

Early Years Leadership in a Post-Covid World

Tuesday 10th November 2020, 4.30-6pm GMT

Transcript of the event

Maddy introduces the event

The Leadership in Early Years Education RIG was founded about five years ago in response to a dearth of research about early years leadership. After a few dormant years, we're privileged to have Mona join us and launch the first of what we hope will be a series of opportunities to discuss key leadership concerns in relation to our sector.

So for those of you who are new to BELMAS, the society brings together practitioners from across the education sector with the view to supporting quality education through effective leadership and management. I can highly recommend membership which brings with it access to high quality leadership research, networking opportunities and of course, the excellent annual conference which runs over two days and is absolutely jam-packed with fascinating talks from people around the world.

We are really fortunate to have with us tonight three wonderful speakers. First up we have Julian Grenier, headteacher of Sheringham nursery school, writer on early years and advisor on the new Development Matters framework. Second up, we have Sharon Quamie, who is the baby room leader at the New Cross nursery, which is part of the London Early Years Foundation. And finally, we have Julie Nicholson, who is a professor all the way in the United States, specialising in trauma-responsive early childhood education.

In terms of the structure of the session, each of our speakers will have ten minutes to share their reflections on early years leadership post-Covid, and after that, we will go into breakout rooms for smaller discussions. We'll then come back together for a chance to put some questions to our speakers.

The hashtag for the event is #eyleadershippostcovid

Our twitter handle is @ey_leadership

Without further ado, I'll hand over to our first speaker – Julian Grenier. Welcome.

Julian Grenier presents

I think the first thing that I wanted to say was how great it is that people are showing up online to have this discussion now. We've all got huge challenges going on in our work and in our personal lives. There's a lot going on for a lot of people. But actually for me, it's really important to look up and to think as a way of getting through times that are difficult, like the time we are in, which is why I was so pleased to take up on Mona's offer to be part of this.

The early years system we have in England is an incredibly fragile system for the following reasons.

First of all, we have a very fragmented system, so we have some children in early years settings, some with childminders, some in maintained nursery schools, some in early years provision in primary and infant schools. And although in theory, all of those different settings are regulated and inspected by Ofsted and covered by the EYFS, in reality, it's a very patchwork and fragmented system. And there are huge differences in funding and pay and conditions in the workforce, which make this a very fragmented part of our education and care system in England. This is in very stark contrast to countries in Northern Europe for example, such as Sweden or Denmark or Finland, which have a much stronger sense of a cohesive early years system, so that the type of provision you access isn't (like it is in this country) so dependent on your postcode, or your parents' income, or the other things that affect childhood inequalities in our country.

Of course, Covid has shown us that our system is financially very vulnerable. In Newham where I work, many private and voluntary settings live really quite hand to mouth financially and are very dependent on government funding and then trying to cross-subsidise with fees. There's very little flex in that system despite a lot of hard work. Despite lots of hard work, there's very little resilience. It's seen as things start to go wrong, lots of settings are at risk and teetering financially on a very very steep cliff edge.

And of course, in addition to that, we are often quite a divided sector. So not long ago when I tweeted something about welcoming early years children back to school after half term, I got a few people saying 'what about children in settings?' But what I'd said wasn't meant to be an affront to children in PVI settings and childminders; it just reflected that half-term was over for children in schools. And I think often we struggle to get our voice heard in the early years because people have been able to play on the divisions between for example the school sector and the private, community and voluntary sector.

An overlooked sector. Boy, did people notice that schools got Covid testing kits and that early years settings didn't. Or that schools got access to PPE equipment, at times when often early years settings didn't. These are England's under-five children; it doesn't matter, it shouldn't matter, where they are – but it does. And parts of our sector feel taken for granted and overlooked at the moment. And we lack a coherent and progressive voice to speak with us and to speak for us.

I guess the final thing I'd say is about the uncertainty of language at the moment in early years. So for example, although any statistical generalisation is always not true of individual cases, from a social equity point of view, it's really clear that kids in poverty were already, pre-Covid, at risk of much poorer levels of progress and outcomes in the early years, and much more at risk of poor health and obesity, and yet I think we find these things very hard to talk about in the early years. People are afraid that if they talk like that, they will somehow be devaluing the unique child, or that it's a deficit view of childhood. I think that uncertainty, rather than a confidence to speak and an openness to be challenged about what you say, means that what we should be saying loudly and clearly to government, to the wider

population, often gets rather lost in conflicts about language and appropriate sorts of discourse. We shouldn't be afraid to say that in our country, how much money your parents earn makes a huge difference to your childhood. That's not a deficit view of kids or families or working class cultures or black and minority ethnic cultures or all the other things that it's sometimes accused of being; that's trying to create a progressive voice to stand up for kids and families and for settings in our country who are getting a very raw deal at the moment.

So I'm just wanting now to think about some of the things that we're learning as we're living in and through this pandemic period before a look ahead. And I would say here are three of the really big messages, and these are the things that I feel optimistic about.

Firstly, the value of 'our normal'. The things we do every day for children, the play, the facilities, the interaction, the way we love children to bits and treasure their individuality and their uniqueness and feel that great pleasure in inviting them into our settings, and giving them enticing and exciting and dynamic experiences. All those normal things we do are unbelievably valuable to children. And of course there are going to be some children who suffered greatly during this period and who are going to need some specialist help, but actually, one of the things we've seen is that a very large number of children who had a rough time during the pandemic have bounced back really well through the normal everyday things we do in early years. So it reminds us of how powerful this provision is.

I think we've also seen incredible depth and flexibility and resilience in our teams. We've seen people step up and take over leadership roles, or adapt to a different way of working really fast, or cope with a difficult situation with incredible calm and confidence. And I'm a great believer in our workforce in the early years and it's been really great to see the workforce shining during this period, at every level. So the leaders, the early years educators, the teachers and the assistants, have really really shone.

And spirit and joy. I think that we don't sometimes talk enough about what the spirit of the children gives us and what the joyfulness of the children gives us, and that sense that we're in a relational place. We care for the children and we educate them, but they also care and love us and educate us and bring a lot of joy into our settings and into our lives. And I think that a lot of people really noticed that when larger number of kids came back after lockdown, but it's always been there. It's just that sometimes we think that sounds a bit fluffy and early years to tell other people. But I would say that we should never underestimate the importance of that human spirit and dignity and joy that we've seen in children and families throughout the period.

So I really wanted to spend time thinking about the background and the context and the past, to try and explain some of the things I think we need to be doing as we're building at the moment our future.

I think our future has first of all got to be much more integrated. So there's got to be a lot more equity across our early years system and there's got to be a lot more teamwork as children move from one sort of provision to another. We need to revisit the integrated children's centre model and think really hard about how we get health and other services to work in that integrated way with children and families. Because we've seen how, when things

get rough for children, we need lots of different people to step in and support on a temporary basis – to help the child and to help the family through.

I think we're going to need to put much more focus on children's health and emotional wellbeing in the early years. So in the corner of Newham where I work, which was worst affected out of the whole country by the pandemic in its early months, we've seen how the underlying health conditions that parents had led to very high mortality rates. But I'm afraid to say that this generation of young children in Newham is probably less healthy than their parents and more prone to respiratory illnesses because of pollution that they suffer on the streets of London. We've got to think big and ambitious about children's health and emotional wellbeing, both in early years, but also in the streets and the parks and in the communities. And children having spaces to play out and to be out and to be noticed and seen as active citizens in their communities, and not hidden away in settings and families all of the time. I think we've got to do much more to link the parents and community and think about that whole picture of children's learning and wellbeing as we forge much stronger and more open alliances across the different parts of our early years system.

And two quick final points.

One is that we haven't put enough focus on the professionalism of our workforce. And now I think we've seen the vital importance of practitioners having that well of professional discretion and judgment and thinking to draw on. Because no one told us what we were going to face, but people have coped because they have adapted quickly and they've adapted quickly because they're thinkers and because they're professionals. And we need to do a lot more to re-emphasise the professionalism of our early years workforce to give people better quality professional development opportunities, so that becomes more widespread across our sector.

And finally – I think we need to see that progressive alliance, which stands up for young children and for their health and their wellbeing, and for family life in England, because we've neglected that for far too long, and we've run our early years on a shoestring for far too long. And now I think is the time for progressive people to come together and to say 'actually this is not a marginal or a Cinderella service anymore; this is integral to family life and the functioning of our society, and it should be seen as such'. And I'm really optimistic that that is our future that we'll be able to build for ourselves.

Sharon Quamie presents

Hello. My name is Sharon and I am a class teacher in one of the nurseries for London Early Years Foundation.

I'm the room leader of the baby room and during the pandemic, while we were in lockdown, I also continued working and we were a hub nursery. So we merged with another sister nursery and continued to provide care and provision for the children of keyworkers. So I've experienced continuing to provide our childcare provision throughout lockdown and then

once we've reopened after lockdown, welcoming back all our children on the register. We've also been welcoming new children starting the nursery.

As a teacher in the classroom and working with my team of other baby room teachers, there've been some quite significant things that we've seen that are very different as a result of the crisis that we're going through – things we've found that we've had to be a lot more sensitive to. So parents are considerably more anxious. Under normal circumstances, there is a high anxiety level, you're releasing your child – you're letting your child into our care, often for the first time, and now we've got this crisis to deal with. So there's been a real need for us to be very sensitive to that and ensure that we really build trust with our families, reassure them that we're providing that high standard of care lots of provisions to ensure that this is a safe place for their children to come and be with us. So we've had to be very sensitive to that.

One of the things that we're finding is that children joining us have not gone through that social experience that we took for granted before. So children are coming to us, they're not having contact with their family members, they're not having contact with the wider community because they can't go to playgroups and things that like. The restrictions that have been imposed on us through lockdown have meant that a lot of the babies that are joining us literally have the experience of immediate mum and dad, and then it's us. And they've not had that wider experience that they would normally have had where they've had the socialisation and the social contact that comes from extended family and from the wider community. So we've found that we've had to be very sensitive to that as well.

So within our teaching practice we have a really strong pedagogy, that we so so firmly stand on. And the pedagogy just shapes our way of teaching and we lead our learning through that. And as the room leader of the baby room I then will constantly be trying to do my best to role model the philosophy behind our pedagogy. We have our pillars which are to be inspiring, to be brave, to be nurturing and these again are steadfast within what we do with the children on a day to day basis. So despite what's going on and despite the difficulties, we are really working hard to still lead the learning and provide great quality care and be caring and nurturing to the children that are coming to us.

We can't invite our parents into the building at the moment because of the pandemic. That's how much it has shaped things. Parents are literally having to hand their child over to us at the door. It's amazing the impact that that's had. Before parents could come into the building, come into the classroom – at the moment we can't do that. So we have to do more to reassure the parents that their children are getting the same high standards of quality care and learning that we provide. So that really means as teachers we have to have really good pedagogical conversations with our parents. We have to make sure that when we hand over our children, we don't just say 'oh they had a good day'. No. That really is not enough. We have to show our parents all the learning that they've done, the activities that they're involved in and how much we are doing for the child throughout the course of the day. Because of course, parents can't come in physically to the building and see what we're doing. So it really is upon us to convey that.

As we teach and as we work with the children, we ourselves as teachers, we're going through our own personal difficulties. But it's so important that when we come to work, and when we work with the children, we're excited to be here. It is important and I say to my team, we have to give that to children – they deserve that from us. I come to work and I'm still excited. I'm excited to be here and I'm excited to work with the children. I get so inspired by some of the activities that my team put together and giving the children this really wonderful quality experience despite what's going on, and then we can feedback these wonderful stories to our parents and they know that their child has had a great day with us and is learning a lot of things with us.

The pedagogy that we have here at LEYF – it has to be a live working integral part of what we do. So it's not just a document on a piece of paper. We talk about it all the time together as a team, and I also try to ensure that my team understands the impact that they're having on each child. Every time you interact – the simplest of interactions is a learning opportunity. You must understand that at the moment you are the child's community, we are the child's community because they're not able to go out and have these extensive experiences that they were previously having before Covid. So therefore we must be that and more for the children when they come.

Having the babies, the youngest group in the nursery, it's absolutely amazing to work with the babies. We don't underestimate the capabilities of the babies and what they can achieve and we really do stretch them in terms of what we expose them to. It's absolutely a joy to see the babies thrive and we know that the parents are anxious, we sometimes get some very anxious phonecalls and very anxious communication with the parents wondering what their child is doing throughout the day. And we do our best to reassure them, as much as we can, that they are having a really fulfilling and productive day with us. In terms of the teachers themselves, I try to stress to every member of staff – 'we're all leaders in the sense that we're all leading LEYF's pedagogy that LEYF has developed for us; we're all leading quality care and practice within the classroom. So don't underestimate yourself and we're all involved in that.' So therefore I try to empower every teacher in the classroom to not underestimate the impact that they have when they're having contact with the children, to you know, be creative and exciting in what we do.

I wanted to give just a quick example of how the pedagogy so influences the practice in the classroom. So one of the things that was in our pedagogy was to expose the children to a rich variety of language. So yeah, we work with the babies, but that doesn't mean to say that we limit the language that we use. How did that manifest itself in the classroom? Well, we then developed and thought about – ok, word of the week. Let's develop a word of the week. And instead of saying 'good' this week, we're going to say 'marvellous' or we're going to say 'fabulous' and it was amazing where that went. And that's what I mean in the sense that, yes we have this pedagogy which is well-developed, well-researched document, but how do we bring it to life in the classroom and that's an example of us taking that and then looking at what we can do. And now we have teachers instead of just saying 'oh that's good', 'oh that was fabulous!', 'that's fantastic!'. And in that comes the joy and the excitement because we then sound so excited that you have this baby looking at you, feeding off your energy, feeding

off that excitement. So that's an example of how even though we are going through these really difficult times and it's putting stressors on us in the classroom and as individuals, we can still do some really great work with our children. And really exciting work and give the parents that reassurance that when they hand over their child to us at the door, their child is in a safe and exciting place, and will learn a lot while they're with us.

Julie Nicholson presents

Hello everybody from sunny San Francisco. It's such an honour to be here with you and I just want to say I'm so thankful to have heard what Julian and Sharon said. I think you're going to see so many points of alignment in what I will share with you and it will connect a lot of dots.

I was asked to talk a little bit about my work on trauma responsive leadership and trauma responsive work in early education. I started this because twenty years ago, I'm a parent of three daughters, and two of them experienced early relational trauma before we adopted them. And I'd had many years of learning about early education and child development and really nothing prepared me to be the kind of responsive effective parent I needed to be. I kept trying things and it just didn't quite work and I struggled for a few years until I found out about the work of Dr Bruce Parry. And I don't know if he is someone that you've heard of. If not, I really encourage you to look him up. He has some beautiful work that talks about the importance of understanding the impact of stress and trauma on the brain for children and for adults, and how it impacts our learning, our development, our relationships and so on. And it was exactly the key that I needed to be able to unpack what I was seeing, what I was experiencing and since then I have brought it into all of my work, whether it's in policy, in teaching, in research. So I'm just going to talk through a few key ideas today, about what it means to bring a trauma-responsive lens.

So the big idea is that we understand what creates stressors, what creates the difference between a positive stressor and something becoming traumatic in our perception of it, and what are the tools that we can use to actually both prevent traumas but also interact and intervene to try to prevent short and long-term impacts.

So I want to start by going through these characteristics here [characteristics of a potential traumatic event].

1. Something that is novel, something that we don't know about – something that our brain isn't familiar with, a new teacher, a new experience, a new event, a new routine in the classroom.
2. Something that is unpredictable, so we don't know what's coming, so there's uncertainty.
3. Something where we have a perception of a lack of control in addressing and solving.

These are the things that we know from decades of research take a stressor and amplify it and make it much worse – in our bodies and in our lives. Because of these things, this gives us a window into what turns from a stressor into something that actually becomes a trauma.

The characteristics of a trauma is the feeling of fear and terror, feelings of helplessness – that we don't feel that sense of agency and control, and feelings again of hopelessness, a frozenness, that we don't have any movement forward. So that helps us understand where we need to go to actually disrupt stress from turning into trauma. And I'm going to talk a little bit about the brain, and then I'm going to talk mostly about what we can do to create – for children and for ourselves – environments and ways of working together that reduce stress, and help us build resilience. And boy did I hear Sharon and Julian talking about these things – and that's why I'm saying we're connecting the dots, so it's very exciting for me.

I don't want this to be a ten minute discussion of the brain, but I want to just talk about a few key things. So when you look at the brain here – I want to just say that every experience that we have, every interaction that we have, has to start and go through our lower brainstem. And this is the part of the brain that we share with all reptiles on the earth. So it is the least developed part of the brain. You can see these things that the brainstem controls – it's a lot of things like our breathing, our blood pressure, the things that we feel inside of our bodies. It's also what we call the smoke detector. So it is constantly something called the amygdala in the limbic system, it is constantly scanning inside our bodies and outside in the environment for danger. What do I mean scanning our bodies? I mean if we're hungry, if we're cold, if we're tired, it will scan and notice that and it activates a stress response. It senses a threat. If it scans the external environment, it's looking for those things that I just showed you – unpredictability, lack of control, danger – and it will activate. If it perceives danger inside or externally, it will activate the fight/flight/freeze response. And we're aware of that but it's your stress response system and when it's activated, it releases all of these stress chemicals. It makes things better for you to be able to protect yourself and to react really quickly to survive.

But the other thing is that when our stress response is activated, it gives us less access to other parts of our brain. And I'm just going to quickly say that our limbic part of our brain is the relational part of our brain, which is what gives us a sense of attachment, a sense of inclusion and belonging. And the forebrain, this is what we need to do to do so many things – to think rationally, to problem solve, to be able to control our behaviour and our emotions to help that self-regulation, to live our values, to sort of say 'we have a mission in this programme, we care about children and families and we want every single person to feel that we are attuning to them, to feel that we care about them'. All of this comes from our forebrain and our cortex, the empathy that we can build, our perspective taking, and so on.

Now, if the brainstem activates because it senses threat, we have less access to the limbic brain and the forebrain. It just shuts those things off, our neural access to those things to support us. It is a protective measure. But we need to know that, that we are less able to control our behaviour, less able to build empathy, less able to connect and attune if we are under more stress. So a trauma-responsive approach says how do we actually de-stress? How do we behave and work to calm our stress response?

So, I'm going to talk about some key things. Before I go to the next slide, I want to say that because of mirror neurones in our brain that we all have, stress is contagious. And this is why when you're around someone that is anxious or worried, you're going to automatically absorb

that into your body. It's not something that's under your control. It just happens and it's subconscious, and it has to do with that reptile part of the brain. So if we know that stress is contagious and Sharon was talking about a lot of anxious families coming in, you're going to be absorbing that into your body, you might feel extra tired when you go home from work because it is a lot of work to hold all that stress, first in your body, and then in all the other people that you're working with – and you're having to hold stress for staff and so on. So we need to know that it is extra work in these stressful times just to go through the day. And Dr Bruce Parry would say that we have to recognise that in these very stressful times, we are probably going to reduce our productivity levels, what we're capable of, and he'd say – just plan for success. Know that you're going to be capable on your best day of about 70% of what you could do before, and in a day that's extra stressful, probably down to 50%. So give yourself grace, give other people grace, plan for success by knowing that you're not going to be able to do as much. Also take regular regulation breaks all throughout the day.

Stress is contagious but so is calmness and this is when we can use our mirror neurones. I heard both Julian and Sharon talking about this, that when somebody is in our presence, a child or an adult who is stressed. We can follow them down, have our emotional state and mirror theirs, and follow them down into that sea of stress, or we can use – without doing anything, just by remaining calm – we can guide them back to regulation, just being in their presence.

I want to share some of these key ways that when we're thinking about trauma-responsive environments, we're talking about understanding the power of regulation. Because young children are the most susceptible to trauma and its impact, but they're also the most capable of neuroplasticity and healing the impacts. But all of us can heal from our stress and if we have these tools – these pathways to regulation, you can be healing every moment of every day and protecting yourself from the negative impact of all the stress and your stress chemicals and so on. Ok, so what are some of these things?

Everybody has been talking about relationships. It takes us one person, one human, one care provider – who loves you, who cares for you, attunes to you, makes you feel held – and we see this with you with families, with children, with staff members. Just being in the presence of somebody that cares for you – we're relational beings – it's going to calm your stress response. Us seeing each other and being in community, it calms the stress response. Just bearing witness and hearing someone's story will calm your stress response. So relational regulation is the most important thing.

But when we do that in combination with one of the next three things, this is power.

And we can do these things in small 15 second iterations, we can do them for two minutes, and we can do them for 15 minutes. It doesn't take a lot to have regulatory breaks.

Top down: This is using your cortex and having strategies, they tend to be thoughts. We might tell ourselves a mantra. You might just be in the middle of a hard interaction with a colleague, you close your eyes for a minute and you say 'I've got this' or 'you can do this' or 'this too shall pass'. We use a thought to try to regulate that alarm centre. That can be very powerful. Sometimes people talk about finding a grounder and regulating yourself with a grounder.

But if your stress response is activated and you're very de-regulated, you can't use this organ, your cortex is shut off. So those kind of verbal or word-related, thought-related strategies are not as helpful.

The next one: bottom-up. This is the quickest way to regulate yourself and this isn't just for you, but for you with an adult, a staff member, or a child, this is the fastest way to regulate. You're going right to the lower brainstem and you're doing things that can calm the stress response. So what are these? It's the combination of movement and rhythm. We call it somatosensory. Movement and rhythmic activities. So have you ever been in a meeting and you feel stressed, and you start to see somebody just rock like this, or we pick up the babies and we rock, and we rock in a rocking chair. Movement and rhythm. Systematic rhythmic activity. Walking, jumping. This is why putting on music – we now do music intervals during our trainings, every 10-15 minutes, we'll put on some rhythmic music – can just calm the stress response. Breathing – taking the deep belly breaths. This is why it's so powerful to just learn to stop and take a deep belly breath, while in the action or in a staff meeting. Meditation. All of these things that get right here to the brainstem and calm it. And like I said, it can be 15 seconds of just de-stressing in a meeting. And you're going to come back and you're going to be regulated, your cortex stays open.

The last one I want to talk about, folks talk about it as disassociative, but I want to say disengagement – I think that's a more accessible word. This is what our brains do most often. They disengage for just a moment to calm and allow you to stay regulated. So you might have disengaged just a moment listening to me and your mind wanders off and then you come back. But guided mediation, prayer, self-hypnosis, these are other forms of disengagement.

So I'm going to stop and close by saying we have to acknowledge and remember those factors that activate stress. We're going through all of those, whether it's Covid, or racial reckoning in America, we have fires everywhere, all of those factors are just sky high. So we are planning for less. We are planning in our meetings with leaders to make fewer decisions each day in each meeting. We're planning to get through. We're spending 20 minutes in an hour meeting just relationally connecting. We're saying that if we're going to make decisions, we have to break them into smaller pieces and take regulatory breaks throughout the meeting so that we can have the cortex open to support those decisions. And we're just recognising that we have to give each other grace to support one another, and ask for more help, do more things in more teams, because that's how we're going to be how we relationally regulate.

At this point in the workshop, we entered smaller breakout discussions. Participants discussed their impressions of the presentations, and each group came up with one question for the speakers.

Questions emerging from the breakout rooms

1. How do we get settings that don't have the positive approaches that we've heard about earlier to go down that path? How do we get those nurseries to begin to change their approach?
2. How can we link with parents and how we might do the work with parents that will help them to co-regulate with their children?
3. How do we highlight the voice of practitioners and in particular how do we promote the localised and historical knowledge of practitioners?
4. How can we support children's emotional wellbeing in a context where there is increasing pressure for school-readiness, which has been exacerbated by lockdown?
5. How can we persuade policy makers that it's education and care and that all of the sector needs to have a standard funding rate that is commensurate with schools so that we can ensure that we can keep hold of those professionals we have, and that we can reward them financially, and so we can provide the high level of care for children and families?
6. How can we still provide for parents that genuine warm connected relationship? How can we continue or improve that given the situation that we're in now where that's more artificial and more difficult when they can't come into the building, to create those warm and caring relationships and keep it really personal?

Mona leads a discussion around the questions

There are questions about parents and how we work with parents in this difficult times. We have questions about providers and this tension between wanting providers to come on board with what we've heard today, while at the same time recognising that what we're doing is local, historical and context-specific. We've got questions about policy-makers and how to influence policy, and we have got a really central question about children's wellbeing.

Given that we're all about children, I think it would be great if we could start with that one – and so we think about children's wellbeing in a context of school-readiness. So where we've got this discourse of school-readiness and it seems to be intensifying because of the pressures that we're under given the lockdown, how do we actually prioritise children's wellbeing within that?

Julian:

I think that school readiness is in a way one of the things I was getting at, where we're having a lot of trouble with language and confrontational and oppositional things happening because of the difficulties we're having with terminology. So UNICEF has a really good definition of school-readiness, which is that they talk about it as having three dimensions. So it is:

1. The school's readiness to support the child
2. It is the child's readiness for school
3. And it's the community's readiness to support the child as they move into school

And UNICEF would say that all of those dimensions need to be in place. It's a really useful construct and without it, we get this idea that it's a terrible thing to focus on school readiness

or it's a great thing to focus on school readiness, and this kind of pointless opposition and division. There isn't actually a contradiction between supporting children's emotional wellbeing and supporting their school readiness, especially in the UNICEF sense, because kids who haven't had the support they need for their early communication, for their early learning, to play with other children, to manage conflicts, they're not going to have a great time when they start school. Let's be really blunt about it. Older kids aren't having a great time in school if they're not getting on well, if they're not learning to read and write and do all of the learning that their friends are doing. So when we support children's wellbeing, it has to be in the context of all of their learning and development. It's not something that we can just hive off, and say we're just going to focus on emotional wellbeing and not the other parts of children's development. And the final thing I'd say is the research from the Centre for Inclusive Education at UCL is really interesting saying that one of the biggest things that we can do to support children's emotional wellbeing is focus on their communication, because children who communicate better are more able to talk about their feelings, more able to resolve conflicts, they're more able to say what they like and don't like, what they want to do and what they don't want to do. We have to remember that early years is like one of those coiled ropes – everything intertwines with everything else, and you can't in a simplistic way, hive off emotional wellbeing – and you can't in a simplistic way think that the school readiness agenda is a bad thing or a great thing – it all depends on how we think about it, and I would recommend people to use that UNICEF model to think about the three dimensions.

Sharon

I just found what Julian was saying so so relevant and interesting. I know that sometimes what happens because I work in a baby room I sometimes feel as though I get that response 'this can't be relevant to you, you work with babies' but every stage is laying a foundation and that's what I say to my team, and even for us, we're laying a foundation. When I interact with the babies, I encourage the team to be as alive with their language and to be as diverse with their language as if they were speaking to another adult, because don't underestimate how much they take on board, how much they're taking from us even though they are young babies. So, yes we have free play, but is the free play guided, is it structured? Is it supported? When you're engaging with your babies, you can give a baby choices so that you incorporate decision-making. When I'm looking at the babies and I'm having to write a report about the babies and their critical thinking, yes they do think critically, yes they do make their choices – so therefore, if I underestimated those things and didn't respect the abilities and the capabilities of the babies, I would sell them short, and I am part and parcel of that journey to school readiness, that then gets added to for toddlers and further among preschool. Within the pedagogy that we have in LEYF, it really does impress that upon us as teachers, so that I feel that I can contribute to that. I was in a parents' evening only literally a week or so ago, where I had a parent asking me when I would start teaching numbers and letters. The child's not two until next year March, but I began to unfold for mum that it's through your language and how you talk and you use a running commentary, your scaffolding of language, how you layer it, how you comment on their play and their day to day activities... I gave her a window into, no I'm not going to sit down and teach your baby numbers and letters, but we can embrace that – because she was so concerned about that already – but we can embrace that,

and I was saying to her that you can do that through the way that you dialogue with your baby and how you talk about all the things and comment on all the things that he is doing. So I see myself and us as teachers, even though we're working with babies, as being very much part of that journey, and preparing them for the learning that will come later. And I found what Julian was saying so relevant to my work, and even though some people might look at me and say 'how can it possibly be relevant if you're working with babies' but it really is.

Mona:

Julie I would love to bring you in to talk about parents – another strand of the questions was realistically, how do we work closely with parents when we're under these physical and social constraints? How can we respond to what parents need?

Julie:

Sure – I'm going to say something really quick about the previous question, and then I'll switch to that. I work with a lot of policy makers on this exact question – about play, about readiness. One of the things that we have to know, and this is the power of trauma-responsive practice, if you think back to the brain and what I said – if we focus on 'we want letters, numbers, readiness that is cognitive' – that's all the cortex stuff that requires the cortex to be open, and when we understand that children are more likely to trigger into a stress response because they have fewer coping skills and they perceive danger internally and externally quicker, and when they have the stress response, it changes the neural structure of the brain – then we know that to bring them back to regulation is the only way to teach them numbers, letters, cognitive skills, which is the narrow way – too narrow, I agree with you Julian – to define readiness. But if we have to speak that language, we have to focus on regulation and how do children regulate – through play, through attachments. So it's giving us an understanding that if children are going to be regulated, their caregivers need to be regulated because of mirror neurones, and their parents too. I'll stop there – but we can speak to that powerfully. The schools that went through hurricanes and natural disasters, we have lots of research to show that when they stopped to focus on connection and regulation with students, they caught up on the academics much faster than the schools that focused immediately on the academics, which saw children dysregulated, expelled and suspended and so on.

But the families – I just want to say that we've really struggled with parents and families and how to reach them. There's not been a quick fix or an easy formula. But knowing that the connection, the relational attunement, to help somebody feel that they are thought about – that they aren't forgotten or isolated – we've spent a lot of time on this. Some families we reach them by text, some families we reach them by a phone call and they don't necessarily pick up or call back, but they know that we're there. Some families come and pick up food each week and we can say how are you, we're thinking about you, bearing witness with them. Some families we don't know how to find them – but we know what church they go to, and we reach out to the pastor of that church to say how are they, can you tell them that we're thinking about them. But finding ways to say we're thinking about you, we care about you, and communicate safety and predictability, which means telling them what's going on in the classrooms, that it's the same, the routines that continue, that sense of reducing uncertainty,

that's really important for staff and for families and for children. Keeping things regulated, rhythmic, predictable. Parents need to know all of the things that you're doing that you've always done, the things that are continuing, that they can hold onto and grip onto. And then the final thing to say, which is true for staff and families, we want to build resilience narratives because this is a powerful predictor of healing and wellness, and that is acknowledging stressors, and giving people a chance to name their experience and to say 'this is hard' but also for them to name coping skills that they've used to get through adversity in the past, or some perceived positive experience that they're having now. Like it's hard but they're having more time with family, it's hard but I've discovered a new something. When we can put these things together, it's called a resilience narrative – it's why gratitude is so important – putting the stressor together with some perceived positive effect of what you're going through, or something you can do to cope, it helps it become not traumatic – it helps you feel a sense of positive movement. We can help do this with families and we can do this with staff. Because folks get stuck on talking about the stressors but not on how they're coping and how they've coped in the past. When we can help them brainstorm this together – you've gotten through hard things in the past – how have you done it? And they start to see they can take small actions to not feel helpless.

Maddy's closing remarks

I hope you'll all join me in offering a huge thank you to all fantastic speakers this evening. It's been fabulous to have such a range of insights from you all. And thanks to all of you as participants. You've really made this event quite exciting in joining us. We very much want this to be the start of the discussion and we want to host a series of events throughout the academic year, so please do stay in touch with us. Forthcoming events will be on the BELMAS pages, useful to those of you who are members already, but you can also follow us on twitter @ey_leadership, and you can find when the next events are happening. We're also going to make the video recording of this event available and that will be available also on the BELMAS pages and we'll let you know on twitter when they're ready. Thanks so much for coming and have a great evening – looking forward to seeing you at the next event.