London Institute of Early Years

EECERA 2026

What Made Us Think and What Will We Do Differently?

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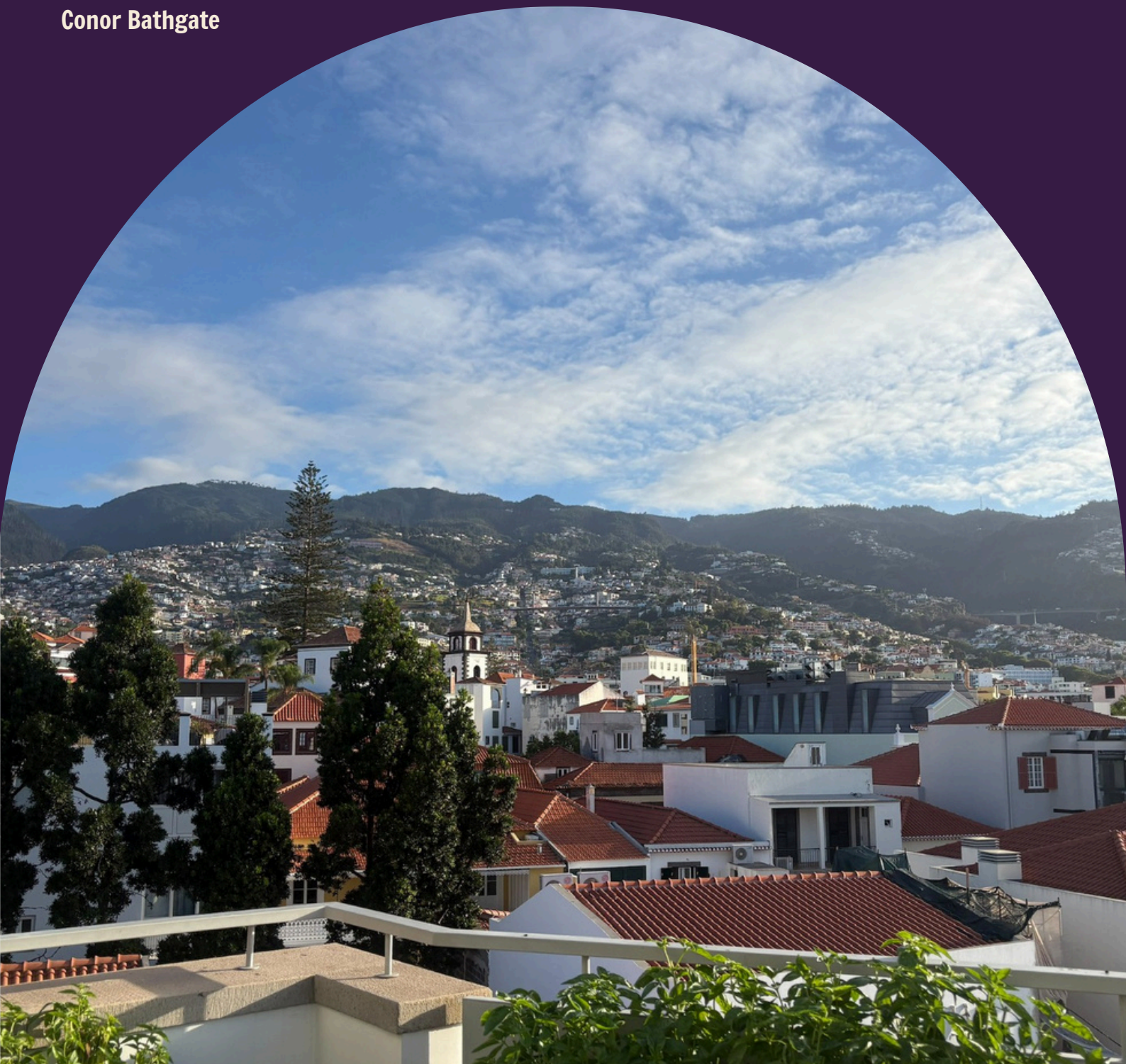

Why we go

Even in a digital age, nobody goes to a good conference without a notebook. This year, five of us from LEYF travelled to Madeira for EECERA, scribbling notes, photographing slides, presenting our own research and having the sort of conversations that often continue over coffee, dinner and long after the official programme has finished.

People sometimes look slightly glazed when you say you are going to an academic conference. I love them because a good conference makes my head hurt. It should challenge what you think you know, introduce ideas you had not considered and occasionally leave you less certain than when you arrived. That is super important!

The point of attending a conference is surely not how many sessions we sit through or how many notes we bring home. It is what we do differently because of what we learned. This report therefore isn't an account of everything that happened at EECERA 2026. It captures what caught our attention, what made us think and what we believe is worth bringing back into LEYF practice. What made us think, and what might we do differently because of it?



EECERA Conference Centre, Madeira, Portugal

The LEYF Team

This year we were there both to listen, and to contribute to the research conversation.

LEYF CEO, June O'Sullivan presented *Anchoring Change to Drive Social Justice in Early Childhood Education and Care in the UK*.

Maria Goncalves, LEYF SEND Manager and Conor Bathgate, PhD Researcher, presented *Now, Next… or Swipe? Rethinking Visual Supports in Early Years Practice*, sharing their comparative action research exploring low-tech and high-tech visual supports in London nurseries.

Sophie Pallash, LEYF Pedagogy Coach, and Dhanvanti Deshmukh, LEYF Nursery Cover Manager, joined us to observe, learn, question and network. And having Maria with us had another considerable advantage: our own Portuguese speaker! Never underestimate the pedagogical benefits of being able to order the best local food.



L-R: Dhanvanti, Sophie, June, Conor, Maria

The Conference Theme

The 2026 conference theme was *The Development of Agency, Participation and Democracy in the Digital Age.*

The Mayor of Funchal opened the conference and set an inspiring tone for the days ahead. Children, she reminded us, are capable people who can make choices, express views and contribute meaningfully to their learning. She spoke directly to the conference theme, reflecting on the role of technology in education. Technology should support human relationships rather than replace them, and the role of the teacher becomes more, not less, important as technology develops. That theme kept resurfacing throughout the conference.

- What do we really mean when we say children have a voice?
- Who gets listened to?
- Who decides?
- How much power are adults genuinely prepared to share?
- And what happens to all of this as more of children's lives become digital?

It was a fitting opening: child-centred practice, meaningful participation and the thoughtful integration of technology, all before the first keynote had even begun.

Spotlight - Maria Goncalves

SEND Manager Maria Goncalves had an extra reason to remember this year's conference. As well as attending EECERA in her home country of Portugal, Maria presented at the conference for the first time, sharing LEYF research exploring low-tech and high-tech visual supports and their impact on children's development.

What was it like attending EECERA in Madeira?

This was not my first time attending the EECERA Conference; however, it was my first time presenting at EECERA. Being in my home country and on the truly stunning island of Madeira made the experience even more special.

Attending EECERA provided a valuable opportunity to listen to, share and discuss ideas, research and evidence-based approaches with professionals from across the world. The conference encouraged critical reflection on how we can continue to support children's learning and development in an ever-changing world, while responding to new challenges and opportunities.

What was it like presenting at EECERA for the first time?

Presenting was both a professional privilege and a significant learning experience. I presented our research, 'Now, Next... or Swipe? Rethinking Visual Supports in Early Years Practice', a comparative Action Research study exploring low-tech and high-tech visual supports on children's development.

The study took place across 10 LEYF nurseries and explored how different types of visual support can impact children's communication, engagement, independence and emotional regulation. We also looked at educators' confidence and how effectively these approaches were being put into practice.

The experience reinforced for me the importance of remaining reflective, being open to new ideas and using research to continue developing inclusive and high-quality early years practice.

Spotlight - Maria Goncalves

What particularly stood out to you from this year's conference?

This year's theme was 'The Development of Agency, Participation and Democracy in a Digital Age', which prompted some really interesting conversations about how technology can be used meaningfully to enhance children's experiences.

Rather than viewing technology as a replacement for educators, the focus was on exploring how digital tools can support and strengthen our practice, enabling us to be more effective in meeting the diverse needs of children and families.

If you could bring one thing you learned at EECERA back to colleagues across LEYF, what would it be?

As educators, our challenge is not to compete with technological advances, but to understand how they can be used thoughtfully and ethically to enhance our practice, strengthen relationships, and improve outcomes for children while preserving the human connections that are at the heart of early years education.

Finally, can you tell me a little bit about your role at LEYF and your journey?

As SEND Manager at LEYF, I lead the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision across the organisation, supporting SENDCos to work with teachers, families, external professionals and Local Authorities to ensure high-quality, inclusive practice for all children.

I have been working at LEYF since November 2003, giving me almost 23 years of service. I joined LEYF, then known as Westminster Children's Society, shortly after completing my Level 3 qualification in Childcare and Education. Since then, I have worked across a number of LEYF nurseries in different roles, including nine years as a Nursery Manager, before pioneering the SEND Manager role in 2019.

Keynotes

Professor Suzy Edwards: *Advancing Children's Participation in the Digital Age*

We loved her! Professor Suzy Edwards gave the first keynote and in it she challenged some of our assumptions about technology in the Early Years. We often begin with risk: screen time, safeguarding, privacy and what children should not be doing. Of course, those things matter. But if risk becomes our only lens, do we also risk limiting children's opportunities to understand the world they are growing up in?

She also reminded us that new technology doesn't mean throwing everything we know about children's learning out of the window. Vygotsky and Piaget still matter. Children continue to learn through relationships, interaction, exploration and making meaning with other people.

What particularly fascinated us was her example of digital literacy without screens. Wooden mobile phones, pretend routers and Wi-Fi connectors can become part of children's role play. Not because three-year-olds need to configure the broadband, but because they create conversations about permission. Adults introducing the language of permission. **Did you ask permission? Can I say no? Who does that information belong to? Who decides?**

Suddenly digital literacy looks less like operating a device and much more like understanding permission, privacy, ownership, sharing, trust and choice. It made us think.

Like many Early Years educators, we have been cautious about introducing more technology when children already experience plenty of screens. Perhaps screens are the wrong starting point. Children are growing up in a digital world whether we like it or not. Our responsibility is to give them the language, confidence and agency to begin making sense of it.

Takeaway for LEYF

Start digital literacy with agency, not screens. Look for opportunities through play to explore permission, privacy, ownership, sharing, trust and choice.

Be thoughtful rather than simply fearful about technology. Our role is both to protect children and to help them become questioning and confident participants in their world.



Keynotes

Who holds the power? Reema Patel: *Nothing About Them Without Them*

The next keynote took us further into the question of children's participation in AI. Reema Patel argued that children should not simply be the subjects of decisions about technology. They should have opportunities to influence those decisions. She distinguished between AI in Education, where AI is used to support things such as planning, assessment or learning, and AI and Education, where children begin to understand what AI is, what it can and cannot do and how it may affect their lives.

The distinction matters and it made us think. Conor captured the discomfort rather well when he noted that as researchers and educators, we are often gatekeepers of knowledge and experience which means making many decisions for young children because we have a responsibility to protect them. But how often do we stop and ask whether we are also restricting their opportunities to participate? Protection and participation should not become opposites. One question to take back to the teams was when we make decisions about technology on children's behalf, how do we know when we are protecting them and when we are simply deciding for them?

Democracy begins in the nursery: Professor Júlia Formosinho: *Children and Teachers in a Joint Learning Journey for Democracy Development*

Professor Júlia Formosinho offered a hopeful reminder that democracy is not something children suddenly encounter when they become adults. They experience it pedagogically. Democracy becomes real when children have a voice, ask questions, make choices, disagree, negotiate and see that their contribution can influence what happens around them. Her references to Pestalozzi, Froebel, Dewey, Freire and Malaguzzi also brought us back to something fundamental about our profession. Pedagogy brings together theory, practice, research and ethics. It determines how children actually experience the things we say we believe. Children do not need to wait until adulthood to experience democracy.

There was another important message for us. Children's agency depends partly on teachers having agency too. Teachers need access to professional development, knowledge and opportunities to think, question and exercise professional judgement. That sits comfortably with our belief that Early Years teaching is an art, craft and science, not the delivery of a checklist.

Takeaway for LEYF

Look at the ordinary nursery day through a democratic lens. Where can children genuinely influence what happens next, and how do they know their contribution made a difference?

Spotlight - Dhanvanti Deshmukh

Nursery Cover Manager Dhanvanti Deshmukh reflects on the pride of representing LEYF on an international stage, the value of educator voice and why the conference reminded her not to underestimate the brilliant practice happening in our nurseries every day.

What was it like attending EECERA in Madeira?

It was a very emotional and proud experience for me. When I was told that Saudaa, my AOM, had suggested my name and that June also felt I would be a good candidate for this opportunity, I was absolutely over the moon. It was a wonderful feeling to represent LEYF on an international platform and learn from researchers, teachers, academics and early years professionals who are all committed to improving outcomes for young children.

I went with a very open mind, keen to learn and be inspired by new ideas. What surprised me was that during some of the symposiums, I found myself thinking, 'We're already doing this at LEYF!' It made me realise that sometimes we underestimate the power of the Action Research and reflective practice that is happening in our nurseries every day.

Was there one session or idea that particularly stayed with you?

There were several, but the one that really stayed with me was about amplifying staff voices. The presenters used something called poetic inquiry, which captures people's experiences, thoughts and feelings through poetry.

We were introduced to Haiku and used it to reflect on our own experiences. One of the prompts was simply, 'What are you proud of?' It was such a simple question, but it really made me stop and think. It highlighted how important it is to create supportive, inclusive workplaces where educators feel valued, heard and empowered to grow. I think it could inspire us to think about different ways of gathering staff feedback and reflections at LEYF, beyond traditional surveys.

Did anything you hear make you think differently about early years practice?

One presentation that really stuck with me was about maths in everyday moments, particularly during songs and group times. What made me stop and think was that it's not the song itself that teaches maths, it's what we do with it. A song like Five Speckled Frogs can become a really rich maths experience when we take the conversation further and ask questions like, 'How do you know?' or 'What do you think will happen next?' Rather than simply looking for the right answer.

Spotlight - Dhanvanti Deshmukh

I was also interested in the research around children using their fingers to represent numbers. It was a good reminder that children often make sense of maths in ways that feel natural to them, and we should value those strategies rather than rushing towards a more formal approach.

If you could bring one thing you learned at EECERA back to colleagues across LEYF, what would it be?

Agency matters. Across many of the presentations, whether the focus was on children or teachers, one message kept emerging: people thrive when they are trusted, listened to and given opportunities to influence what happens around them. Whether it was children directing their own learning, teachers developing their professional identity or other staff sharing their experiences, the common thread was participation, belonging and having a voice. For me, that feels deeply connected to LEYF's values and pedagogy.

Was there a moment that made you particularly proud to be representing LEYF?

Seeing our own colleagues and June presenting on such a significant international platform was a very proud moment. It was wonderful to see LEYF sharing our work and contributing to the wider conversation about early childhood education.

I also felt very proud talking about LEYF among so many other professionals. Some of the most meaningful learning happened through conversations between sessions and around the dinner table, where we could exchange ideas and hear different perspectives. It reinforced for me that the work we do every day really does have an impact and that we shouldn't underestimate the value of our own knowledge and practice.

Finally, what did you come away from EECERA feeling?

I came away feeling inspired, proud and even more committed to the work we do at LEYF. As someone who has been at LEYF for over four years, the experience also made me reflect on my own professional journey. LEYF has supported me to develop my professional identity in ways I never imagined. From attending conferences, participating in Nursery World events, and serving on the Nursery World Awards judging panel.

Most importantly, EECERA reminded me never to underestimate the value of our everyday practice. Our voices matter, our reflections matter and our work matters. When we share our learning and learn from others, we can improve outcomes for children and families and contribute to shaping the future of early years education.

Keynotes

Who owns my data? Professor Andrew Manches: Grasping Data

This was the final keynote and proved to be another session that shifted our thinking. A very engaging presenter he described how increasingly intelligent devices collect data from children all the time: voices, photographs, movements, locations and interactions. Yet young children have very little agency in these transactions. Adults usually consent on their behalf, and many adults don't fully understand what happens to the data either. Andrew introduced the Grasping Data project, which explores how children as young as three can begin to understand and value their personal data. He also referenced Charlie Brooker's Black Mirror episode Arkangel, in which a mother's determination to protect her daughter through technology reaches a disturbing conclusion. It raises an uncomfortable question: When does protection become surveillance? It made us think...

We often place responsibility for digital risk on technology companies and regulation. Andrew reminded us that teachers, researchers and parents have responsibilities too. Children cannot exercise agency over something they don't understand. Perhaps personal data literacy begins with very simple Early Years questions: Is that mine or yours? Did you ask? Can I say no? Who are you sharing it with?

Takeaway for LEYF

Explore how these ideas can enter play and conversation naturally. We do not need a new “data curriculum”. We need curious teachers who can help children begin asking good questions.

Spotlight - Sophie Pallash

Pedagogy Coach Sophie Pallash-Shaikh shares how the conference challenged her to think more deeply about children's agency, why giving children choices isn't always the same as giving them a voice, and how we can build on our Children as Researchers approach across LEYF.

What was it like attending EECERA in Madeira, and what were you most interested in exploring?

I was particularly interested in children's agency, participation and how the environments and experiences we create can give children more meaningful opportunities to influence their learning. A lot of the conference made me think about the difference between simply giving children choices and creating opportunities for them to genuinely shape what happens around them.

Was there one session or idea that particularly stayed with you?

One idea that really stayed with me was how we support children as researchers in their own right. This means recognising that children are not simply responding to adult-planned experiences, but are actively noticing, questioning, testing ideas and making meaning through their play, conversations and choices. Project work offers a meaningful way to develop this, because it gives children time and space to follow their own questions, revisit ideas, test theories and make connections over a sustained period. Through these opportunities, teachers can work alongside children as co-researchers, listening carefully, offering provocations and helping to make children's thinking visible and to investigate questions or interests that matter to them.

Did anything you hear make you think differently about early years practice?

The conference made me reflect more deeply on what we really mean by children's agency. We often talk about listening to children and following their interests, but genuine agency goes further than that. It means children being able to influence decisions, shape their environments and see that adults have listened and responded to what they have told us.

One example that interested me was using photography to document environments from a child's perspective. Looking at a nursery from children's eye level can reveal things adults might otherwise overlook, and giving children cameras themselves creates another way for them to show us what matters to them.

Spotlight - Sophie Pallash

How could the learning from EECERA influence the way we approach learning at LEYF?

I'd like us to strengthen our Children as Researchers approach and embed it more consistently across our nurseries. Project-based learning gives children the opportunity to pursue their own questions and interests, while teachers work alongside them as co-researchers. The important thing is that children's ideas genuinely influence where the project goes. Teachers don't need to have all the answers or be experts in a subject, just being curious, experimenting and problem-solving alongside children can be part of the learning too.

What are some practical ways teachers can give children more influence over everyday nursery life?

I would encourage colleagues to reflect on the many ways children already influence everyday nursery life, and to keep asking how we can make that influence more visible and meaningful. The key question is whether children can see that their ideas, questions and contributions are taken seriously and can shape what happens next. It doesn't always need to be something big. It could be children helping to decide where to go on a local trip, what they want to investigate, which resources they want to use through consistent children's planning meetings that dig deeper than the surface, or even how an area of the nursery develops.

Children could see and shape this when their questions are recorded and revisited, when their drawings, photographs or comments are used to plan future experiences, or when they notice that adults have changed an environment because of something they suggested. For example, if children are interested in snails, they might decide what they want to find out, help create a snail habitat, take photographs, compare where snails are found, draw what they notice and share their findings with other children. If they are exploring buildings after a local walk, they might choose which buildings to photograph, talk about what makes them different, test ideas through block play, invite families to share local knowledge, or help design changes to the construction area.

Project work can also grow from everyday moments and we should encourage finding different ways to represent children's ideas through drawing, photography, construction, storytelling or floor books. These opportunities position children as researchers because they allow them to ask questions, gather information, test possibilities, return to ideas and share what they have discovered with others. The important thing is that we listen, respond and make it visible to children that their contributions matter.

Beyond the Keynotes

One of the pleasures of EECERA is the symposia. Researchers present several related studies and then, importantly, people argue, question, compare and continue the conversation afterwards. We couldn't attend everything. We chose sessions connected to areas where LEYF is already thinking, researching or developing practice. Here are the things that stayed with us.

Joy, drawing and professional love

One group of papers explored arts-based practice, mark-making and professional love. The research on drawing was particularly interesting because the important finding wasn't necessarily what children drew. It was what happened around the drawing: conversations, shared stories, ambitious language and interactions between children and adults.

Another study explored reciprocal dance with children experiencing family complexity. The five-week intervention improved confidence, social connection and wellbeing, but perhaps most importantly, the practice continued after the research ended. That matters to us. A good intervention should not vanish when the researcher packs away the clipboard.

Takeaway for LEYF

Look again at mark-making and arts provision. Are we valuing the conversations, relationships and thinking around children's creative work as much as the finished product?



Beyond the Keynotes

A child who said hello to a tree

The Outdoor Play and Learning SIG included studies from Norway, China and Finland. One tiny story stayed with us: a child named a particular tree and greeted it each time they returned to the forest. There is something rather lovely in that. It says a great deal about children's relationship with place.

However, all three studies were rural. That immediately made us think about London. Children do not need a forest on the doorstep to develop relationships with place. They have streets, parks, markets, buildings, buses, canals, allotments, trees pushing determinedly through pavements and communities full of stories. Another study examined children's right to the city and how increasing housing pressure has reduced the outdoor space available to young children. It made us think about how we ensure that our urban environment is not the poor relation of nature, especially a city as green as London. We need to make our places a co-educator.

Takeaway for LEYF

We will strengthen our Urban Approach to Outdoor Learning and Nature. Use local walks and children's research to help children investigate, question and influence the places where they live.



Beyond the Keynotes

What does the nursery look like from three feet high?

Research into visual environments asked children to photograph their nursery from their own perspective. The findings were fascinating. Children showed a preference for real-life objects rather than resources deliberately manufactured for educational use. Other presentations explored light, photography, drama, loose parts and larger open-ended materials. Again, the message wasn't “buy more resources”. It was almost the opposite. Create environments that invite children to wonder, manipulate, investigate and contribute.

Takeaway for LEYF

Try looking at your nursery through the child's eyes. What do children notice, choose, ignore or change? Use photographs, conversations and Children's Research to find out rather than assuming we already know.

“Technology is not the question. Pedagogy is.”

This was one of those conference lines worth writing down. Research into participation reminded us that children communicate in many ways. Listening therefore cannot mean simply asking a question and waiting for a verbal answer. Children communicate through movement, gesture, play, expression, drawing, behaviour and sometimes by walking away. Participation also isn't simply giving children a menu of adult-selected choices. Real agency means having some influence over what happens next.

Takeaway for LEYF

Become better at multimodal listening. Notice what children communicate beyond words and ask whether our environments are designed for children or increasingly with them.

Beyond the Keynotes

Who gets our attention?

The TACOS research stopped us in our tracks. Researchers used observation, video and eye-tracking to explore how teachers' language and attention affect children's participation. Children with weaker language or lower levels of engagement received less eye contact and fewer open-ended questions. During planned activities, adults were more consciously attentive to vulnerable children. But in spontaneous parts of the day, confident communicators tended to attract more adult engagement. That is an equity issue. It made us think...

We talk a great deal about giving every child a voice. But what if the children who find communication hardest are also receiving fewer of the subtle invitations that encourage them to communicate? A look. A pause. A question. Waiting for an answer. Tiny interactions can carry enormous pedagogical weight.

Takeaway for LEYF

Notice who gets your gaze and your questions, particularly during the messy, unplanned parts of the day. Equity is built in those moments too.

When children are investigating something, ask yourself: Am I extending their enquiry or have I accidentally taken it over?

Time to think is not a luxury

Another study examined a Froebelian community of practice. The most interesting finding wasn't a particular training technique. It was time. Protected time for teachers to think, talk, question and solve problems together appeared to be a major catalyst for change. This resonated strongly with us. We spend considerable effort thinking about what professional development teachers need. Perhaps we also need to keep asking whether we give them enough space to digest it.

Takeaway for LEYF

Treat reflective time and engage in and nurture Communities of Practice as part of improving pedagogy, not as something we do when everything else is finished.

Beyond the Keynotes

Inclusion happens in the small transitions too

Several studies explored children's transitions. One distinction was particularly useful: vertical transitions, such as moving from nursery to school, and horizontal transitions, the many small movements children make during an ordinary day. We devote considerable attention to school readiness, but what about the experience of leaving nursery? Children may be leaving friends, teachers, familiar rooms and routines that have been a major part of their lives.

And what about the dozen smaller transitions every day: stopping play, going outside, coming to lunch, moving rooms or getting ready to go home? For children with SEND in particular, these apparently small moments can tell us a great deal about how inclusive our practice really is.

Takeaway for LEYF

Pay attention to endings as well as beginnings and look at everyday transitions through the eyes of children who may experience them differently.

Children's rights: from principle to practice

Sophie and Conor attended the inaugural Children's Rights SIG. The discussion exposed considerable variation in how children's rights and the UNCRC are understood and implemented in research. This is particularly relevant to our growing research activity through the London Institute of Early Years.

Consent with a three-year-old cannot simply be a form signed by an adult. We need to continue developing our understanding of relational and dynamic assent, recognising that children's willingness to participate can change during the research itself. Sustainability must make sense locally.

What we will do: Stay involved with the Children's Rights SIG and continue strengthening our rights-based approach to research with young children.

The Sustainability SIG also generated an important reminder. Education for sustainable development can easily become a standard package of instructions. But sustainability looks different according to place, community, resources and people's lived experiences. That reinforces what we are already learning at LEYF.

A sustainability-informed teacher doesn't simply follow a green checklist. They understand their context, ask questions, make connections and have the confidence to act. The same principle applies to digital literacy.

Five Things We Will Do Differently

We came home with pages of notes and plenty of possible actions. These are the five we want to hold onto:

1. Strengthen children's agency. Use children's planning meetings, Children as Researchers and project work to give children greater influence, and make sure we close the loop so they can see what happened because they spoke.

2. Explore digital literacy through play. Begin with permission, privacy, ownership, sharing, trust and choice rather than screens or another bolt-on curriculum.

3. Look harder at equity in adult attention. Notice who receives our gaze, questions, conversations and time, particularly during spontaneous parts of the nursery day.

4. Use London as a learning environment. Strengthen our Urban Approach to Outdoor Learning and Nature and children's role as researchers and environmental stewards of their communities.

5. Protect space for teachers to think. Use the 4 Cs; Credible Cognition, Compassionate Conversations, Compassionate Coaching and Communities of Practice to anchor new knowledge into thoughtful action.

Conclusion

So, was it worth going? Absolutely! Not because we returned with a folder full of presentations or a new list of things everybody ought to do. We came home with better questions. Some research confirmed things we already believed. Some gave us practical ideas. Some left us unconvinced. And some, perhaps most usefully, made us reconsider assumptions we had arrived with.

That is the value of bringing teachers and educators into research spaces. We should not simply receive knowledge created elsewhere. We should question it, test it against practice, contribute our own research and decide what is useful for the children and communities we serve. Technology will change. AI will change. Research will change. But our task as teachers remains profoundly human: to notice, listen, question, interpret and respond. And ultimately, the test of any conference is probably much simpler than the programme makes it appear: What will I do differently now?

