An organisational approach to supporting pedagogical leadership: reporting on a case study with London Early Years Foundation (LEYF)

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Introduction

Pedagogical leadership is most effective when it is enacted by all ECE professionals rather than just a select few with official management roles (Murray & Clark, 2013). Most research on pedagogical leadership in ECE so far has focused on its development outside of the practice context, for example through university-led training routes and external qualifications. We need to know more about what ECE settings can do to build pedagogical leadership amidst the pressures and relationships that characterise their everyday context. This chapter investigates how pedagogical leadership can be supported to flourish in ECE settings through an organisational approach, rather than external training or qualifications. It explores this through case study research with the London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) – a social enterprise group comprising 39 nurseries across London. The thematic analysis of 18 interviews across four LEYF nurseries suggests some of the key ways in which pedagogical leadership can be developed among ECE staff as part of the organisational processes that structure day-to-day activities and relationships within LEYF settings. The chapter presents four aspects of an organisational approach that are supportive of pedagogical leadership: 1) continuous improvement is conceptualised as the growth in pedagogical leadership capacity among staff, 2) in-house Continuing Professional Development (CPD) focuses on pedagogical leadership, 3) career progression is explicitly related to the demonstration of pedagogical leadership and 4) staff have the opportunity to

develop specialised pedagogical leadership by leading improvement initiatives and action research. I argue that some elements of these organisational foundations are available to all ECE organisations, regardless of size and resourcing, while others (such as the provision of CPD around pedagogical leadership) depend on smaller settings working together and the cross-sector support of larger organisations.

Pedagogical leadership as 'catalytic leadership'

In the English context, the term 'pedagogical leadership' is quite closely related with the now defunct qualification 'Early Years Professional Status' (EYPS). EYPS was a postgraduate qualification specifically for those working in ECE. Its creation was part of an attempt to drive up the levels of qualification in the ECE workforce. It has since been replaced by the Early Years Teacher (EYT) status. One of the special aspects of the EYPS was its focus on the enhancement of quality ECE provision through pedagogical leadership, rather than formal management hierarchies. Those with EYPS were often brought into settings in roles that had no official seniority, and yet their training was in making and enabling change and improvements in pedagogy. Because of this, particular models of pedagogical leadership emerged that were distinct from an understanding of leadership in managerial terms.

The research of McDowall Clark (2012) contributed significantly to our understanding of the pedagogical leadership that could flow from the EYPS. She described this pedagogical leadership as 'catalytic leadership', which was the idea that particular professionals were able to improve practice through positively influencing the culture of the organisation. Through modelling, coaching and pedagogical conversations, the EYPs were able to generate a culture of questioning and curiosity, which in turn

prepared the ground for change. They specialised in improving pedagogical implementation through the 'soft' means of inspiring and supporting others, without officially managing others. The EYPS qualification was thought to open up the possibilities of catalytic leadership because it acted as a model, helping these individuals to ask questions of their own practice, to be open to change, to be constantly attuned to future possibilities and potential improvements. Thus, the EYPS training was routed in creating spaces of critical, creative and collaborative reflection.

Regardless of official qualifications, deep reflective work seems to be the key component in international understandings of how to develop pedagogical leadership. Sims et al. (2015) suggest that leadership development initiatives can be either empowering or disempowering depending on the levels of reflection they encourage among professionals completing them. Empowering programmes focus on supporting practitioners to engage in reflection, challenge and insight – to develop their 'activist professionalism'. On the other hand, some leadership development can effectively be 'training in the dominant discourse' (p. 150). That is, leaders learn to 'play the game' set out for them. For example, they might not question for themselves the meaning of 'quality' in ECE, but simply accept that quality is whatever the Government or regulatory powers say it is. They then focus on just dishing out more of whatever others have defined as quality ECE. In this kind of development, pedagogical leadership is inhibited because reflections lack depth with regards to 'how' and 'why' actions are carried out in the day to day.

Various studies have explored the potential of action research to develop pedagogical leadership. Henderson (2017) documented the use of action research in Australian ECE settings, arguing that the 'cyclical processes of learning, acting and reflecting' (p. 389) are key to the development of pedagogical leadership. The paper evaluates three

action research projects in three ECE centres, as part of a wider professional development programme. Based on the evaluation, Henderson argues that the action research provided essential time for important relational work among ECE practitioners at all levels. The action research was an investment in the organisational culture, with dedicated time for learning together, which leads to 'moving from points of difference to engaging in genuine dialogue' (p. 394). Similarly, returning to an English context and the EYPS, Davis (2012) found that what mattered to EYPs was not a particular theory of leadership or change management, but the creation of a space for reflective discussion and intellectual stimulation.

Advancing what we know about organisational approaches to developing pedagogical leadership

Given the fragmented landscape of qualifications and training in the English ECE context (Elwick et al., 2019), the onus is often on ECE settings themselves to foster pedagogical leadership among their staff. We need to know more about how they might do this. In order to contribute to our knowledge, this chapter therefore shares conversations in the context of one ECE organisation (LEYF) in London and 18 ECE professionals within LEYF regarding their pedagogical development. The professionals interviewed were working in various positions (ranging from apprentice to nursery manager) and across four of LEYF's nurseries. The conversations were structured around perceptions of leadership and leadership development more broadly, but the focus in this chapter is on the following questions within the dialogues:

1. How do professionals think pedagogical leadership is developed by LEYF?

2. What developmental activities and initiatives do they find particularly helpful in supporting pedagogical leadership to flourish?

3. How are these activities and initiatives managed within the everyday realities and constraints of an organisation like LEYF, where time and budgets are limited?

A quick note on terminology: in LEYF, all those working in the nurseries with the children are called 'teachers' regardless of qualification level or position. This is a conscious decision within the organisation to recognise the pedagogical purpose and contribution of those working 'on the floor'. In respect for this decision, the remainder of the chapter, when referring to LEYF staff, uses the term 'teacher' as opposed to 'professional' or 'practitioner'.

LEYF's organisational approach to developing pedagogical leadership

The conversations suggested four ways in which LEYF develops pedagogical leadership:

1. Continuous improvement is conceptualised as the growth in capacity of pedagogical leadership among teachers

2. In-house CPD experiences often focus on pedagogical leadership

3. Career progression relates explicitly to the demonstration of and potential for pedagogical leadership

4. Teachers have the opportunity to develop specialised pedagogical leadership; this builds confidence and passion across the organisation

These themes are each outlined below in more detail, with illustrative quotes from teachers.

Continuous improvement is conceptualised as the growth in capacity for pedagogical leadership among teachers

Continuous improvement is at the centre of all that LEYF does, and both managers and teachers voiced their commitment to improving practice every single day. There are a host of tools and practices that staff use as part of continuous improvement, which have been created by the central team at LEYF and embedded by nursery managers. Pedagogical leadership is built into these tools and resources. In the organisational context, using the tools and resources equates with showing pedagogical leadership.

For example, the LEYF pedagogical development scale (LPDS) is used by nursery teams to reflect on their pedagogical practices and what next steps they would like to use. A detailed account of the LEYF pedagogy can be found in O'Sullivan's chapter within this volume. The teams are encouraged to actively use the LPDS tool as a demonstration of pedagogical leadership practice:

> *We have the actual LEYF pedagogy development scale which relates to all seven strands of the pedagogy. So if you took 'spiral curriculum' for example, it would be broken down into satisfactory, good and outstanding, and within that what would you expect to see, what would you expect to be doing. So if you say you're good, what would be the next thing? And what would the teacher be doing? And then where could you progress? So it's all laid out like that for you, and we assess ourselves. (P5)*

The development scale is used collaboratively, with teachers reflecting together on potential improvements:

We have our sort of pedagogical goals – we're trying to focus on just a few things to get up to the next level. But it's never like 'we're going to do this', it's 'here are the goals, can we think about which ones we can realistically target' (P10)

P10's manager explained that this collaborative approach was important for developing ownership and accountability:

Sometimes it's good for them [the team] to reflect themselves and then see rather than you telling them. With you constantly telling they receive it in a particular way, rather than if they can reflect themselves and then they can identify the problems themselves. There's a sense of ownership there and accountability. (P15)

Improvement is intertwined across nurseries and individuals. The development scale for example is used both with teams (e.g. in team planning meetings) and with individuals (e.g. in individual supervisions):

When I have supervision with my manager, I can speak to her about any concerns, and also hear what I'm doing well. And I like to hear what I'm doing well from her, I like her to acknowledge when I'm doing a good job, because it makes me feel good and know that I am on the right pathway. (P3)

We have supervision. Just three weeks ago all of us had supervision. You tell her where you need support and she's definitely coming to make sure that yes you are improving on where you think you are lacking. (P14)

There is an effort to ensure that the language surrounding these developmental processes is supportive and positive, and that pedagogical leadership is seen as constant and ongoing; the work of pedagogical leadership is never done.

The manager does support us, gives us ideas and opinions on what we can improve and what we're doing well, but also points out where we need to think a bit more about our activities in relation to the pedagogy. (P13)

Our curriculum is spiral, it's constant and it's never-ending and I feel like LEYF is a bit like that as well. They never sit still for a minute, they're always 'ok, we've achieved this, what's the next step?' It's always doing something to further develop and develop. (P15)

In-house CPD experiences often focus on pedagogical leadership

In-house CPD experiences consistently start with and circle back to LEYF's values and pedagogy. When anyone joins the organisation, regardless of their role – whether they are a chef, teacher or finance officer in the Central Office – they complete a Level 1 qualification which outlines LEYF's social purpose, values and pedagogy. Further CPD designed for teachers brings pedagogy even more to the fore, meaning that pedagogical leadership is stressed as the heart of all individual and organisational development.

I feel that when we go to our training, our Pedagogy Manager, he's brilliant, he's so excited all the time and that comes through and he gets us doing some really crazy stuff to inspire us. So just a couple of weeks ago I had a session, and it feeds me, it does, I came back and my team usually know when I have

been on one of the Room Leader Workshops, they know that I'll come back with stuff, because they feed me. (P5)

The training, the conferences, the rigorous monitoring from the Area Managers. It's just the culture. So, you know sometimes we have new people coming in and the tone of how they speak and their body language and behaviour is different but after being in LEYF for a while, you see they have begun to absorb the LEYF culture and it all beginning to fall into place. (P15)

These responses suggest that training and explicitly developmental processes (such as mentoring or supervision) are not primarily about acquiring 'know-how' in the sense of technical knowledge. Instead, they are a transformative process in which the values and pedagogy of LEYF are increasingly taken up and embodied by the individual teacher, enhancing their capacity for pedagogical leadership. This is even more the case when we consider that staff are expected to share what they have learned through training with colleagues in their nursery:

With my colleague, we participated in a maths training and then we felt more confident to deliver the maths training within the nursery to the parents who feel that they were less confident to deliver maths to the children…you must be able to find something that you can take away for yourself and bring it back to your own setting. (P1)

Of course, these formal processes of induction, training and supervision do not have the same impact with all staff members. P8, who has been with the organisation for 7-8 months, expressed that although others in the organisation thought he had changed, he himself did not feel aware of these changes:

They said to me that I've changed a lot since coming here… I don't know because personally I don't feel I've changed that much. (P8)

The same employee felt uncomfortable with the idea that he was a 'leader' in the organisation, or would develop leadership skills and roles over time:

I'm not really a leader… I don't feel that I would be suitable. (P8)

This might indicate that the 'LEYF-ification' process – in the sense of taking on the workplace culture and the commitment to pedagogical leadership - takes longer than 7-8 months to occur, or it might be that particular staff members feel unable or unmotivated to engage with these facets of the LEYF professional identity.

Career progression relates explicitly to the demonstration of and potential for pedagogical leadership

The teachers generally felt optimistic about the opportunities for progression within the organisation. Even when they themselves were not committed to progressing to another formal role, they admired the journeys that they saw other employees going on. The journeys were conceptualised in terms of personal and professional development, rather than being seen as mechanistic movements through an organisation when vacancies arise. For example, participants explained:

I've seen people that have started off as a trainee or an apprentice and they've gone off to become a teacher and after that they've moved on to be a room leader, or they've moved on to be a deputy, and they've moved onto manager, and they've moved onto other roles in the organisation. *It's just about how you want to channel yourself*. (P1; italics added)

Here they take it step by step so there's practitioner, then there's room leader, then there's duty manager, then you can step up to be deputy…And a lot of people that were apprentices, one or two of the girls that were in my class, are now deputies in LEYF nurseries. So it's amazing to see in such a short space of time that people can…there's lots of opportunities for that to happen. (P2)

Yeah, if I stayed in the company I would definitely try to move forward. There is a way of going up. That's what I like about the company. *Because if you have a passion and you love what you do, you can move forward and people do it.* (P6 italics added)

As the comments above show, opportunities for progression were surrounded by positive language: 'you can', 'I would definitely try', 'it's just about how you want to channel yourself'. Teachers talked about being encouraged by managers to attend training or apply for new roles; they did not have to ask for these opportunities, but these were regularly extended to them. This meant that progression was seen as the norm and staff encountered lots of reassurance and support in moving on to new challenges if it suited their personal circumstances, as the following quotes illustrate:

…I'm in the pre-school room, and there was a vacancy in the baby room and they encouraged me to apply to work there as Room Leader. But because I'm term-time, I thought I couldn't go there because the babies are full time, but they said 'no you can do it'. They reassured me a lot and encouraged me to go for the Room Leader post… (P9)

We've got internal vacancies advertised before it goes out externally and you are really encouraged, 'why can't you try this?' and it boosts your career up

which is really really nice. Here we are really encouraged, we are given the
support to push your career to a limit. (P14)

The concrete invitations and encouragement to move forward professionally led to the development of a more intangible aspect of the culture among employees. Many teachers discussed feeling that there was constant forward movement in the organisation and as a result, they did not feel stuck or limited in their role. They were excited about learning new things and engaging in professional development. In this sense, most of the staff interviewed demonstrated the commitment to professional development that was described by McDowall Clark (2012) as a key characteristic of catalytic pedagogical leadership:

For me, I mean I've been in nurseries since I was 17 but I find that even now I'm still learning new things, which is really good so it doesn't get boring, you're not stuck in one place, you actually keep moving. I mean I know a lot of people do get stuck in one place, they're just in that rut, but I find that every day I'm just learning new things and they challenge me to take the chance, to go ahead and do that, and do this role, and I think it's really good, and they have that confidence as well. (P11)

So she [the nursery manager] does help us and she does support us to progress, and it's obvious that she does want us to go forward in our career, she just doesn't want us to stay in the same level because if we stay in the same level for many years, we could get bored. We want to be challenged every day. For me I like to be challenged, I like to feel 'wow can I do this?' and then 'I'm going to do this because my manager says give it a try.' (P13)

Teachers have the opportunity to develop specialised pedagogical leadership; this builds confidence and passion across the organisation

Teachers, regardless of their level in the nursery, will take on particular roles and projects. This cultivates responsibility and ownership and accountability. With all of the structure at work in LEYF – the various tools and resources that staff are expected to know and work with – one might expect that staff would feel that their autonomy and freedom was constrained. The following responses challenge this perception, suggesting that the structures at work in LEYF create opportunities for independence and creativity:

> *I feel like here I've got a lot of autonomy and I've worked in places where I haven't felt that and LEYF are very open to staff leading the way and what happens in the classroom and what happens in the nursery. (P5)*

> *I've been given a lot of freedom to coach and to lead people and to take the decisions in certain situations of what to do. (P6)*

> *I think it's giving you the – autonomy? – yes, because sometimes you go to your manager and you ask an opinion and she gives it back to you: 'what do you think?', 'how do you think this is going to happen?'. She sends it back to you but she's there to guide but you take the lead… So she's giving you – not responsibility, but – a sense of control of the situation and that sense of 'I can do things, I can change things'. My opinions and my skills, my knowledge and understanding has been taken into account, because whatever I'm bringing it's been appreciated. And I'm conscious of that, to contribute to the day to day running of the nurseries. (P12)*

178

One way in which staff develop increasing levels of independence and creativity is by taking on particular roles. These roles are pedagogical rather than organisational – so that they relate to areas of the pedagogy, which align with individuals' areas of interest and expertise:

It [the organisation] can look at your skillset and there's an element of freedom and if you've got a strong project, or an idea you can take it forward. Like my philosophy has always been working with parents and somehow I've managed to shape that in this space in this nursery. (P4)

The allocation of roles really helps you improve your input and then you feel I'm driving towards something higher, not just sitting back, but we do have a lot of input. She [the manager] supports us but she really lets you fill her role, that she is doing. It's not just leaving us at the back. We all drive together for the children, for the children. (P14)

One room leader also talked about allocating roles in relation to action research, which is a facet of LEYF's pedagogy:

So, me as a room leader I would say to my team, who is going to research stuff for me this week? As an example, I've taken all the areas in the room and I've delegated to each member of staff, so for example if you are responsible for the construction area, I might ask , can you do some action research and find out activities and ideas for this age group? Or ok, we're going to do outdoor learning and one of the things that we really advocate is risky play, so come to me with some ideas about what can we do and so each member of staff is really encouraged to broaden their learning. (P5)

Discussion

The findings suggest four ways in which LEYF enables the development of pedagogical leadership across the organisation: 1) they use the language of pedagogy as a vehicle for making improvements every single day, so that continuous improvement processes become wrapped up in the practices and growth of pedagogical leadership; 2) the focus in-house CPD on the development of pedagogical leadership, ensuring that a majority of training experiences for staff focus on pedagogy, and that all use and embed the language of pedagogical leadership; 3) career progression is an important motivation for individual staff in the organisation, and the process of career progression is linked in the mind of staff to the demonstration of pedagogical leadership and 4) staff are encouraged to find particular pedagogical specialisms in which they can lead practice, and this helps to build confidence and passion among staff.

Some of these strategies are open to all organisations, regardless of size. For example, all organisations have the option to use pedagogy as part of their everyday language and to ensure that all professionals – regardless of their qualification level – are familiar with what the organisation's pedagogy is and how pedagogical leadership is demonstrated in concrete ways in an everyday context. All settings can encourage pedagogical specialisms and enable these through support for action research, or other processes that help practitioners to reflect on particular areas of pedagogical development.

Other strategies, such as the focus of in-house CPD on pedagogical leadership, are limited to organisations that have their own training programmes and packages. To make this strategy applicable in ECE settings, leaders need to think about their approach to managing CPD opportunities among staff and the extent to which the

CPD they buy into prioritises pedagogical leadership. There is also the need to consider opportunities for partnerships across the sector, which might mean that smaller providers could 'tap into' the CPD driving pedagogical leadership in larger organisations. Linking career progression to pedagogical leadership is also more limited within smaller organisations where opportunities for progression are less frequent. However, while there may be limited opportunity for concrete progression in an organisation, other forms of individual professional development and appraisal – such as internal coaching and supervision – can be linked to pedagogical leadership.

This chapter presents findings from research with a single organisation. The findings are therefore not intended to be directly applicable to other organisations. They are however, a starting point for reflection and dialogue at an organisational level with regards to pedagogical leadership. I hope that in highlighting the strategies and processes employed within LEYF, organisational leaders elsewhere are better able to conceptualise and articulate their own approach. Similarly, the findings shared here are by no means a comprehensive account of pedagogical leadership development. We need to continue to share good practice in this field and open up discussions about how these practices differ depending on organisational and national context.

Further research is needed in order to understand more about the development of pedagogical leadership in ECE organisations. While this chapter suggests a series of strategies according to what staff have said about what they do, we urgently need observational research to look at processes of pedagogical leadership development in action. Ideally, longitudinal research would allow us to see how pedagogical leadership emerges over time and not just how it is recounted at one particular moment in time. This would also enable us to understand the everyday 'messiness' of

pedagogical leadership development, rather than relying only on the neat categories produced by a thematic analysis of interviews.

Conclusions

The chapter offers some insight into an organisational approach to facilitate and expand pedagogical leadership 'on the job' in ECE. Based on research with LEYF, the chapter suggests the importance of explicitly linking continuous improvement and career progression within an organisation to the demonstration of pedagogical leadership, as well as focusing CPD on pedagogical leadership and using distributed responsibilities and action research as a means for enhancing pedagogical leadership across all staff. While other organisations can learn from what LEYF does, the list of support mechanisms offered here is not presented as comprehensive or equally applicable in all contexts. The chapter is intended to act as an invitation for further dialogue and research about what ECE organisations can do themselves, in the context of everyday practice, to foster stronger pedagogical leadership among their teams.

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