Leading the Development of a 'Pack Away' Nursery for Young Children

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This article focuses on development work led by Nikki Smith who participated in a teacher leadership support group designed especially for educators in the field of early childhood. Nikki's project improved the provision and practice of a particular type of learning environment for very young children, one that is created and packed away each day. Nikki's story is instructive in that it shows very clearly how teacher leadership is key to advancing practitioners' professionality. It demonstrates how the programme of support enabled Nikki to create and enhance professional knowledge, positively influencing her colleagues and the conditions in which they work. The article demonstrates how the teacher-led development work methodology might be adapted to mobilise early years educators' enormous leadership potential.

Keywords: Early years education, early childhood, pre-school, teacher-led development work, support for professional development, teacher leadership

Introduction

The three authors are committed to making a difference to the education and well-being of the youngest children in the English education system. Each of them works directly with young children and their families in Hertfordshire, UK. They are connected to each other through their daily work and local geographical networks, but also by means of their membership of the HertsCam Network (Hill, 2014). The HertsCam Network is a teacher-led, not-for-profit charity which offers programmes based on an approach to school improvement known as 'teacher-led development work' (TLDW). Over the course of an academic year, participants are enabled to lead a process of development which is defined as:

> Strategic, focused and deliberate action intended to bring about improvements in professional practice. It takes the form of collaborative processes featuring activities such as consultation, negotiation, reflection, self-evaluation and deliberation which take place in planned sequence. (Frost, Ball, Hill & Lightfoot, 2018, p. 10)

In September 2015 as part of her doctoral study, Sarah Lightfoot, a member of the HertsCam Managing group, initiated the first teacher-led development work group for 'early years educators' (Lightfoot, 2019). This is a term she uses to refer to all those working in the English early years education sector with babies and children from 0-5 years of age. The 'Making a difference in the early years programme' started in September 2015 with 15 participants from ten different educational settings. Nikki and Diane were amongst them. It is now an established and successful programme offered by the HertsCam Network. Since September 2017 the programme has been facilitated by Diane and Lucy, whose nursery school has hosted the programme since its inception. Nikki has completed two teacher-led development projects.

Lucy and Diane are both experienced teachers, with formal leadership positions, in state funded early years education settings. Lucy is the headteacher of a nursery school catering for children aged 2-4 years, whilst Diane leads the 'early years education department' in a primary school where children from 3-11 years are educated. Nikki has over two decades' experience of working with young children. She is the leader of Little Learners, a community-led pre-school for children aged 2-4 years. The pre-school is an example of what is known locally as a 'pack away nursery.' This means it takes place in a building which is used for a variety of other purposes. The pre-school learning physical environment is therefore created and dismantled on a daily basis by the adults who work there.

Provision for Early Years Education in England

The biographical details outlined above illustrate the wide range of educational provision for very young children in England. The majority of children will enter primary school and start their 'reception' year when they are 4 years old. Prior to this, children access a wide range of different early years education settings, from childminders, private day nurseries, state nursery schools, nursery classes and community-led pre-schools, which were traditionally led by volunteers and parents. The roles, nomenclature and status of those working in the sector is similarly variable. There remains an historic institutional divide between early years education in state funded nursery and primary schools and the provision of care for babies, toddlers and young children in private, voluntary and independent settings (PVI). Those working in state funded settings tend to be teachers, who are degree educated or highly trained practitioners. Those in PVI settings often have fewer or vocational qualifications. Even for those with degrees, pay and conditions for employees in the PVI sector are generally inferior compared to those in state funded settings.

Inconsistent policy and funding has helped to create this variety of early years provision. Despite policy recommendations to increase nursery provision in the 60's and 70's the expansion of early years education was slow. In 1972, an Education White Paper, entitled *Education: A Framework for Expansion* (DES, 1972) was presented by the government. This proposed an increase in nursery provision citing three reasons for doing so—educational, remedial, and compensatory. However, the White Paper 'ended up a victim of economic recession' (Brehony & Nawrotzki, 2011, p. 243) and was neglected. Despite some further key policies supporting early years education, funding into early years was slow and did not accelerate until the late 1990's. Pugh (2010) highlights how this lack of funding resulted in two key developments. In the 1960s an expansion of the voluntary sector occurred via the playgroup movement. This was initiated by Belle Tutaev, a London mother, who in 1961 organised a nursery group for her small daughter in a church hall, sharing the tasks of child care with a neighbour. The educational

authorities welcomed the volunteer-based playgroup movement as a low-cost substitute for nursery schools. Several decades later, the 1990s saw the growth of privately owned, for-profit day care provision for young children.

This disparity of funding in the early years sector has contributed to this diversity and resulted in early years settings becoming established in a range of places such as community and church halls, as well as in purpose-built locations. A 'pack away' pre-school such as Nikki's workplace is an example of this. This comes with obvious challenges, particularly concerning resourcing and maintaining a high-quality environment. Therefore, in order to create high-quality pre-school provision, strong leadership is required as well as an emphasis on the centrality of an individual's values and sense of moral purpose. Moral purpose pertains to educators' motivation and belief in their own ability to make a difference to the educational enterprise (Schleicher, 2016). This is key to the transformation and capacity building necessary for educational improvement (Frost et al., 2018). Nikki's experiences recounted in this article demonstrate how she developed such a mode of enhanced professionality both for herself and for those in her team. The programme of support that enabled to her to do this is explained next.

The HertsCam 'Making a Difference in the Early Years' Programme

The programme developed by Sarah Lightfoot, 'Making a difference in the early years,' is grounded in and adapted from the work of the HertsCam Network. The impetus for this programme's creation was a professional concern. Sarah's most recent teaching experiences, and that of other early years educator colleagues, demonstrated the impact of the professionalisation agenda in the sector. This involves adherence to particular models of technical practice, tight regulations and subjection to judgements in terms of narrow indicators of performance. An exploratory study (Lightfoot & Frost, 2015) indicated a local need for support that would enable early years educators to negotiate these challenges and constraints inherent in their work.

The many stories and accounts demonstrating acts of non-positional leadership and its transformational effects in secondary schools in Hertfordshire, UK and abroad as part of the International Teacher Leadership Project provided the inspiration for the new programme (Frost, 2011; Frost, 2014). The courses offered by the HertsCam Network embrace the idea of teacher leadership, but the approach adopted rests on the assumption that it is possible to enable all teachers to develop their leadership capacity in ways which suit their circumstances and professional concerns, irrespective of job title or designated role if they have access to supportive structures and strategies (Mylles, 2006). This non-positional and inclusive approach enables teachers to lead innovation, build professional knowledge, develop their leadership capacity and influence colleagues and practice in their schools, enhancing their professional identity (Frost, 2017). Through this process of development teachers not only improve practice and create or enhance professional knowledge but also have a positive influence on their colleagues and the conditions in which they work (Frost, 2012).

Similarly, the mobilisation of early years educators' enormous potential is best not left to chance. Its emergence requires specific and planned support and activities and tools to inspire them and enable them to develop this prospective aspect of their professional identities (Lightfoot, 2019). Thus the 'Making a difference in the early years' programme incorporated the following characteristics:

- scope for educators to identify their own professional learning focus;
- support for reflection, planning, and experimentation;
- an emphasis on peer support and collaboration;
- provision of processes to encourage, extend, and structure professional dialogue;
- provision of processes for sustaining the professional learning over time to enable teachers to embed the practices in their own settings;
- recognition of individual educators' starting points and enthusiasms
- recognition of particular workplace contexts and diversity within the sector
- duration of an academic year;
- internal support from senior leadership;
- opportunities to belong to a setting-based group;
- membership of a wider network of like-minded individuals.

Its design means that the 'Making a difference in the early years' programme is quite distinct from the strongly instrumental approach often used in traditional opportunities for professional development. It expands the notion of support for professional development in the early years sector from a limited policy-driven model, to one that is transformational in nature. It takes into consideration the professional context, the challenges and complexities of this field of education and enables prospective participants to develop their leadership capacity (Lightfoot, 2019). It is designed to enable educators of young children to enact an extended professionality (Hoyle, 1974), one that would nurture and enable their capacity to lead change and innovation in their workplaces.

The programme was developed and facilitated in such a way that it would mobilise educators' moral purpose, empowering them to become change agents and enabling them to believe in themselves as lifelong learners. It necessarily involves a high degree of social interaction among participants, engagement in conversation, debate, creative tension, questions and divergent perspectives among individuals in order to provoke the development of opinions, a greater depth of understanding, new perspectives, and professional growth (Potter, 2001).

Participants in the programme, as in all of the HertsCam Network's programmes, are enabled to enact leadership via the execution of a project plan. The process involves seven steps as outlined by Hill (2014) in Figure 1:

Step 1. Clarify your professional values
The first step is for participants to clarify their professional values. We have learned that by enabling participants to clarify their values in collaboration with colleagues their passion and moral purpose is mobilised.

Step 2. Identify your concern
Tapping into that moral purpose enables participants to identify a concern. They explore what they are bothered about in terms of pupil learning.

Step 3. Negotiate with colleagues to explore your concern
The third step is to then negotiate with colleagues to explore that concern. For most participants, this is the first time they have engaged in such professional dialogue.

Step 4. Design and produce an action plan
Following these negotiations, facilitators support participants enable them to design and produce an action plan for their development work, detailing a sequence of planned activities such as experimentation, and consultation with pupils and colleagues.

Step 5. Negotiate with colleagues to refine the plan
During and outside of the TLDW sessions, participants discuss their action plan with colleagues and invite critical feedback so they can refine the plan ensuring it is robust.

Step 6. Lead a project that draws colleagues, students and families into collaborative processes
With a robust action plan, participants can lead their development work, reflecting on its impact and adapting it during the process.

Step 7. Contribute to knowledge building in your networks and educational systems
During the whole process as well as afterwards, participants contribute to the building of knowledge about teaching and learning, and exercising leadership in their networks and educational systems.

Figure 1. The 7-step model of teacher-led development work (Hill, 2014)

The development work process is supported by the programme which lasts for an academic year. The programme consists of 7 twilight school-based sessions taking place from 4:00-6:00 p.m. For most of the participants this comes after 6 hours of teaching and supporting young children in their settings. The activities within each of the sessions are designed to enable participants to think and act strategically, and to pursue their goals or agendas by planning and leading a project. Participants are encouraged to share their stories of development at a series of Network events throughout the year, joining approximately 100 others from a range of educational settings and phases also participating in the TLDW and the HertsCam MEd in Leading Teaching and Learning. At these events participants engage in a dialogic process of presenting work to each other, either in workshops or via a poster presentation, and providing reciprocal feedback (Anderson et al., 2014). The year culminates in an Annual Conference celebrating their achievements.

In addition to the support provided in the school-based sessions, each participant receives one-to-one tutorials with the programme facilitator, usually three times during the course of the academic year. Tutorials entail exploration of leadership of development work, guidance on maintaining the portfolio and preparation for network events. Meetings last twenty to thirty minutes and represent valuable opportunities for participants to receive individualised support.

The participants submit a portfolio of their work for assessment at the end of the academic year. This is a selection of evidence presented for the purpose of documenting participation in the programme and demonstrating their leadership of development work. Recognising and rewarding participants' efforts in this way may support their engagement with leading their projects; it may also lead to a greater commitment to learning and leadership (Mylles, 2017). Portfolios are assessed in relation to the extent to which they offer an analytical and reflective account of planned projects, which demonstrates the extent of impact in the current academic year and outlines its potential impact in the future. Those meeting the criteria

are awarded the HertsCam Certificate in Teacher Leadership, which is the equivalent of 30 masters level credits.

Portfolios are created by participants over the academic year. They assemble evidence, arrange it, and label it in order to be easily intelligible to someone who does not necessarily have direct knowledge of the action or its context. The portfolio also includes additional commentary and reflective writing that serves to make the action explicit and to make evident relevant learning that may have arisen. Its creation does more than prove participation in the programme. The portfolio plays a part in documenting, demonstrating and supporting a participant's burgeoning professionality (Lightfoot, 2019).

The following section is based on Nikki's written reflections which formed part of the portfolio documenting the first process of development work she led in her workplace. It demonstrates the process of development which was grounded in her professional concern about a particular aspect of practice in the nursery. It goes on to show the way in which she used and developed her approach to leadership in order to bring about change by questioning and challenging her and her team's practice. These changes were not enforced but took place within an emerging environment that involved facilitating and nurturing collaboration with her colleagues.

Clarifying a Concern for Development

Nikki already occupied a positional leadership role, as Pre-School Manager, when she embarked upon the 'Making a difference in the early years programme.' At this point Nikki employed a leadership model which placed the onus on her as the primary decision maker and active participant in any change that occurred within the setting. However, the work of the HertsCam Network reframes leadership as a more inclusive practice, based on the belief that any education practitioner can be empowered and enabled to exercise leadership in their settings (Frost et al., 2018). This was perhaps Nikki's biggest challenge as she began to understand the implications of this approach for her own setting after many years of taking sole responsibility for any changes made to practice.

Nikki's development project spotlighted the role of the adult in supporting children's learning in her setting. This represented a major shift in her thinking. Reflecting on practice and consequently developing it to enhance children's learning was not usual. She was becoming aware that she and members of her team, whom she refers to as 'practitioners,' had perhaps used the challenges of their pack away environment as an excuse not to question routine ways of working with young children. She realised that the shortcomings of the physical environment were perhaps obscuring a much more significant issue that needed to be addressed.

Her reading emphasised that sensitive interactions were the key to supporting children's learning (Fisher, 2016). Nikki's informal daily observations gave her concerns. She noticed a difference between the ways in which the practitioners interacted with children in the indoor and outdoor areas of the setting. The outdoor classroom is an integral part of the provision and experience for young children. Early years settings are required to provide children with access to an outdoor play area or, if that is not possible, ensure that outdoor activities are planned and taken on a daily basis (DfE, 2017). For outdoor play to be effective and instrumental in children's learning it has to be organised in a particular way. Nikki was aware of Bilton's (2010) set of guiding principles which illustrate this well and reinforced her resolve to improve this area of provision:

- Indoors and outdoors need to be viewed as one combined and integrated environment.
- Indoors and outdoors need to be available to the children simultaneously.
- Outdoors is an equal player to indoors and should receive planning, management, evaluation, resourcing, staffing, and adult interaction on a par with indoors.
- Outdoors is both a teaching and learning environment.
- Outdoor design and layout needs careful consideration.
- Outdoor play is central to young children's learning.
- The outdoor classroom offers children the opportunity to utilise effective modes of learning.
- Children need versatile equipment and environments.
- Children need to be able to control, change and modify their environment.
- Staff have to be supportive towards outdoor play.

Nikki suspected that her team of practitioners either lacked the will to put these challenging principles into practice or did not have a belief in the value of learning in the outdoor environment. However, she knew she had to act upon her observations.

During a regular team meeting she presented her observations to the practitioners. She had used a simple observation tool to record the number and frequency of interactions that took place both indoors and outdoors. Although she had carried this out informally, the information it provided surprised everyone. Twice the amount of interactions between adults and children occurred inside than in the outside learning environment. Some practitioners were a little defensive. They argued that if they been aware of the focus of these observations or if she had observed for longer periods of time then the result would have been different.

Nikki explained that the recorded observation was indicative of a general concern she had. She did not want team members to think she was blaming or criticising them but she had pinpointed an area of practice which needed to be addressed. She changed the focus of the discussion. Nikki explained that her overriding concern was for those children who spent long periods of time outside. These were often children with challenging behaviour as well as those who preferred solitary play. She explained how they needed particular support from knowledgeable adults in the form of sensitive, well timed interactions.

The TLDW programme provided the support Nikki needed to make progress with her proposed project. The facilitation used in the sessions was key to this. The choice of activities in the first session signalled the mode of learning and interaction that would pervade the programme. Structured tasks and activities stimulated individual refection and fostered connections between group members, ensuring that relationships were built quickly. A developing professional learning community emerged because of these planned opportunities (Easton, 2011). Structured discussion provided the means for critical friendship to thrive. Dialogue stimulated deep reflection and reinforced active engagement with the TLDW process.

Nikki found both the process and the support of a group of fellow early years educators beneficial. What she found appealing about the TLDW process was its adaptability. She noted how all practitioners whatever their background and setting were enabled to recognise their potential as leaders. Fellow participants were able to lead change that was appropriate to their own concerns and suited their own educational contexts. For her the programme was in complete contrast to her other experiences of study. She relished the opportunity to take ownership of her own professional development and make changes rather than be expected to implement initiatives devised externally.

Nikki signalled the importance of the support she received from her fellow TLDW participants. Although the group comprised individuals with various roles, qualifications and backgrounds, their common commitment to early years education brought real cohesion to the group. A high level of trust was established very quickly (Lightfoot, 2019). Nikki appreciated the professional connections that developed within the group. For her what was important was being able to share and explore the challenges and frustrations that occurred, particularly in the early stages of the process. She appreciated the support and advice from like-minded peers who were not directly involved in her setting. This gave her the confidence to be certain her project was viable.

By engaging in the Network events Nikki availed herself of professional dialogue with a wide range of other educators, not just those from an early years education background. She found their perspectives invaluable but also found these were opportunities to rehearse and clarify her own thinking and subsequent actions. In a similar way the opportunities for one-to-one tutorials contributed greatly to her understanding about the ways in which she was enacting extended professionality, and how the support offered was enabling this. Those who teach young children can find the pace and physicality of the work unrelenting and the emotional demands overwhelming. Such stressful circumstances often lead to them feeling as if they do not have time to engage in more than what is required for 'survival' (Kell, 2018). Although the statutory framework for the early years (DfE, 2017) describes supervisory opportunities as an entitlement for those in the sector, very few participants ever had the opportunity for supportive one-to-one conversations about their role and work, apart from annual appraisal interviews. The tutorial was a deliberate strategy for providing participants like Nikki with some valuable protected time for professional reflection (Lightfoot, 2019).

Reframing Leadership in an Early Years Education Setting

Facilitation of the sessions involves visiting and revisiting key messages about the concepts and principles underpinning the programme. The assumption is that all participants will broaden their understanding of the notion of leadership and, with support, begin to act on this understanding within the scope and limitations offered by their own context (Lightfoot, 2019). After several TLDW workshop sessions and Network events, Nikki knew that her position, knowledge of each member of the nursery team and the challenges of the environment were key to improving the situation. As a leader she considered that she needed to share her vision for development with the team but also began to recognise that she needed the team's support to achieve her aims. Her early experiences indicated that colleagues' understanding and co-operation was a precursor for change but one of the key components of the process of development work is the importance of collaboration with colleagues (Frost & Durrant, 2002). True collaboration is associated with a culture of collegiality and this was not evident in the setting at that point. It required careful fostering. Nikki found colleagues were unused to taking

ownership of their practice and professional development but also wary of sharing reflectively together about practice. She used team meetings to help her colleagues appreciate the need for interactions in the outdoor environment and to consider some of the barriers that had been preventing everyone from working in this way.

Some members of her team found the process of reflecting upon their own practice uncomfortable and were not keen to participate in these activities. Nikki was aware that this was a barrier to the development work process but realised that this was partly due to the way in which she had previously led the setting, taking full responsibility for all decisions and directing all actions. She began to see that for collaboration to flourish she needed to relinquish this mode of leadership and facilitate opportunities for her team members to take responsibility for their own developing pedagogy. There were frustrations, indeed for some colleagues the changes proved too difficult and they found employment elsewhere. Nikki was sure that the changes were necessary and continued to communicate her vision steadfastly and invite practitioners to contribute to it. Maintaining a focus on the impact of the pedagogical changes for children's learning sustained her through these challenging times.

Over time, the team of practitioners became more used to the dialogic tools Nikki developed and used in team meetings to enable colleagues to help each other identify ways to overcome barriers. Excerpts from relevant studies and professional publications helped the team identify the nature and form of enabling interactions and consider how and when these would be meaningful for young learners. Gradually Nikki realised this facilitative approach was helping members of the team to take ownership of their own practice. They were able to offer ideas and solutions to the group knowing that they would be valued and useful for others. Nikki observed a demonstrable difference in the number, range and quality of interactions between children and adults in the outdoor learning environment. The practitioners suggested the need to record more formally the practice they were developing and its impact on children's learning. This became part of the policy documentation for the setting and is used to explain to parents and new members of staff the approach taken to learning in the outdoor environment.

The impact of Nikki's development work has been far reaching. What is of significance is the emphasis on and evidence of increased personal agency, both in Nikki's development as a pre-school leader and in the professional practice of the members of the team she leads. Nikki's deliberate decision to reframe her leadership practice led to the empowerment of those practitioners with whom she worked. Without this they would not be the self-determining and creative group of educators they are today. Her development work illustrates both Hill's (2014) and MacDowell Clark and Murray's (2012) conceptualisations of leadership which have the development of practice at their core, furthering the learning, development, and wellbeing of children and young people. The support for the process of development work she engaged with helped Nikki move the focus from formal leadership with its emphasis on personhood and position to the promotion of leadership as a 'dimension of being human' (Hill, 2014: 74).

Despite the challenging circumstances of leading a pack away setting, Nikki's development work has been highly successful. Encouraged by the impact engaging in the process had on practice, Nikki embarked on a second TLDW project. Having realised the impact of collaboration amongst her team, she decided to build on this by seeking to establish more collaborative relationships with children's parents and carers. This project focuses on supporting parents with children's home learning. During this latest project Nikki has become more outward facing in her approach. She has worked alongside a teacher in a neighbouring primary school to produce resources for parents. She has visited other settings to discuss and reflect on

the practice of others in the locality. She has successfully applied for grants to support her work with parents. More recently Nikki has become a 'specialist practitioner.' This role involves supporting other educators at a range of settings in the wider community. She also leads a large social media group which focuses on encouraging those in the early years community to share their experiences of developing responsive and reflective pedagogies. Her development work demonstrates the adaptability of the TLDW approach and its place in promoting and achieving far reaching and sustainable change.

Early years education continues to be the subject of intense political scrutiny. In England, for example, highly contentious trials of baseline assessments of young children in their first few weeks of the reception year are due to take place. Many in the early years community view these as reductive, inconsistent, and unreliable indicators of children's learning and development. Professional judgements based on close observation of children at play are to be replaced by a yes or no answer to a narrow range of questions on a tablet app. These circumstances compel early years educators to have at their disposal an opportunity to 'subvert and resist prevailing and dominant understandings of their professionalism' (Osgood, 2006, p. 12). The 'Making a difference in the early years' programme is one such opportunity. As a model of support for professional development it goes beyond technical-rationalist approaches and recognises that empowerment can be fostered when participants, like Nikki, are first acknowledged as competent learners and enabled to enact leaderful behaviours in their work (Lightfoot, 2019).

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