



National College for
Teaching & Leadership

‘Being and becoming’: under threes in focus

Leadership in the early years

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Disclaimer

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Introduction

The child is wonderfully prepared for active learning from birth. Children approach the world with all senses open, all motors running – the world is an invitation to experience. Their job is to develop and test all their equipment, make sense of the confusing world of people and things and unseen mysterious forces and relationships like gravity, number and love

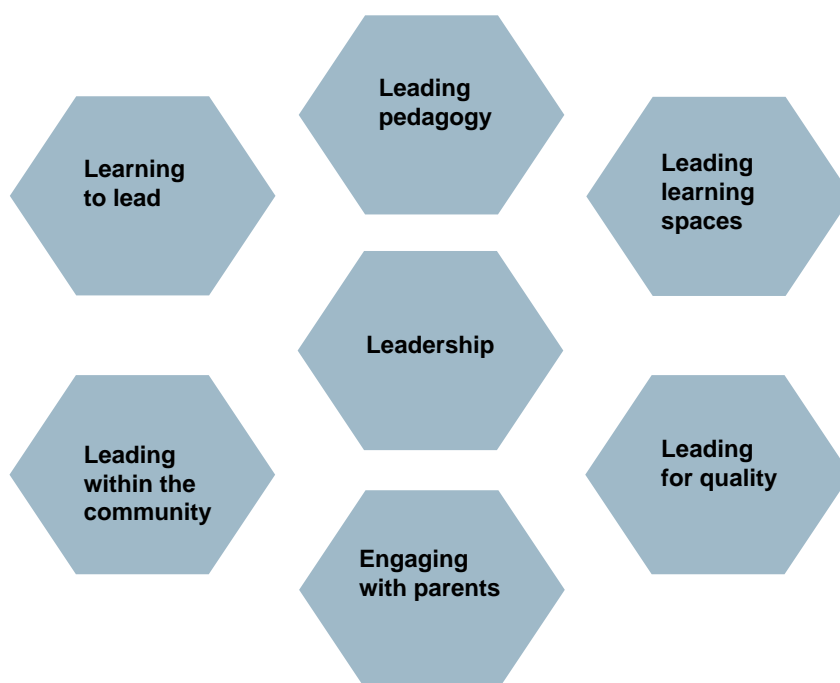
Jim Greenman, 1988, Caring Spaces-Learning Spaces

This paper was commissioned by the National College for Teaching & Leadership and aims to explore how two-year-olds accessing education and childcare through the government's Early Education for Two-year-olds offer can be assured of receiving consistently high quality learning and care experiences and the implications of this expectation for leadership across the sector.

The intent is to stimulate thinking and professional dialogue within and between early years providers and at local authority and policy levels. This will provide a platform for leaders to consider the components of quality for these very young children and how leaders can support each other to impact positively on the learning opportunities for children and their families.

The paper considers six components of quality. These areas are inextricably linked:

- leading pedagogy
- leading learning spaces
- leading for quality
- engaging with parents
- leading within the community
- learning to lead



Taken together they aim to bring focus to the debate about quality provision for two-year-olds by ensuring learning experiences are considered holistically in terms of offering all children:

- challenge and enjoyment
- opportunities to achieve and be successful
- personalisation and recognition of individual need

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- relevance and developmentally appropriate learning and play opportunities
 - curriculum breadth and range
 - clear opportunity for progression based on effective assessment
 - practitioners who challenge their own performance and want to improve

Understanding two-year-olds

It's fun to be two although sometimes it can be difficult, confusing and even scary – for both children and adults!

The acceleration of brain and neurological development that takes place during the first two years of life makes this an incredibly important time for a child, requiring sensitive, highly skilled adult support and care. The child's physical, cognitive, social and emotional growth is dramatic and happens with significant variability within a normal range. Each individual child's development is both complex and unique and is influenced by a range of factors including exposure to varied experiences and environments.

Two-year-olds use all their senses and motor skills to explore their world. They demonstrate high levels of curiosity and can solve simple problems usually through repeated trial and error. Physically they are very active, exploring a range of ways of moving around, rolling, crawling, walking, climbing, running and jumping. They are able to kick a ball and throw with varying degrees of accuracy. They develop fine motor skills through encounters with various materials and tactile activities, loving finger rhyme games, play with dough, gloop and clay, exploring simple musical instruments, mark making and painting. Research observes that, developmentally, two-year-olds tend to play alongside, rather than in collaboration with, other children. They can, by turns, be shy, clinging and easily frustrated expressing such feelings by being destructive to objects without any understanding of the resulting consequences as they vent their feelings. They are quick to learn how adults respond to certain behaviours and are expert in using this in a variety of ways. They express affection easily and love physical contact in the form of hugs and cuddles. They demonstrate early signs of independence and a desire to carry out simple tasks without help although they need to know what to expect and find security in familiar places and activities, which they often repeat again and again.

Children at this age are developing important attitudes and aptitudes for learning. They enjoy books and stories, make early scribble marks and join in actively with rhymes and songs. Mathematically, they can often be observed using logical reasoning to solve simple problems, can sort by shape and size and recognise basic patterns.

Their ability to use language, with 24 months recognised as the 'critical period' for the acquisition and expression of key language skills, increases rapidly, and prompts many why, what and how questions. Some children will also begin to form more complete sentences. They have a growing spoken vocabulary and can often understand more than they can articulate. They follow simple directions, particularly when linked to routine situations.

In recent years, many settings have reported concerns about the increase of two-year-olds entering this phase of learning with varying degrees of language delay and associated speech and language problems. These are sometimes but not exclusively linked to a range of socio-economic risk factors. Language delay may be the result of personal, social and emotional development issues, including early attachment difficulties, intermittent hearing impairment, over use of dummies (or pacifiers) impacting on soft tissue and dental development and the increasing concern about the quantity and quality of positive verbal interactions with adults. This can make for a vulnerable time for such young children. The impact of early risk factors and in particular those connected with poverty are significant. Multiple risk factors, including poor nutrition, restricted and negative environments and relationships, complex and special needs can combine together to present significant barriers to accessing learning, achievement and healthy development, highlighting further the critical need for highly qualified and sensitive practitioners, able to identify, assess and respond to complex combinations of individual need quickly and appropriately.

To meet children's needs with confidence requires a holistic approach, a good example of this being the link between nutrition and learning. It is well documented that good nutrition in the earliest years makes a significant difference to children's immediate and longer term health and wellbeing outcomes as well as their potential to access learning and enjoy the learning opportunities on offer. Recently much has been documented about the lifelong impact of poor diet with immediate concern about the levels and associated health concerns linked to childhood obesity. The best leaders and practitioners understand that providing children with good nutrition is hugely significant for children's all round physical and cognitive development and 'learning readiness'. Outstanding provision is able to consistently evidence how professionals work closely with parents, encouraging good nutrition and eating habits in the home environment with many offering training and support for parents in the planning and preparation of healthy meals and snacks for their children, including managing on a limited food budget. Educating parents about healthy and affordable food choices for very young children is becoming increasingly important in the wider debate about how best to maximise learning readiness and impact on children's longer term health and life chances.

Research carried out by the Children's Food Trust in 2012 and reported in its *Eat Better Do Better Impact Report* suggests a significant number of children who will be eligible to access the Early Education for Two-year-olds offer may not be receiving a nutritious and balanced diet at home and may already suffer from such conditions as early, or indeed chronic, tooth decay, and dental abnormalities impacting on their ability to chew and enjoy the taste and texture of food properly and in more severe cases, affect early sound formation and language development.

In its recent report *Measuring Up: the medical profession's prescription to the nation's obesity crisis* (February 2013), the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges challenges the early years workforce to consider how:

...the current expansion of the health visitor workforce in England could be accompanied by 'skilling up' the wider early years workforce to deliver basic food preparation skills to new mothers and fathers and to guide appropriate food choices which will ensure nutritionally balanced meals.

A variety of other recent studies add weight to this argument, reinforcing the importance of a healthy and balanced diet on infants' and children's early development and later life outcomes. Consistently, breastfeeding and good nutrition in the pre-school years have been found to be of extreme importance to children's long term health, behavioural development and educational attainment. *The Preliminary Review of Early Years Food, Nutrition and Healthy Eating Guidance in England* by the School Food Trust (2010) reported that according to (Feinstein, et al (2008), Gardner (2009) and Wiles (2009):

Healthy eating habits in the years before school are important because in later childhood they impact on growth, development and achievement.

Quoting the World Health Organisation (2003), they add that:

A healthy diet and regular physical activity are identified as fundamental determinants of general health and wellbeing. A poor diet is one of the main causes of ill health and premature death. Evidence suggests that interventions to promote the initiation and duration of breastfeeding and good nutrition in early years will reduce later obesity and associated chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and some cancers.

It is therefore concerning to note that seven years later, the National Child Measurement Programme 2010/11 (NHS Information Centre, 2011) reports that 'nearly a quarter of children enter primary school overweight or obese'

This strongly evidenced link between nutrition and learning serves to emphasise that children's development cannot be compartmentalised. This can be argued for children of all ages but particularly for the youngest.

Interviews with early years' practitioners and leaders report that increasingly, children arriving at nursery, particularly in more disadvantaged areas may not have eaten breakfast emphasising the

vital need to provide a nutritious breakfast or small meal before encouraging children to engage in the learning experiences and opportunities on offer. In addition, leaders also report that many children have had limited or indeed no experience at all of sitting at a table during mealtimes and have not mastered even the most basic use of cutlery. Additional evidence from setting leaders indicates that the amount of water some children drink during the day is minimal and that the quality of snacks provided by parents is sometimes of limited nutritional value and may actually reinforce poor eating habits. It is imperative that leaders, when evaluating the overall quality of their provision and considering children's approach to learning, respond with a sense of urgency to such intelligence monitoring food preparation, quality and consistency and encouraging parental responsibility and education in early nutrition by raising awareness of the impact on children's immediate and long term academic and health outcomes.

Learning from practice

The need to be aware of the experiences children have had and are exposed to in the broadest sense is central to helping them to develop as confident, secure and active learners. Children are born with a strong predisposition and powerful motivation to learn. In order to maximise this they require adults who understand and engage them in meaningful ways. Research conducted by the Peterborough EYFS and Children's Centre Services team (2009) concluded that the youngest children's engagement with learning and emotional wellbeing is greater when supported by adults who:

- are well informed about child development
- are respectful and enjoy being with children
- ensure they identify, value and focus on developing the individual strengths, interests and learning preferences of every child
- are aware of and respond to children's fluctuating emotional and physical needs
- provide children extended time to develop new relationships and close attachments with a key person
- encourage regular involvement in small group, paired and large group experiences
- plan for children's specific passions and interests supporting and encouraging their language development, reflect on current practice, new research and adapt their practice accordingly
- support all children at daily transition points, particularly those who find it hard to cope or difficult to separate from their parent
- provide regular access to quality outdoor experiences for all children and demonstrate that they value both indoor and outdoor experiences equally
- consider and ensure that specific provision is made for the number of new two-year-olds coming into the setting at any one time

Common across Peterborough's research findings was the importance of providing support for leaders and practitioners to reflect on the extent to which their provision was flexible and adaptive enough to meet the youngest children's individual, collective and ever-changing needs:

If we can understand the (children's) behaviour as a message to us, we can look behind the behaviour and think about the needs of the child. Once we focus on the need, we can think about how best to meet it.

Peterborough Research 2009

Across early years care and education, leaders and practitioners at all levels have the responsibility of articulating, not only what they do but why they do things in certain ways and the intended impact of their planned approaches. Securing accountability and improvement requires visibility and ongoing scrutiny of practice and open professional debate. A strong shared pedagogical understanding and vision helps leaders to feel more confident to discuss their work with other leaders in challenging

professional conversations focused on making progress, adding value and ensuring consistent improvement of practice and provision.

Leading pedagogy

Leaders in early years' settings – by nature diverse in character, quality and effectiveness – are charged with managing the related areas of care, health and family support and integrating these with education. In addition they need to effectively lead, manage, deploy and develop staff with different professional backgrounds, perspectives and associated qualifications, as well as with varying levels of experience and exposure to professional learning and development opportunities. Nutbrown (2012) recognises the importance of excellent pedagogical leadership, supported by a highly qualified team, as vital to improving the quality of provision, recommending that all early years practitioners become 'pedagogical leaders'. The publication of *More Great Childcare: Raising Quality and Giving Parents More Choice* in February 2013, takes Nutbrown's recommendations further, calling for:

...rapid improvement in early years qualifications so that parents and providers can have greater confidence in the calibre of people who are teaching our youngest children. The government will raise the quality of those entering the workforce by imposing tougher entry requirements.

It outlines two new professional roles: early years teachers and early years educators. Early years teachers will specialise in early childhood development and pedagogy, meeting the same entry requirements and passing the same skills tests as trainee school teachers. As part of their role they will also focus on supporting the professional development of practitioners below graduate level who will train at NVQ Level 3 to become early years educators.

There is an urgency in terms of making all of this a reality, with the need for pace in developing such leaders recognised by Susan Gregory HMI, National Director of Early Years in the first Ofsted annual lecture on early years, 3 December 2012. She challenged the 10 year timescale set out in the Nutbrown Review:

If it takes ten years to achieve a higher standard, we risk disadvantaging three more generations of babies that will pass through in that time. Or, put another way, a baby aged one in a setting at the moment will reach the end of primary school before the changes are fully implemented.

There is, therefore, a growing consensus within the workforce that pedagogy for children under three is highly specialised and subtly different from teaching and learning with older pre-schoolers. This reflects the different and wide ranging communication styles of infants and toddlers, and the greater physical care and attention to emotional nurturing that they require.

The quality and design of the 'curriculum' (learning experiences, wide ranging opportunities, interactions with adults and peers and an enabling learning environment both indoors and out) offered to young children is key to their successful development and engagement with learning. A leader with responsibility for the planning and facilitation of rich learning opportunities and experiences requires deep understanding of pedagogy. Engaging with and learning from other leaders makes a key contribution to enhancing pedagogical awareness and to children having a secure foundation for future learning.

Siraj-Blatchford et al (2010), examining early years leadership in the publication *Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector* reports that the strongest leadership and minimal staff turnover (leading to greater consistency and quality of practice) is evident when:

- the adults had a good understanding of appropriate pedagogical content
- the adults formed **warm interactive relationships** with children
- settings viewed **educational** and **social development** as **complementary**
- the adults used **open-ended questioning** and encouraged '**sustained shared thinking**'
- a balance was achieved between adult **supported** freely chosen play, and adult **led** small group activities

- the adults used **formative assessment** to differentiate the curriculum according to the needs of individual children
- the adults supported children in being assertive while at the same time **rationalising** and **talking through** their conflicts
- a **trained teacher** acted as **manager** and a good proportion of the staff were (graduate, teacher) qualified

In the *Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning* (SPEEL) (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 1999) practitioners were described as ‘recoiling’ at the term ‘pedagogy’ which they associated exclusively with teaching. Early Years professional development programmes, including EYP and NPQICL, have sought to address this misconception. This is a key issue for leaders, particularly to consider with their staff to ensure the renewed emphasis in the Early Years Foundation Stage framework on learning and development. Hansen’s (2010a, 2010b) indicators of quality support this, highlighting the critical role of leadership in driving quality:

The socio-economic and cultural context of settings was also found to be particularly significant in Siraj-Blatchford’s *The Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project 2003* (EPPE)¹ and linked REPEY studies. While the research provided evidence of a direct association between children’s cognitive and social outcomes, and the pedagogic principles applied by the leaders and practitioners in effective settings, the evidence also showed that some settings appeared effective even where these pedagogic principles were in place but not consistently applied. The REPEY evidence suggested that in some middle class settings (notably some of the private day nurseries), it was less the staff’s interventions and more the parents’ pro-active support of their children’s learning in the home, that accounted for the children’s greater development. The most effective settings provided effective pedagogic leadership and parental support in the provision of an effective home learning environment (HLE). It was clear that in more disadvantaged areas, the staff had to be **proactive** in influencing and supporting the parents’ role in developing a home education environment that supported children’s learning.

The EPPE Project concluded that disadvantaged children in particular can benefit from good quality pre-school experiences where pedagogical awareness is strong.

Where settings view educational and social development as complementary and equal in importance, children make better all-round progress. Effective pedagogy includes interaction traditionally associated with the term ‘teaching’, the provision of instructive learning environments and the encouragement of ‘sustained shared thinking’ and effective pedagogy in the early years does not only involve the strategies and techniques teachers/practitioners use to support learning in their daily interactions with the children, but also the learning environment they set up and relationships with parents and family.

Fullan (2001) suggests that pedagogical leadership is about motivating and convincing practitioners to do things differently, producing evidence that the change is worthwhile and beneficial to children and their learning.

The Leuven wellbeing and involvement scales developed by Professor Ferre Laevers provide indicators of how young children thrive and succeed in an appropriate and engaging environment. As a result of his research Laevers developed the five point Leuven scale as a means of measuring levels of children’s wellbeing and involvement in learning. Comparing children’s behaviours against the scale indicates that, if there is a consistently low level of wellbeing and or involvement in learning, it is likely that a child’s all round development may be at risk. The higher the levels of wellbeing and involvement encouraged in the child, the more it is possible to support and enhance a child’s development. When there are high levels of wellbeing and involvement, Professor Laever’s research evidence suggests that deep level learning is taking place. Pedagogical leadership is key in developing learning experiences and environments where this can happen.

¹ EPPE Project – summary of findings from the pre-school period <http://eppe.ioe.ac.uk/eppe/eppefindings.htm>

Further thinking:

Leaders may wish to consider:

1. encouraging and initiating professional debate toward a secure and shared understanding of the term 'pedagogical leadership' and the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities that arise as a result.
2. developing and creating a whole team vision for pedagogical leadership with a clear purpose, common goals and a relentless focus on quality in all aspects. The vision is consistently revisited with the team and shared with new members for consistency as part of induction and performance management processes.
3. the introduction of a coherent accountability framework for high quality leadership in settings for under threes in order to ensure all practitioners are certain of their responsibilities, expectations of their practice and the need for leaders to regularly monitor and evaluate impact of practice to ensure successful outcomes.
4. ensuring that, through targeted and quality professional development for all practitioners, the critical importance of early attachment is understood and used to inform interactions with all children on a daily basis.
5. professional development opportunities are carefully planned and structured by leaders and practitioners, to strengthen knowledge and understanding of child development and key developmental milestones. Leaders engage actively in collaborative work, through peer to peer support and translate learning into everyday practice, articulating this to team members and parents.
6. pursuing evidence based practice that develops from practitioner led, quality assured action research and joint practice development.
7. engendering strong and secure team practice in both formative and summative assessment and record keeping models, enabling the identification of the most effective early interventions to ensure children achieve key milestones.
8. identifying and providing professional development opportunities for teams, leading to qualifications where possible in understanding the significance of good nutrition and approaches to food which will sustain lifelong eating habits, making the important links between children's diet, learning and achievement and in supporting parental understanding and practical application in the home environment.
9. a focus on supporting the development of a self-improving system, where leaders and practitioners learn collaboratively alongside and from each other, using a range of approaches, including peer mentoring, coaching, induction, performance management, joint practice development, robust challenge and professional partnerships.
10. a continued focus on the broadest definition of multi-agency and system leadership, involving a range of partnership agencies including health practitioners to ensure children's holistic development is considered.

Leading learning spaces

The exploration and engagement of two-year-olds, as they experience the world with their whole bodies, emphasises the vital role of leaders in ensuring that the indoor and outdoor learning environment/learning space is appropriate and convenient for the age and stage of the children using it on a daily basis (including flexibility within the space to accommodate changes in both—and also to support children presenting with specific learning and developmental needs and disabilities). Children may remain in the learning space for extended time, encompassing the beginning and the end of each day and including a range of transitions during that time. The best leaders recognise this variation and support teams in planning for children's needs at different times during the day and also for new experiences to be available so that children are both stimulated in their learning and nurtured in their

daily routines. The space is uncluttered, particularly by minimising adult 'clutter', enabling children to see potential for exploration, be able to move freely and reach resources and objects of fascination, with an optimum number of fixtures, fittings and play equipment to allow space for movement, circulation and a calm atmosphere. Storage needs are considered from the outset. For example buggy/push chair parking/storage is often overlooked immediately affecting parents' experience of provision. By making this into a positive design feature, which can be used flexibly during non-storage times, the whole experience of parents and carers can be enhanced with minimum effort.

The Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (2012) and the National Education for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC's) *Features of Good Practice* research, in line with a wide range of other documentation, highlight the importance of providing young children with an enabling learning environment, both indoors and outdoors and its importance in meeting children's need for learning based activity, sensory stimulation, fresh air, nourishment and a balance of rest and active movement throughout the day. Should access to an outdoor play space not be possible, *The Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (2012) indicates that outdoor activities must be planned and taken on a daily basis unless unsafe weather conditions prevent it. The document also states that registered early years providers must meet specific guidelines with regard to indoor space requirements:

- Children under two years: 3.5 m² per child
- Children of two years: 2.5m² per child
- Children aged three and upward: 2.3m² per child

NAEYC's *Features of Good Practice* goes on to explore children's need for an orderly routine that provides structure, within an environment that is dynamic and changing yet also predictable and comprehensible.

The guidance reinforces the following principles of pedagogy that should be taken into consideration when providing learning spaces for young children:

- children's wellbeing, learning and individual needs and interests are paramount
- consistent, positive relationships with a limited number of adults and other children matter
- planning opportunities to play individually and together in varied group sizes
- planning opportunities for adults and children to talk with each other in order to enhance their own learning and development

Jean Ayres in *Sensory Integration and the Child: Understanding Hidden Sensory Challenges* (revised edition 2005) considers the concept of 'proprioception' as critical to the learning and development of children under three, using the term to describe:

...one of the sensations that tell us where the body is in space and how it is moving

The research into proprioception shows that very young children need access to a learning space that enables them to experience running, jumping, stretching, climbing, pulling, pushing, crawling, sliding, turning, bending, touching, rolling, squeezing and tumbling. Equally, very young children need regular experience of being held, wrapped, stroked, squeezed and also being involved in rough and tumble play. She suggests that proprioceptive stimulation can be encouraged if resources provided within (and the layout of) the indoor and outdoor learning environment enables lifting and carrying activities, opportunities to push objects around, to sweep with brushes (often aspects of children's early imaginative and creative play) and activities that involve a child's muscles in heavy work as indicated above. It is also important to note that provision and appropriate furnishings should also be made available for children who wish to sleep, relax or play quietly. Where children do sleep, leaders must ensure that practitioners monitor this area of the learning space at frequent intervals.

Leaders can consider a range of innovative and creative approaches to the development and use of the learning space, whether provision is based in a purpose built setting or functions in an existing and adapted building. The following suggestions take into account a wide range of settings in terms of size,

condition, existing or new build. The suggestions are the result of research carried out by the architect Richard Scott for the purpose of this paper and may be considered as a mutually exclusive 'shopping list' of dynamic options to enhance experiences for very young children. In an existing building, leaders may consider the introduction of just one of these elements that might be used to efficiently and effectively transform specific outcomes for children and families. In a new building, all or some of these elements could be incorporated where space, imaginative leadership and resource permit. However, any selection and/or combination of them would be of benefit to an existing or new build setting and may also offer suggestions for child minders caring for children in domestic premises:

- **colour**—white or neutral background colour generally on walls and ceiling with colour as elemental highlight in furnishings
- **food**—preparation and eating area to be in close proximity – including a 'viewing point' at child height to enable key person and/or the preparation and cooking process to be 'peeked at' or closely observed. The distance from the kitchen to eating area should be minimised and located to ensure that hot food stays hot and to ensure that children experience the 'whole' cooking/transporting and eating process and to allow efficient continuity of the use of space
- **wet area**—internal zone for creative, water and sand play near to terrace/outdoor area where possible— additional provision also externally if space allows
- **storage**—generous and dispersed storage at child height where appropriate to enable access or desire to access with adult support
- **acoustics** – consideration of acoustics will help to create a peaceful and calm atmosphere and reduce general human and resource noise level that some of the youngest children find distressing. Acoustic treatments can be incorporated into furniture and fittings as well as being part of the building fabric and can equally be achieved with the thoughtful and responsive use of good quality soft fabrics on hard surfaces and floors. For more auditory learners – and to introduce this aspect of learning to other children, speakers and microphones with links to other areas can be incorporated to extend the learning potential of the space.
- a range of '**space**' **enhancing** opportunities can support the learning of two-year-olds and suggest an illusion of a larger learning space, particularly in existing buildings where resource is limited and building alterations impossible:
 - **parallel mirrors**—creating infinite reflections
 - **angled raised mirror**—to elevate the viewer's reflection
 - **periscope**—with two 45 degree mirrors to provide a higher parallel view
 - **floor/sky view**—base mounted mirror to provide view up through skylight
 - '**secret**' child-scale spaces to suggest 'another world' or 'hidey hole', 'mouse holes' and tunnels. These can have changing levels, where a child enters at higher level and exits on floor level with a small hidden slide inside
- **a softly coloured** interior provides a completely different visual, tactile and acoustic environment. Passive supervision and 'peekaboo' moments can be provided with small porthole windows or cut-outs
- **a glass house** as a fish tank or a home for land snails, or for creating visual effects with stones, shells and other materials can create imaginative visual effects. This could be a simple tank encased in a wooden crate, placed to create a sense of 'inside the wall'
- an '**igloo**' formation, using opaque material, perspex or plastic, with some areas created to enable children to 'see through' more clearly or 'cut outs' to allow practitioners to be 'unseen' observers of children's play and interactions. The 'igloo' is a strong symbol for 'enclosing', incorporates a family or group theme as a free standing element and inspires play whilst supporting children's 'enveloping' schema.
- **garden of technology**—incorporating affordable digital cameras and screens within garden furniture or outdoor fixtures could provide an experience for children similar to a 'Skype' effect between inside and outside and encourage the use of technology to 'connect and communicate'.

Often, a learning space becomes so ‘familiar’ that simple possibilities to change, extend or recreate the space are missed. Leaders should encourage practitioners to ‘stand back’ and observe the learning space, both with children on site and without, noting where children spend most time, what is accessed or ignored, where children linger or flit – and how inviting the space appears to children who are crawling, toddling and walking. This information may provide a blueprint for redesign which should be managed sensitively to give children time to become confident and comfortable with this kind of transition. Carried out in this way, simple changes can have a major positive impact on the wellbeing, learning and development of two-year-olds.

Further thinking:

Leaders may wish to consider:

1. a dynamic and consistent approach to ongoing development of the learning space, based on responding creatively to children's needs and interests and adapting available resource to maximise opportunity
2. creative and innovative planning for learning spaces that will reflect and be flexible enough to enable practitioners to respond to the needs of two-year-olds and will work practically to engender and encourage choice, freedom, inclusion, tranquility and exploration
3. conducting a formal audit of existing provision and using information from this to evaluate the environment's strengths and possible areas for development, including: considering that children of ‘just two’ differ in their daily learning and development needs from children ‘just under three’, and taking into account individual needs, daily transitions and timetables
4. a particular focus on the existing and changing specific needs of two-year-olds in the setting and their parents so that the highest quality environments are developed and sustained to meet the specific needs of particular groups of children
5. collating evidence through observation, discussion and interaction with practitioners, children and parents to inform revisions to the learning space, including children's responses to opportunities and resources

Leading on quality

Long standing and more current research across a range of contexts has consistently confirmed a direct correlation between the quality of leadership and its potential to impact on children's learning and developmental outcomes. Ofsted's *Annual Early Years Report 2012* reinforces this, identifying outstanding leadership as integral to high quality provision and sustained outcomes across all early years settings.

Considering what is needed to build and lead high quality two-year-old provision requires a strong and shared knowledge base of what constitutes quality services for young children as well as the key tenets of good leadership in early years settings. The evaluation schedule for *Inspections of Registered Early Years Provision* (September 2012) indicates that outstanding leadership is dependent on ‘an uncompromising, highly successful and well-documented drive to strongly improve achievement, or maintain the highest levels of achievement, for all children over a sustained period of time’ and that such leaders ensure children's needs are quickly identified and exceptionally well met, through highly effective partnerships between the setting, parents, external agencies and other providers. As the ‘sole arbiter of quality in the early years’ Ofsted makes judgements about the progress of the youngest children through their achievement against the *Development Matters* document and the national expectations of children on entry to nursery as outlined in the *Ofsted Inspection Subsidiary Guidance – Supporting the Inspection of Maintained Schools and Academies from September 2012*.

Leaders who develop a culture of continuous improvement are often also the leaders who place high importance on the use and application of evidence based practice, encouraging their teams to engage with research at a range of levels. Sylvie Rayna and Ferre Laevers (2010) remind leaders of the need to:

...realise the enormous relevance of the insights coming from research on the under threes for the whole of the educational system and how much potential there is for a bottom-up movement where early years takes the lead.

It is in the interests of all stakeholders, children and families to ensure that early years leaders and practitioners build on what has been learned and continues to emerge from research; not least the powerful message that in most effective settings:

...better leadership is characterised by a clear vision, especially with regard to pedagogy and curriculum, which is shared by everyone working within the setting.

Siraj-Blatchford et al, *Effective Leadership in the Early Years Sector* (2010)

An important aspect of the quality debate is how leaders use their position and influence to establish a sense of shared purpose and expectation around pedagogy. Going forwards it will become increasingly important for leaders to find ways to build their leadership capacity and capability by working collaboratively and sharing knowledge and expertise within their own setting but also more broadly across the sector. This approach is increasingly recognised and referred to as the development of a sector led self-improvement system. As far back as 1997, Kagan and Bowman's research found that leadership in early care and education has many facets, including and not limited to management and administration. It also requires leaders who are:

- knowledgeable about children's learning and development
- willing to take risks
- retain a breadth of vision
- allow innovation, collaboration and courage
- work together with others

Such a focus on innovation and collaboration requires leaders to think in new and creative ways about potential partners and stakeholders, particularly as a new education landscape emerges locally to include academies, free schools and teaching schools. Teaching schools, in particular, have the potential to become a key conduit for professional development opportunities locally and will play a central role in the delivery of the government ambition for early years educators and teachers as detailed in *More Great Childcare* (2013).

The importance of robust workforce development strategies and a focus on raising the bar in terms of early years qualifications is central to the quality debate. Ofsted's *Annual Early Years Report 2012* noted that the best settings have the strongest leadership and are making the most difference by recognising that:

staff expertise and qualifications make a distinct difference to the richness of children's experiences before they start school.

And that in the most highly motivated teams where there is a shared commitment to improvement:

Managers and others overseeing settings are self-motivated, good communicators and able to get the best from those they work with.

It is a point also made by Nupponen (2006a, 2006b) that effective leadership is vital to quality services for young children and that effective leadership frameworks are needed as a starting point for teams to work together towards ensuring quality.

The current and future challenge of providing sufficient quality places for funded two-year-olds, is dependent on the leadership of high quality provision delivered by sensitive, skilled, committed and well qualified staff. This should not be compromised by the need to find places at any cost.

C4EO, in their paper *Expansion of the entitlement to free education for disadvantaged two-year-olds* (2012) assert:

Addressing the issues of quality of settings and qualifications of leaders is critical.

The paper goes on to highlight Medway local authority's trial of the two-year-old free education entitlement which found that the quality of settings and the qualifications of leaders were critical to improving and sustaining outcomes, as was encouragement for parents/families to support home learning.

The paper also cites the example of Tower Hamlets local authority which strategically planned to ensure that early years practitioners were able to access regular and co-ordinated continuous professional development, alongside the implementation of better systems and processes for assuring quality, securing accountability and driving improvement. On a less optimistic note the paper recognised that early year's settings in general lack sufficient funding to ensure high levels of regular practitioner development which may present a barrier to the successful implementation of the new entitlement particularly for those, working with two-year-olds with a range and combination of complex needs and disabilities.

Nutbrown (2012) recognised this challenge stating:

No study of child development would be complete without a solid understanding of special educational needs and disability. Indeed, a key part of understanding how and when children typically develop is being able to notice signs of slower, or different, development and whether an apparent delay in development is an indication of other special educational needs or disabilities. Early years practitioners need to know what to look for, how to respond to it, and how to interact with parents and the range of other bodies, professionals and services that may play a part in supporting a child with special educational needs or who is disabled. Importantly they need to be able to work inclusively, so that the individual needs of all young children are identified and met in the context of interdisciplinary collaboration with other related professionals and with families.

The majority of local authorities involved in the initial piloting of early education for two-year-olds recognised and paid direct attention to the issues of identifying and sustaining the quality of settings and improving the skills of the workforce through professional development training. Generic outcomes from the pilot activity also demonstrate universally that the overall quality of settings and their potential to respond to the diverse needs of all children is strongly dependant on the level of qualification of leaders and practitioners. Given such empirical evidence, it is clear that the best pedagogical leaders are those who use their leadership skills and influence to create a shared dynamic around quality and the continuous drive for quality improvement through placing children:

...at the centre of the service and helping them gain a sense of belonging, self-worth, value and respect, independence and the ability to make sense of the world

O'Sullivan 2009

Further thinking:

Leaders may wish to consider:

1. their contribution to improving and sustaining good quality practice through
 - high quality personal supervision systems
 - robust performance management evidence and a clearly articulated and evidenced approach to professional development and workforce planning
 - development planning and priority setting, regularly reviewed and updated
 - target setting, monitoring and evaluation models
 - effective communication at all levels
2. active and effective knowledge management and information systems (that is, the data sets required to support the provision of quality places for two-year-olds, methods of effective data collection and analysis to inform best practice for all children, with a direct focus on 'narrowing the gap' and supporting children with additional needs) enabling data to be collated, shared and acted upon
3. a strategic focus on the development of partnerships and networks where key services and practitioners can come together to focus on shared accountabilities and outcomes and develop practice together
4. a clear focus on the use of resource both human and financial to maximise effectiveness and efficiency including how to work with and influence the local authority to ensure sufficiency and quality

Engaging with parents

High quality partnerships with parents, carers and families matter. The most effective partnerships impact significantly on children's learning, development and progress. Fundamental to successful reciprocal partnerships is the way leaders and practitioners value all parents and their contribution to supporting their children's learning. This involves active engagement with parents around the process of learning and expectations of progress alongside a sensitive listening approach to parental concerns, learning and acting upon their views and aspirations.

Research consistently recognises that parents and the home environment they create are the first and most enduring factors in shaping children's neurological development, health and well being, future achievements and prospects. The EPPE research conducted by Sylva et al (2004) notes:

Parents are children's first and most enduring educators. When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on children's learning and development.

Easen and others (1992) acknowledge the parents' own learning process in the dialogue with practitioners, emphasising the importance of:

...taking what children do now as the starting point for observation and reflection (as this) allows for a positive and non-judgemental dialogue to develop between parents and educators (practitioners).

Interestingly, various research reports suggest that irrespective of children's backgrounds the home learning environment has a greater influence on intellectual, emotional and social development than the occupation, income or level of education of the parents.

Supporting this, the EPPE paper concludes:

What parents do is more important than who parents are.

And (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003) report:

Parents are children's first and most effective motivators for learning. The key to keeping young children's natural curiosity alive is for parents to take an interest in everything their child does and to talk about it together.

They go on to suggest that the influence of the home learning environment is "enduring, pervasive and direct".

A leadership focus on parental engagement, based on genuine interest and positive intent is a key factor in providing the basis for high quality learning opportunities that are a special and positive experience for all children and their parents. This takes on additional importance for more marginalised families, for example those from poorer socio-economic backgrounds or whose first language is not English. A recent review of research by Springate et al (2008) has shown, there is considerable evidence that high quality early years interventions can narrow the gap between the most disadvantaged and other children in terms of cognitive development. This is equally true for social and behavioural development evidence that demonstrates such early benefits can also be sustained into later schooling (Sylva et al, 2008).

As research shows that strong parent partnerships are of prime importance to quality early years provision, implementing such practice and sustaining quality partnerships is a high priority for the most effective leaders. They ensure:

- everyday planning and organisation has regard to parental views and feedback
- activities are regularly planned to engage with groups of parents around developing a shared understanding of children's learning
- targeted approaches are directed at particular groups, particularly the most marginalised, for example fathers and teenage parents
- support materials and resources are readily available to help parents understand different aspects of children's play and learning, including ideas to use at home
- parents are encouraged to share what they know about their child and a range of formal and informal opportunities are provided to share such knowledge and discuss progress, achievement and next steps

Such approaches are particularly important for children who may have complex needs and disabilities. The huge sensitivity and professionalism needed for staff to raise the subject of developmental issues with parents highlights one of the most difficult challenges early years leaders and practitioners face. It can harshly highlight their differing levels of ability, emotional maturity, self-esteem and confidence as they raise and manage difficult issues and conversations with parents. Some parents may perceive such conversations as a challenge to their parenting skills which in turn may impact on their relationship with the child and setting. The evaluation of the Sure Start children's centre programme in 2010, ascertained that if standards of provision and levels of quality are to rise:

Continual training...should be particularly focused on the developmental needs of two-year-olds, the planning and implementation of appropriate programmes, supporting and assessing children's developmental progress, and involving and working with their parents.

The most effective leaders retain a focus on ensuring and maintaining effective parental engagement by establishing it as a recurring theme in staff appraisal and performance management, underpinned by access to appropriate professional development for themselves and practitioners to secure, recent and relevant knowledge of child development, managing difficult conversations and developing emotional literacy when engaging with a wide variety of parents, some of whom may be vulnerable and/or challenging. The Nutbrown Paper (2012) reinforces this, stating:

Of particular importance is recognition that working with some parents can bring enormous challenges.

Working with parents who may be presenting and dealing with their own problems — both of a parenting and personal nature — is not easy and can cause high levels of anxiety, particularly for young and less experienced early years practitioners, many of whom are themselves still learning to manage their own responses to challenging situations. The best leaders are aware of the need to build the capability, skills and confidence of their teams to actively engage all groups of parents. In relation to provision for two-year-olds, many children will initially come from the most disadvantaged families, making it increasingly important for leaders to recognise that some early years practitioners will require targeted and specific training in order to help them to become quality partners with parents in children's learning.

Inexperienced practitioners may over or under estimate children's needs, increasing the risk that if the two-year-old check is not conducted and communicated in an appropriate way, it could impact on a child's learning and development opportunities, irreparably damage relationships with parents and possibly deter them from future engagement with the setting and at worst detach them from any interest in their child's learning.

Experienced and well trained staff who feel more confident to readily engage with parents on a day-to-day basis, establishing mutual trust and confidence, will feel more able, when required, to explain sensitively and clearly what parents can do at home to support their children. They will also have developed greater skills and expertise in managing difficult conversations, dealing with conflict and providing consistency both in response and guidance.

O'Sullivan (2009) states:

...many young staff say that one of the areas they are most nervous about is working with families. There are many reasons for this, ranging from lack of confidence to never getting the opportunity to learn. Many settings face daily encounters with difficult parents...this means focusing on the family's needs as identified by the family and involving families wherever possible in service delivery and design, while being realistic.

The EYFS statutory framework 2012 states:

...Staff could be made aware of the importance of their relationship with parents. Traditionally, staff in childcare settings have focused their attention on the children in their care rather than on children and their parents. Therefore, there may need to be a greater acknowledgement of the importance of parents in children's early learning so that all staff become confident about working with parents to encourage early home learning.

The 2012 EYFS statutory guidance states:

When a child is aged between two and three, practitioners must review their progress, and provide parents and/or carers with a short written summary of their child's development in the prime areas. This progress check must identify the child's learning and development strengths, and any areas where the child's progress is below expectations. If there are significant emerging concerns, or an identified special educational need or disability, practitioners should develop a targeted plan to support the child's future learning and development involving other professionals (for example, the provider's special educational needs co-ordinator) as appropriate.

This planning process is of key importance for practitioners, requiring direct involvement between parents and practitioners and in the case of some children, the need to initiate conversations about developmental progress, share sensitive information about children's learning and development and set in place early intervention and 'next steps' which may involve a range of other multi-agency professionals and services.

The *Early Education Pilot for Two Year Old Children Evaluation* (DCSF,2009) reported that where settings and parents worked together in genuine partnerships parents were generally enthusiastic about what they had gained from their two-year-olds being part of the pilot.

They articulated a range of ways in which they believed the setting had positively affected their ability to parent. They felt they had gained a better understanding of their children as individuals and of different child development stages. Some believed that their parenting skills and their relationships with their children had improved during the time their child was in the setting, whilst others felt able to provide a more stimulating learning environment for their children.

Further thinking:

Leaders may wish to consider:

1. focused professional development for staff to strengthen understanding and implementation of high quality parental engagement so that parents know about their child's development, recognise, where identified, the need for early intervention and feel confident and able to sustain strong levels of attachment and assured parenting
2. how time is given to developing high levels of involvement and collaboration building mutual confidence and trust and ensuring the views and needs of families are understood and responded to
3. the development of a suite of professional development activities and support materials (including access to external opportunities where appropriate) to ensure that all levels of practitioners:
 - are supported to work alongside parents and other adults
 - are more confident and successful at engaging multi-agency professionals to work with parents at the earliest stage
 - ensure assessment methodology is meaningful and makes the link between the nursery and the home learning environment
 - are confident and skilled in managing sensitive discussions with parents
 - ensure through effective communication and support, parents are encouraged to consider the home learning environment and their child's specific learning needs with an emphasis on early language development and social/emotional development
4. methods and approaches that encourage parents to become more actively engaged with the running and governance arrangements of their child's setting, using their skills productively in critical partnership and to hold settings to account
5. listening to, hearing and responding to the voice of the child and family
6. how to focus on evidence based outcomes and use this information effectively to improve services for children and families
7. how to encourage parents to become active volunteers, giving careful consideration to the training and supervision implications of this approach

Leading within the community

The introduction of early education for two-year-olds presents an opportunity for early years' providers to examine and evaluate how they work beyond their own environment into their reach areas and local communities. Sure Start children's centres have an impressive track record of such activity and provide a strong evidence bank of the potential benefits of a co-ordinated and integrated approach across local services that identify and target those most in need of help and support and ensure resources are well matched to need.

The best early years leaders recognise that a function of leadership is to help strengthen communities and develop social capital through effective capacity building and partnership working locally. In the Department for Communities and Local Government report *The Cost of Troubled Families* (2013), reference is made to the huge human cost of services failing to intervene early and effectively,

particularly with more troubled communities and families. The report makes the case for all local service providers to examine how effective they are in helping turn lives around and preventing families from becoming overwhelmed by social issues and concerns, referring to such work as:

...pioneering work of national significance and of great value to other public sector agencies which share a desire to spend taxpayers' money more efficiently – and improve the prospects of some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Department for Communities and Local Government (2013)

Such community aspects of leadership have been highlighted as significant for some time. In 2001 Kagan and Hallmark suggested that:

...community leadership, connects early childhood education to the community through informing and constructing links among families, services, resources and the public and private sectors.

Purposeful community leadership enables and sustains rich social and neighbourhood networks and community cohesion by facilitating conversations and recognising the different needs of families ranging through the continuum of universal, targeted and more specialist services. To reach all families with an offer of services, that respect their level of need and constructs high levels of trust, multi-agency leaders need to work in a more integrated way, sharing knowledge, data, information and resources. Increasingly this involves co-ordinated attention on inefficiencies, duplications and gaps in provision, identifying how services could be redesigned to deliver better value for money and better family outcomes. This requires leaders who are willing to work with partners and local stakeholders in new configurations to consider different interventions and activities, draw out common themes and learn from each other in a context of professional and personal respect.

The best leaders secure involvement, influence participation in the community through their own credibility and professional integrity, understanding the motivation of community members and ensuring that decision-making processes are evaluated to ensure that they are authentic, significant and impactful.

Fredriksen-Goldsen, Karen, Robin, Nancy (2006) interestingly take the community dimension one step further by considering opportunities for multi-generational practice:

There is no doubt about the importance of multi-generational practice to the social context of the UK and the benefits to children in early years as strong family makes strong community. Multi-generational practice can be defined as assisting individuals, families, and communities within the context of cross-generational relations and larger social systems to promote change which strengthens the inherent capacities of the family system and supports the best possible relationship between individuals and families and their environment.

They comment that there are very few multi-generational centres, defined as:

...designated public indoor and outdoor spaces where children, young and older adults participate in ongoing services and/or shared programming at the same site.

Supporting an Inter-generational Centre in London: Scoping the evidence (Policy Studies Institute, 2007) defines inter-generational approaches as:

...the facilitated interaction of more than one demographic age group (for example, preschool, school age, young people/adults parents, older people) to work towards a common goal or participate in an activity that is of mutual benefit.

They say that:

...regular, positive contact between groups can nurture relationships that merge boundaries, resulting in more positive attitudes and less stereotyping of the other group as a whole.

To date, they note:

...there are very few centres with an inter-generational focus operating in the UK. Key to this model is shared activities. There may be other sites that share daycare facilities for older and younger (pre-school) people but these do not offer or encourage 'shared activities' between young and old, able and disabled.'

The London Early Years Foundation (LEYF), during 2012, carried out action research across all LEYF settings in order to inform and establish methods of securing engagement with local communities. Successful activities included (in addition to events frequently offered by good nurseries, such as coffee mornings, summer fairs and open days for families) a set of complementary and more unusual projects, for example:

- *Teens and toddlers* - a project helping young people avoid becoming teenage parents
- local walks past the homes where older people live, and engaging residents in informal conversations
- LEYF-initiated football sessions
- locomotion days - joining generations together including 5-13 year olds, market workers and local residents
- street tea parties
- anti-vandal projects
- an arts project with 6-9 year olds.

LEYF considered this to be an important and developing area of work and central to learning more about the community in which the children and families attending their settings live and work. This view is strongly supported by Louise Casey who is leading the government's work to support and understand the needs of the country's 120,000 most troubled families as identified by the Prime Minister in December 2010. She suggests:

...convincing people of the merits of more integrated, pro-active, whole family approaches is not that hard — there is plenty of evidence about the success of family intervention and that evidence base is growing all the time.

Further thinking:

Leaders may wish to consider:

1. the potential reach of high quality community and system leadership, including peer to peer and leader to leader support and in particular how leadership actions and choices affect those who cannot be seen as well as those who can
2. establishing successful settings that sustain and actively continue to develop high quality practice, recognising their position within the community, supporting other settings by sharing practice and offering peer to peer support and work to develop as learning organisations
3. stakeholder and partnership working that recognises and builds on the importance of integrated working across and within services
4. maximising the potential of local leadership by exploring the concept of sustainable leadership, increasingly influencing and empowering parents/carers and the wider community to find solutions for a safer neighbourhood together
5. developing a greater understanding of the everyday experiences and lives of the local community by encouraging inclusion, equality of access and integration and demonstrating high visibility local leadership

Further thinking continued

6. the creative and forensic use of data and local intelligence to ensure a direct focus on key local issues and effective ways to record and measure impact and outcomes

Learning to lead

As early as 2002, critical observations by Ebbeck and Waniganayake suggested there were few publicly acknowledged early years leaders and therefore a lack of common expectations for leaders in early childhood. More recently this idea has received support from O'Sullivan (2009) who suggests that:

...by placing so much emphasis on leadership, and consequently making it appear complicated, almost unattainable, it seemed that unless we were superheroes we could not possibly lead.

Effective Leadership in Early Years Settings (Blatchford et al, 2010), the refreshed Ofsted children's centre framework (2010) and the Nutbrown Review (2012) all raise the importance of leadership and its relationship with sustained quality improvement. Leadership is highlighted as key to quality provision, practice and outcomes for young children and families.

It cannot be disputed that leaders have a critical role to play in establishing professional cultures. They must be able to demonstrate a commitment to, and investment in, ongoing quality improvement and the development of not only their workforce but also their own personal and professional skills and behaviours with the aim of growing reflective and enquiry driven practitioners.

The Nutbrown Review (2012), emphasises the importance of a high quality and skilled workforce stating:

...the current early years qualifications system is not systematically equipping practitioners with the knowledge, skills and understanding they need to give babies and young children high quality experiences.

A new long-term vision is needed for the early years' workforce, with a reformed system of qualifications to help achieve this. In working towards this vision, a balance must be struck between supporting existing good practice and challenging the sector to ensure provision is high quality in all settings.

Many countries internationally are moving towards raising the qualification levels of early years leaders and practitioners, realising the importance of this in ensuring high quality educational experiences for the youngest children.

Research carried out in 2009 by Professor Rae Condie and Liz Seagraves at Strathclyde Department of Educational and Professional Studies focused specifically on the professional development needs of early years managers and practitioners working with children under three years of age. Evidence indicated that such provision was dominated by short-term programmes such as day, twilight and evening in-service courses. Practitioners expressed the view that 'one-off' sessions were unsatisfactory with regard to having a direct and sustainable impact on practice and did not instigate change. Conversely, the research indicated that well-supported, in-house development opportunities with leader to leader and peer to peer support, coaching, mentoring from high quality and experienced colleagues, sharing practice across settings and direct specialist support were all valued highly and seen to be effective in effecting improvement. Such practitioner led, on the job approaches generated local models of professional development that were strongly evidence based, recognised local context and involved highly effective, active learning.

Collaborative practitioner led research and shared professional development 'for the purpose of advancing practice' (McLeod 1999) is often recognised as a fundamental contributor to service improvement. Pascal and Bertram (2002) suggest it is important for those involved in the delivery of a service not simply 'to try out something new' but to deeply question 'how', 'why' and 'what' is done

and the impact this has on teaching and learning approaches and outcomes for children. Pascal and Bertram believe that where leaders and practitioners are directly involved in systemically gathering evidence within their own and others' settings, they gain a greater knowledge of their own influence on the services that they offer and also gain greater knowledge, understanding and confidence about high quality practice, enabling them to make constructive changes for the better.

They suggest that:

Those people working on the front line with young children and their families, whether they know it or not, have a vast wealth of knowledge grounded in real life experiences and through developing practitioner research this knowledge can be used to improve service delivery without the need to bring in outside observers.

Munton et al (2002) support this argument:

...research has consistently demonstrated that high levels of training – both pre-service and in-service – are necessary for quality outcomes with infants and toddlers.

Whalley, M (2002), in Early Years Leaders Involving Parents in their Children's Learning, Creative Waves states:

...it is crucial for leaders and staff to be reflective and to be willing to cultivate their own practice. Improved co-operation of early childhood professionals with parents as part of that will mean a big step forward for children's learning and development.

Further thinking:

Leaders may wish to consider:

1. a visionary approach to system leadership, developing ways of supporting and challenging each other and modelling the changes needing to be implemented, including leadership behaviours that are self-motivating as well as supportive of the development of others
2. how best to support leaders in maximising the opportunities within the two-year-old entitlement offer, while finding ways to overcome the challenges at a local level
3. maintaining a strong focus on workforce development, progression and succession planning at all levels and nurturing collaborative activity within teams and across settings
4. the best and most effective and efficient ways in which leaders can support each other through local collaboration and system leadership and how this will work in a potentially competitive environment, considering the potential all round benefits of such an approach for children and families
5. system leadership approaches that provide effective peer to peer support to help leaders reflect on their personal leadership styles, behaviours and impact and act on improvement strategies
6. system leadership approaches that provide opportunities for leaders to work beyond their own settings to learn from and support others, including opportunities to engage in joint practice development
7. the empowerment of the leadership role to influence and forge stronger and enduring partnerships with other agencies, including schools and academies
8. devising effective frameworks for measuring impact and creating systems of accountability so that all are aware of and execute their roles and responsibilities

Conclusion

Looking forwards to the successful implementation of early education for two- year-olds it is clear that there are immense opportunities alongside challenges for leaders at all levels and across a range of services. The quality of practitioners currently working with funded two-year-olds will be widely varied and this in itself has implications for leaders in ensuring the consistency of highest quality provision. There are also critical strategic implications for central policy makers and local authorities in planning and providing authentic support and development for leaders creating places and implementing the offer on the ground. It will be important to ensure bureaucracy and regulation does not stifle the creativity and innovation of place providers.

The suggested leadership considerations presented in this paper are informed by conversations with early years practitioners at a range of levels and are offered to support leaders and policy makers in thinking about the quality of provision and practice for two-year- olds in their own settings, particularly the most vulnerable, alongside the readiness of settings to work with such young children and their families.

Early education for two-year-olds brings with it important accountability to parents who will entrust their very young children into the care of settings probably for the first time and this should not be overlooked or underestimated.

Suggestions have been made about the strengthening of a range of relationships including leader to leader, peer to peer, adult to child and practitioner to parent. The importance of secure accountability within such relationships has also been suggested, with a key focus on improvement and understanding parents' needs in supporting their child's learning and development.

As the reach of the offer is extended to include more two-year-olds, leaders will need to consistently define approaches that create sustainable and high quality outcomes. Leaders may also need to think in more transformational ways about how to secure investment, maintain a high performing workforce and develop new partnerships. This will require leaders who can demonstrate a set of skills and behaviours that incorporate:

- openness to new ideas and ways of working
- personal resilience and tenacity to implement the offer
- a willingness to work collaboratively to achieve economies of scale and drive improvement locally
- a focus on securing accountability and delivering high quality outcomes by seeking out and using evidence of what works well

Convincing new and existing providers of the importance of implementing the early education for two-year-olds well with a focus on the quality and sustainability of the offer is easy. What is more challenging is ensuring leaders are supported to develop a secure vision for the service that includes a holistic view of the child, incorporating more integrated, active whole family approaches and understanding of the importance of the home learning environment. This may require rigorous review of some provision and greater investment in evidence based practices which can demonstrate a strong track record of success complemented by robust evaluation. In this way the needs of such young children and their families can be fully respected and properly prioritised.

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