership with a coaching colleague. It is a process of conversation that is thought provoking and often helps unlock ideas and is a means of growing confidence which ultimately can maximise professional potential. Recent research on adult learners 'anxieties about new learning found that altered mindsets could have widespread benefits from many kinds of cognitive tasks [26]. People who reframed their frustration and did not try to avoid learning challenges performed significantly better when they had the support of a coach. They were encouraged to learn slowly using small steps, moving gently out of their comfort zone and using every new challenge as an opportunity to question the negative assumptions about their own abilities. This was particularly useful for staff at LEYF when we examined how we could address the continual challenge of managing change.

In the ECEC world change is continual; we developed the organisational LEYF 7a's approach to help embed a positive and constructive approach to organisational change. The 7as articulates the change journey for staff so they can understand each stage and focus on how we anchor and amplify the change successfully, so it is consistently anchored in practice by all staff in their workplace. It challenges the assumption that managing change is easily achieved through technical processes, but instead recognise the emotional elements along the change process which needs careful and informed change leadership that involves and motivates staff to want to change their practice (**Figure 3**).

3.2 Spiral curriculum

The LEYF pedagogy design was influenced by many ECEC, modern theorists and some of the thinking of some national curriculum frameworks as well emerging

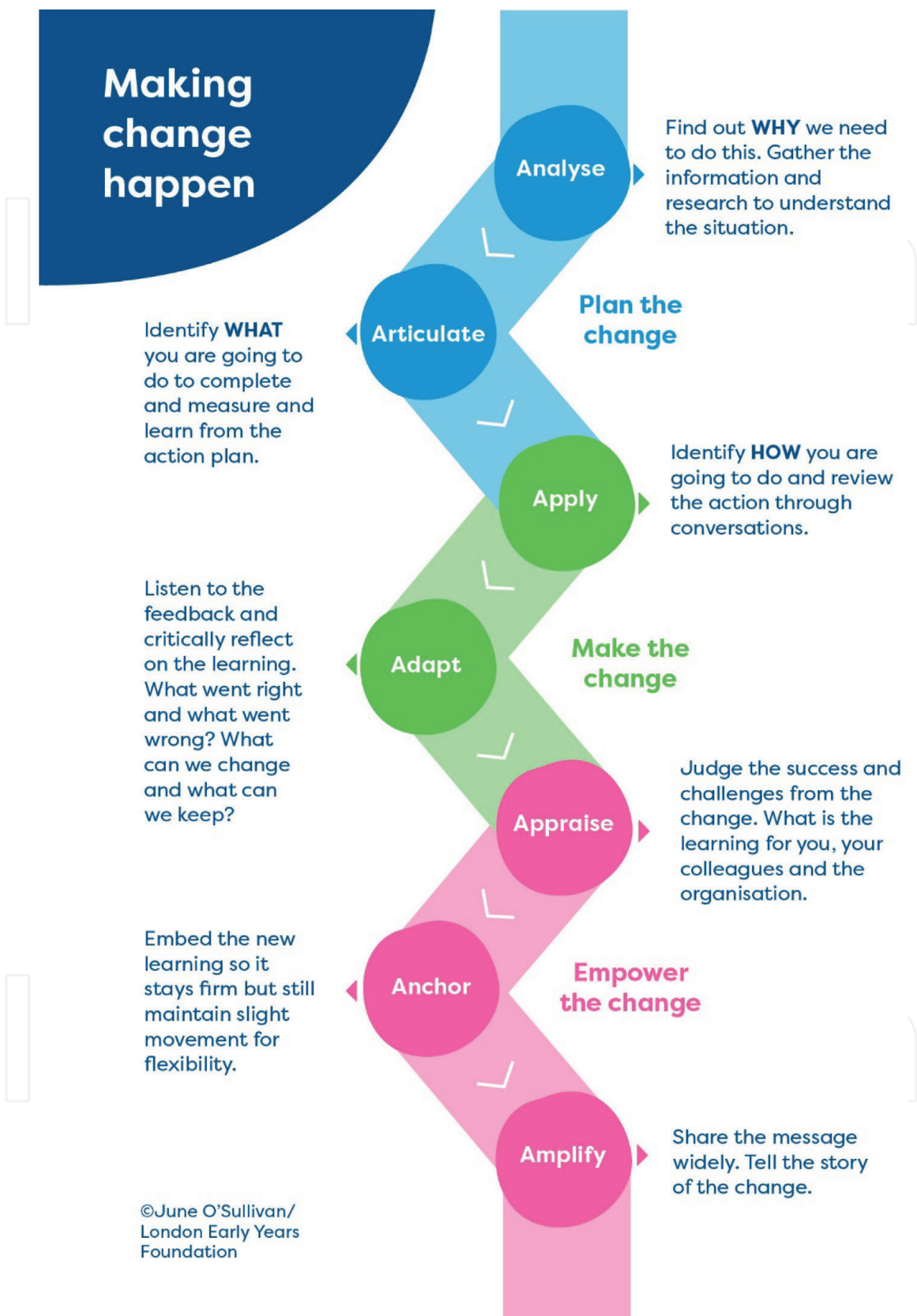


Figure 3.
LEYP 7As of Change.

knowledge about brain development. The LEYP Curriculum is portrayed as a spiral because children coil around their experiences and learning, rarely learning in a straight line. At LEYP this includes the enabling environment, harmonious

relationships, a strong home-learning environment and their local community. Inside the spiral is the teaching and learning designed to nurture, inspire and extend the creative and curious child. How children are enabled to learn is just as important as what they learn. LEYF staff are required to support children at a suitable pace, stretching and encouraging and celebrating as they move onwards on their learning adventure. This is often described as a strength-based approach with an appreciation of the strong human being, a view of children advocated by the Reggio Emilia approach as the strong, powerful, competent rich child in contrast to the deficit idea of the poor child. This means staff must know the child and their idiosyncrasies and understand their own role in helping children make friends, find their place and voice in the nursery and their community and value their thinking and independence. Social-enterprise nurseries need to have systems to make this happen as too many poor children are highly aware of their social position and the limitations it placed on them from an early age [27].

At LEYF, the cultural capital gap is directly linked to the children's access to an abundance of rich language especially as by three years of age, there could be a 30-million-word gap between children from the wealthiest and poorest families [28]. Therefore, a social-enterprise nursery must have language and literacy at its core. It must be so heavily language and literacy rich that droplets of gold fall from every interaction. Language does not consist only of words, sentences and stories: it incorporates art, dance, drama (including pretend play), mathematics, movements, rhythm and music. Children are learning to communicate their experience in many ways and to understand the ways in which others have communicated and represented experience. They are developing increasing competence in symbolic, abstract, imaginative and creative thinking. Language develops in meaningful contexts, when children have a need to know and a reason to communicate. Adults will need to understand and respect both verbal and non-verbal communication styles. All LEYF nurseries use techniques that support language development, especially children from more disadvantaged backgrounds, where language delay is more common. For example, Makaton, a language programme using signs and symbols, to help people to communicate, helicopter sessions developed to give children a voice and share their thinking and ideas through drama [29]. We also use Dialogical Reading, the practice whereby a child and adult share a picture book and focus on the picture book and story through talk, helping the child become the teller of the story and the adult the listener, the questioner, the audience for the child. The child has an active part in the reading experience, talks about the story and asks and answers the questions about the story is more effective in developing oral language than when adults just read the book to the child and supports their ability to develop their grammar, deepens their listening and comprehension, and the ability to elaborate and shape an argument [30].

Staff development is also designed to encourage and extend communication and language development, and great emphasis is placed on children hearing grammatically correct language, especially those bi and multi-lingual children at whose homes limited English is spoken. During the week, children at LEYF conduct their own planning meetings to ensure their voice is heard and staff are familiar with their interests. Children should have control over their own learning and play a role in learning how to learn and think about things. They are apprentices and with the right support use their boundless energy and enthusiasm to actively learn to perfect their skills and understanding and navigate their environment. We also seek children's views through exit interviews, which help us see the nursery from their perspective and make the necessary amendments.

At LEYF, staff focus on providing a wide variety of activities and experiences which offer breadth and balance to each child. Play is the best vehicle for this as it is vital for children's development and welfare. Play allows children to express strong feelings, rehearse experiences and interact socially, often with great enjoyment and therefore is the main medium through which we teach and includes a daily balance between free flow and child-initiated play, with planned activities that stimulate children's curiosity, creativity, wonder, fun, enthusiasm and enjoyment.

Social-enterprise nurseries must weave weekly outings into parts of the community that may seem closed to the children, like galleries, theatres, markets, restaurants and local-interest sites. Too many children live near parks or the sea or areas of outstanding interest to tourists but remain unfamiliar with them. Social-enterprise nurseries like LEYF must have inclusivity, equitable opportunities for participation and diversity at their heart. Celebrating and making children familiar and comfortable with their family heritage and, in the LEYF case, the predominant London cultures actively supports a positive self-esteem, thereby developing open and confident people, which contributes towards countering prejudice and has a significant impact on how they view themselves within their world as well as preparing them for their role in a globally connected world.

3.3 Enabling environments

Over 77% of LEYF nurseries are sited in neighbourhoods of high social disadvantage. Many of these areas have no nurseries or poor-quality nurseries often in forlorn and neglected environments, in poor repair with ill thought pedagogical designs. LEYF believe children deserve the right to be educated in appealing and attractive environments – places of beauty and order – and therefore every LEYF nursery conforms to a particular set of sustainable design principles, whether a new build or a refurbishment.

The environment needs to be child-oriented and stimulating as it operates as a third teacher [31]. Children need a space where they can explore, touch and learn without fear, using tools and utensils that fit their small hands and tables and chairs that match their small bodies. Each nursery has a visual timetable and children need to understand how the day operates so they are safe and secure. Independence is also encouraged by teaching a child practical life' skills through the routine, such as helping them learn to dress themselves, prepare and share meals, put their toys and clothes away and take an active part in their nursery and their neighbourhood.

The adult has a responsibility to provide wonderful sights, textures, sounds and smells for children; these are also a means of increasing cultural capital, and all LEYF nurseries provide the children with a selection of fresh and unusual vegetables in the role-play areas as a provocation for learning. A LEYF nursery should be homely with an emphasis on creating a secure and safe place where each person is entitled to respect and the best of care. This feeling of belonging contributes to inner well-being, security and identity. Our approach is akin to the view expressed by the United Nations Education for All which noted that education should not only include literacy and numeracy but also life skills, such as the ability to make well-balanced decisions, to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner and to develop healthy lifestyles, good social relationships and responsibility, critical thinking, creative talents and other abilities which give children the tools they need to pursue their option in life [32]. This vision is entwined in all aspects of the day and helps children become independent.

We designed the LEYF Urban Outdoors Approach on the basis that children who display curiosity about their local and natural environment can explore, experiment, discover, interpret and evaluate their findings and so are more likely to continue to engage in these learning processes. Great social-enterprise nurseries can lead the way in how they collaborate within the community to create glorious natural wildernesses in unsightly abandoned spaces, which have the potential to be transformed. The focus is on giving children space, freedom and learning: from fire pits to mud kitchens and growing and digging, whether in window boxes or allotments, while playing an active role in exploring their local community spaces through daily walks and outings. This also aligns with the environmental strand of our approach to sustainability.

3.4 Harmonious relationship

Harmonious relationships promote children's well-being and help them to grow up as strong and independent people. Children who are nurtured by adults learn to form, develop and sustain positive, harmonious and empathetic relationships. The importance of personal empathy attunes us to the needs of individuals while social empathy connects us to the realities and injustices experienced by others. Social empathy involves recognising the limitations of our viewpoint by walking around in another's shoes and comparing their path with our own. It leads to a shared understanding of our reciprocal responsibilities echoing a principle of democracy. Building systems such as coaching, talent enrichment and development is central to helping staff to understand their own emotional reactions to their work, their relationships and their communication with children and others. Learning carries with it the responsibility for staff to apply their learning in ethical and effective ways.

This is also the basis of our approach to sustainability which involves deep transformations in values, new ways of thinking about problems, and the future [33]. We adopted the Random Act of Kindness philosophy to build harmony within the organisation and externally through local connections and an open-door approach. Kind actions are particularly important if relationships are to be sustained especially in a world where we need to be willing to respect difference especially when we have no personal experience of each other's situation.

The LEYF adult is best described as 'tuned in', which means staff:

- Apply strong child-development knowledge;
- Know how children learn;
- Sustain sensitive and positive relationships with everyone;
- Are sensitive, tuned-in adults who support children's learning by the warmth and encouragement;
- Develop a warm relationship with their key child;
- Help children to know they are lovable and valuable;
- Understand children's personalities and idiosyncrasies;
- Remain one step ahead of the children;

- Enjoy being with children and have lots of fun;
- Create an enabling environment;
- Are great conversationalists;
- Understand children's emotions and can calm and reassure them;
- Understand attachment and the impact this has on children;
- Listen carefully to children so they know they are heard and understood;
- Involve them appropriately in discussions and decisions, such as planning meetings, feedback projects and exit interviews;
- Provide appropriate help as soon as possible so children learn to feel safe;
- Support children with problem-solving;
- Help children understand and put into words their feelings and learn to regulate emotions and reason solutions to problems;
- Teach children that their distress and discomfort does not last forever so they can gradually learn to manage these;
- Always reflect on and think of how to make improvements.

One of the most effective ways of building harmonious relations while supporting learning is through pedagogical conversations. People like to talk and have deep conversations is often the place where through positive interaction and shared understanding new thinking and understanding emerges. Conversation is rarely an end in itself. It is usually an opportunity to inform, request or persuade in a way that leaves both parties better informed. The process of a conversation is complex and has an opportunity to address different levels of information, learning and exchange, while building mutual trust, respect and affection, inviting new thoughts and knowledge and encouraging active listening [34].

Social leaders design their parallel pedagogy with children and professionals that revolves around conversations. Their conversations with children, are designed to genuinely find out what the children think and feel, and are central to developing their sense of voice, self-expression and autonomy. At the same time, conversations with and among professionals are key for developing not just the same characteristics but for enabling a virtuous cycle where they can have their own personal conversations with children. The focus lies upon coming to some greater understanding rather than winning the argument [35]. Powerful conversations can be pedagogical conversations (to implement a social pedagogy successfully), coaching conversations (to grow the leadership of others), reflective professional conversations (to embed a culture of collaborative innovation) and wider network and public conversations.

Staff at LEYF are trained to become good pedagogical conversationalists which builds confidence and emotional intelligence. This was in response to findings that found many staff were reluctant to engage in pedagogical conversations because they

found it difficult to articulate or describe in any detail the specifics of their practice that were important to them [36]. They were stronger on the “what” and “how” but less confident on “why”. Therefore, the LEYF pedagogical conversation is structured around two key words “**because**” and “**so**” because these two words remind the conversationalist to introduce the rationale for the conversation, engage the other person and help explain and conclude the conversation in a helpful and constructive manner, which encourages better and more confident conversations.

3.5 Safe, fit and healthy

Children attending a social-enterprise nursery need to be provided with a healthy, well-balanced diet with varied menus using fresh seasonal foods and simple ingredients. LEYF tries to buy locally produced goods and local sustainable communities. Healthy food for healthy children is important if we look at the ongoing child health crisis in the UK, with obesity acutely affecting children from disadvantaged backgrounds [37].

The LEYF response to the growing child obesity epidemic was to consider how we might better use nursery chefs to provide high quality nutritious home cooked food to children, that aligned with our sustainability strategy by being seasonal and locally grown where possible. Chefs are members of the LEYF Chef Academy and invited to complete the Level 3 Diploma in Professional Cooking for Early Years Chefs. This qualification was designed by LEYF because there was no specific qualification to teach chefs about procuring, preparing, cooking and serving nursery children and be able to support parents and staff to understand the importance of providing a balanced diet for the children. It is essential that children eat a healthy diet to ensure that they receive the nutrition they require for their physical and cognitive growth. This phase is also a critical time for children to learn about food and develop good eating habits that will influence their health and well-being in later life. Therefore, the overall aim of the Chef Academy was to ensure more children are getting the healthy, nutritious food they need to grow and learn, by training chefs to be experts in child nutrition and food education. The calibre of an early-years chef needs to be high, especially when feeding children where poverty or disadvantage impedes them receiving nutritious food at home.

Many children from poor neighbourhoods attend nurseries either hungry or undernourished. They are often obese, because poor families often rely on high-calorie, low-cost food [38]. Children cannot learn if they are hungry, and therefore it's imperative we address this as a matter of course. Eating habits are developed from a young age and messages about healthy lifestyles are best absorbed then. Nurseries can open children's eyes to foods they may never have eaten, and mealtimes are particularly important at LEYF as children learn to eat correctly, using good table manners so they can be socially confident in any type of environment from restaurants to the school canteen. It is unacceptable not to broaden children's horizons from the earliest age in order to build their social capital.

Many children live in tiny, cramped spaces or in high-crime neighbourhoods where they are kept indoors because parents are fearful of letting them play outside. There is also a correlation between growing levels of childhood obesity with poor physical skills, and this is more common among children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Therefore, understanding physical development and placing a high emphasis on active movement is critical in a social enterprise nursery. Movement is essential to the development of the nerve cells that form the neurological system fundamental

to our survival by creating the connections needed to develop our proprioceptive and vestibular senses which are linked to our sense of 'gravitational security which ensures we do not fall over and keeps us feeling safe and secure as we go about our lives. Having a garden and continual access to outdoors is important. For example research conducted by LEYF with the social enterprise Bikeworks highlighted the lack of confidence of many children, staff and parents about cycling and we refocused our efforts to support children to become confident cyclists as well as developing a bike lending scheme for parents and cycling training for staff.

3.6 Home learning environment (HLE)

A wide range of research has concluded that the quality of the Home Learning Environment (HLE) is one of the main determinants of children's development. Findings from confirm that the quality of the HLE is more important for children's intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income. Interventions that supported high-quality HLEs were a powerful lever in raising the attainment of disadvantaged children, tackling inequalities and having a significant impact on reading, maths and pro-social behaviours. They also noted that parents with English as an additional language lacked confidence about the best ways to support their child's development at home. There were also gender differences – for example, fathers were less likely to read to their children than mothers [39].

Given the importance of Home Learning in addressing disadvantage, LEYF conducted action research to design our own approach. We began from the premise that the most effective settings were pro-active in offering advice on how parents could complement the setting's educational aims within the HLE and auditing of parent's needs, with targeted intervention was more successful than a 'one size fits all' approach. The LEYF study explored the notion of categories of parents, and their attitude to home learning and their levels of parenting confidence. Four groups emerged, the inquisitive parent was the most dominant type in the study, interpreting home learning as activities providing opportunities to understand how their children were developing. The social parent understood home learning as the provision of expert advice and a route to creating social interaction for the child at home and in the community with other parents. The enthusiastic parents considered home learning as set of planned home teaching activities provided with the guidance and support from the experts in the nurseries. Finally, the apprehensive parent relied on expert advice from staff to build their confidence to support her child's development. Interestingly, like many studies, the answers also raised other questions for example no respondent associated home learning with fun or saw home learning as a source of playing and learning which resulted in us thinking harder about narrating the power of HLE to connecting joyfully with their children with play as central to them learning together [40].

Conversations with a pedagogical twist have proved to be the most effective means of introducing parents at LEYF to their children's learning because they helped build on the relationship with parents while exploring their children's development and interests. Staff, once confident and trained in the 'LEYF HLE know-how' adapt their conversation to each parent's needs, interests, language and use a range of opportunities to have the conversation that are less intrusive and more inclusive. In addition, home-learning resources to support and provoke conversations such as sending a dinner recipe home with the ingredients to encourage a shared cooking activity as well as a supporting parents to use the dialogic reading techniques to help their children become the story tellers and in doing so build parents confidence especially those

with less confident English to support their children to become readers. Employing empathetic and respectful staff who are alert to the challenges parents are experiencing and willing to build social capital by creating opportunities for networking, encouraging activities that create shared opportunities for meeting and participating in community activities while maintaining raised expectations for the children are central to the success of the home learning environment approach.

3.7 Multi-generational approach

The final element of the LEYF pedagogy is the multi-generational approach. This is based on the premise that nurseries are an essential part of the local community, with a key role in promoting children's sense of belonging while also contributing to the local heritage and future. The LEYF multi-generational model places significant value for children to be able to connect with the wider community, nurture extended kinship, become familiar with their neighbourhood and develop a positive attitude to forming relationships with adults of all ages. It is important that children have a connection to where they are growing up. In large cities like London, that is even more important and a multigeneration approach connects the history of the area from older people with the reshaping for your adults and the future for children. It also weaves our third strand of sustainability into the approach therefore committing to protecting its environment, nurturing the local biodiversity and green spaces through shared allotments, community gardens and city farms. This benefits the behaviour and wellbeing of children, connects families across local networks and builds social capital. Research from the Beth Johnson Foundation [41] supports multi-generational practice as important in promoting health, development and equality across multiple generations through interdisciplinary practice, education, research and community-based partnerships. What we do at LEYF is engage with local communities and build collaboration to deepen the community relationships. Nurseries can be catalyst for positive community engagement helping to build better community health and wellbeing which means children grow up feeling safer, less likely to commit crime and ultimately benefit from improved educational performance and greater life satisfaction. It was beautifully articulated by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in his definition of *Ubuntu*, a Southern African concept which best translates as a person is a person through other people [42].

4. Conclusion

Today, LEYF is the largest charitable childcare social enterprise in the UK, with 40 community nurseries, employing 850 staff including 100 apprentices to provide 4500 children with high quality education and care. The social-enterprise model as defined by the LEYF is one way of providing ECEC to children from disadvantaged families or living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. It is a model built on trust, a sense of human dignity and hope for the future. It is a new source of positive social change, navigating between the different modes of business-led and government-led transformation.

The key question for consideration is that given how much we know about the benefits of ECEC for all children but especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, why are childcare social enterprises not replicated? Right now, the models of ECEC available for children from disadvantaged children are not effective. They rely on the goodwill of individuals or settings wanting to do something positive for

children from disadvantaged communities or disjointed political initiatives. Neither result in a sustained national policy approach which could remove the ECEC lottery which fails too many children.

The LEYF approach has demonstrated that it can be replicated across London especially while also generating cultural and social capital and delivering social impact. We therefore need a national conversation about ways to extend the LEYF model more widely, by using a range of funding and investment models designed to make ECEC accessible and affordable and in doing so reduce child poverty and support parental employment as part of the national economic infrastructure. This would be a win not just for children living with disadvantage but for all of society.


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