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# Leading in the Early Childhood Education and Care Sector in England During a Pandemic: Reality, Relationships and Ruminations

**Lewis Fogarty**

**Abstract:** *Leading in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in England has been challenging for many years, before this pandemic and associated struggle. The sector has battled synchronous funding shortfalls and increased expectations from central and local government, as well as from parents. Leaders are therefore faced with the complex challenge of leading a team of individuals through this new reality that threatens to exacerbate pre-existing difficulties. I propose that leaders in ECEC, and beyond, can embrace a specific framework when navigating this reality. Through forming reassuring relationships, communicating clearly and inspiring continuous curiosity, all within an enabling environment, leaders can create the right balance between pedagogical and entrepreneurial leadership and encourage a focus on both education and care in their settings. This is important for all stakeholders now more than ever.*

**Keywords:** Pedagogical leadership, entrepreneurial leadership, early childhood

## Introduction

This paper is written by a leader in education, for leaders of education, drawing on recent literature and a range of experiences of the reality of leading in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector during a pandemic. This sector has already been weakened as a result of a perpetuating hostile policy context in England (Hoskins, Bradbury & Fogarty 2020), contributing to a myriad of issues facing leaders on a daily basis. After discussing these, some challenges for leaders caused by the pandemic will be discussed in relation to ECEC, followed by a framework that has enabled me to maintain positive and productive relationships with my team and families throughout. This has provided encouraging signs for the sustainability of my provision. This paper will conclude with some reflections and ruminations on this

framework and how it could be adopted by leaders across the educational sector, to not only survive but thrive, as we begin the gradual global return to the new normal.

## **ECEC in England**

The ECEC sector in England is unlike most comparable sectors in developed countries. The government in England has continued to nurture and stimulate a childcare market, providing education and care for 0-5-year-olds, for more than 20 years. This market has been stimulated through a range of policy initiatives that have largely focused on increasing access to ECEC for more disadvantaged children (Lewis & West 2017). In the past, there have been other policies stimulating a focus for leaders to raise the quality of provision. Whilst this was a welcomed development from the previous narrow focus on quantity of places, often at the expense of quality, it has contributed to the continued tensions around the purpose of, and pedagogy in, ECEC provisions. Alongside this, there is a maintained part of the sector relying solely on government funds, typically providing education and care disproportionately located in areas of deprivation, and referred to as the 'jewel in the crown' of the sector (Hoskins et al. 2020).

## **Challenges for Leaders in ECEC in England**

With this in mind, leaders in ECEC in England are faced with many ongoing challenges, several of which will be considered now. Firstly, there is high staff turnover, which is often attributed to the lack of qualifications, low pay and poor benefits for those working in ECEC (Nutbrown 2012). This is part of a wider issue of a lack of professionalism in the sector. Secondly, there is an uneven playing field fuelled by flawed funding and regulatory frameworks. West and Noden (2019) offer a thorough overview of the historical funding processes in England to date. They show that over the past 25 years, the government in England has made continuous tweaks and adjustments in order to provide more funded places for children in ECEC provisions. The caveat here though is that this rate of funding is not commensurate with the costs associated with providing this provision, and other sources of funding are also under threat from government inertia (Powell 2019). This is an alarming fact that is yet to be addressed in government policy, despite recent literature highlighting these concerns (Hoskins et al. 2020). Regulatory frameworks, operated mostly by OFSTED in England, have been similarly criticised for their lack of parity and sustainability. There have been consistently different expectations on different providers, in terms of ratio requirements and staff qualifications amongst other elements (West 2006), despite accessing the same funding rate through schemes outlined previously.

There are also competing discourses of play and school readiness as the suggested focus of pedagogical activity in provisions and the two have been largely considered incommensurable (Kagan & Lowenstein 2004). Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury (2016) capture part of this by saying that school readiness is a focus on preparation for adult life as potential

human capital, as part of a global education race that starts in pre-school. In contrast, there is strong evidence highlighting the importance of play and advocating for more play in ECEC (Palaiologou, 2017). Rogers and Lapping (2012) suggest that policy documents' construction of play is erroneous and has a too narrow focus on being ready for their next stage of education, sacrificing essential time for young children to play. Consequently, leaders are left with a dichotomy to navigate, considering the regulatory ramifications of not heeding to the school readiness agenda which is rife in policy documents and often in-line with parental expectations. Ultimately working against the innate desire and need for children to be given abundant time and freedom to engage in self-directed play.

Consequently, there is confusion throughout the sector about what they should be doing and how they should be doing it, leading to a range of inconsistencies. The funding shortfall, along with these other factors, has led to numbers of providers in the sector falling, most notably childminders and maintained provisions, two parts of the sector offering essential education and care for families who need it most (DfE 2019).

## **Responses to the Pandemic: Four Pillars of Pedagogy**

There was a mixture of ECEC responses to the pandemic across England. The government had a clear desire for places to remain available for 'key worker' children, although there was a lack of clarity around who were 'key workers' and the published government list was itself open to interpretation, as well as criticism. Consequently, some settings scrambled to seek out these children to be able to remain open, others decided to close their doors awaiting further information or indefinitely. Some, including my own provision, tried to adopt a hybrid of key worker care and learning packs for those at home, trying to maintain connections with our families as far as possible.

This new uncertain reality left many, already under funded and weakened providers, wondering if they would remain solvent. This was exacerbated further by a highly publicised government u-turn regarding essential funding for the sector. As reported in April by the Early Years Alliance (2020), the government backtracked at the last moment on their previous statements confirming that ECEC providers could access essential funding. The Early Years Alliance (2020) described this as 'a "kick in the teeth" for the sector and warning that it is likely to lead to nursery closures and threaten the long-term viability of the sector' (p. 1).

This combination of factors led many providers at the beginning of the pandemic, myself included, to move through a stage of panic, pause and pivot. The initial thought running through my mind was that of, how can I support my team and families if we cannot operate in a safe way and, ultimately, may be forced to close? There were no clear support measures in place by the government yet, and any information emerging was muddled by concerns over previous false statements and inconsistencies. When support was announced, through a range of schemes, it allowed me time to pause. I was therefore able to reflect and consider what matters most. This is, of course, the safety and happiness of the children in our care and

the staff that provide it. Then came the pivot, how do I adjust our structures and processes to support the staff and families in our care in a thoughtful way?

I remained grounded and focused during this troubling time by the approach embodied by my team and wider nursery community on a daily basis, the **four pillars of pedagogy**, which I will now turn to focus on. The four pillars of pedagogy are centred on the notion that education and care are needed, in equal measure, throughout education. This is founded on the idea that if students are not happy, they are not engaged, and if they are not engaged then they are not learning. With a more balanced focus adopted by educators, children and students of all ages can feel supported to be the best they can be, in the broadest possible sense.

Relationships are essential at all levels of education, between all stakeholders. Therefore, the **first pillar** is **reassuring relationships**. These relationships facilitate more shared understanding within teams and communities that lead to a more supportive and open environment. This was pivotal in the early days of the impending pandemic. Particularly when combined with the **second pillar, clear communication**. This applies to all communications and we have received excellent feedback for offering timely, concise and informative communications. These included a level of candour and empathy that conveyed genuine care and respect for our nursery community.

The communications between stakeholders often naturally lead to curiosity, an eagerness to learn more. This forms the basis of our **third pillar, continuous curiosity**. Being in isolation can impact on everyone differently, as we are in the same storm but in very different boats. This pillar has been particularly pertinent in the success of our response to this pandemic, as we have been able to stimulate a broad range of professional conversations around how we can use this time to develop ourselves and continue to develop the children. The nursery team has regularly been encouraged to learn new skills and try new activities, like one-to-one coaching through video call and reading a wider range of books. Alongside the more obvious benefits of professional development with these activities, there has been undoubtedly improvements in well-being through regular engagement and checking-in.

These three pillars together contribute to an **enabling environment**, which is the **fourth pillar** of pedagogy. Whilst everyone's environment is different during lockdown, technology can allow us to enter and improve our community's environment and this has been readily embraced in our nursery community. This is something we hope to continue to do beyond when we return to a sense of normality.

## Leadership Ideas

None of these pillars should seem radical to leaders and they should allow ample flexibility for them to encompass the nuances that exist across the diverse globalised education sector. However, by drawing on this framework, leaders can consider a broad range of elements to inform their leadership approach in such an unrepresented time. Most notably, this framework



promotes a broader sense of what educational leadership constitutes. For me, this is summarised in a balance between entrepreneurial leadership and pedagogical leadership.

Entrepreneurial leadership, is described by Campbell-Barr (2014) as an economic model that sees parents as purchasers, more aligned with business enterprise and financial priorities. In the context of a pandemic, this relates to concerns around sustainability of the organisation, marketing, communications with customers and ensuring resources are in place for reopening. That is not an exhaustive list, but it is easy to see how the four pillars of pedagogy are a useful framework to adopt to work through those concerns. For example, the entrepreneurial leader needs to be curious about what information to act on and which to filter out to their community. They also need to be aware of alternatives when it comes to marketing and purchasing avenues, particularly in light of many suppliers capitalising on the situation and inflating their prices.

Pedagogical leadership, can be defined in several different ways, but common features are captured by Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) who suggest it is being connected with effective communication and collaboration, and the development of children's learning. In the context of a pandemic, this relates to issues around ongoing education for children, working with families and other professionals, and ensuring regular developmental communication. Again, in this is not an exhaustive list and the benefits of referring to the four pillars of pedagogy are evident. For example, the reassuring relationships the team has with children have been, and will continue to be, essential to providing appropriate educational activities. Also, in order to collaborate effectively with others, rapport needs to have been established and communication needs to be clear. This will lead to a more enabling environment for children to learn in and for professionals and parents to collaborate within.

## Conclusion

The pedagogical and entrepreneurial elements of a leader's focus are inevitable, particularly in ECEC in England, where there is a competitive childcare market and a hostile policy context to navigate. Leaders also need to be able to articulate their purpose and pedagogical approach to parents and staff members and support its continuous implementation. The four pillars of pedagogy, successfully utilised by my nursery provision, may well support other leaders to have the confidence in the potential benefits of adopting this approach in their organisations too. Founded on the imperatives of education and care in equal measure, I hope it will result in a more realistic perspective of education and more secure relationships between all stakeholders. Ultimately it contributes to a more enabling environment, with engaged and happy children and students throughout education, two essential pre-requisites for learning and development.

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## Author Details

Lewis Fogarty  
College of Business, Arts and Social Sciences  
Brunel University London  
Email: lewis.fogarty2@brunel.ac.uk