



EVALUATION OF THE LEAP (LITTLE EXPLORERS AND PARENTS & FAMILIES) PILOT PROJECT



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Final evaluation report

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Summary

Background

Movement- and arts-based approaches provide important opportunities for physical, cognitive and social development in children. Northern Ballet has delivered early years (EY) projects to introduce young children to dance since 2010 and adapted these for remote delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic. This provided the inspiration for the LEAP (Little Explorers And Parents & families) project, which aims to offer an accessible way for pre-school children from disadvantaged areas to engage in movement, music, storytelling, and multisensory experiences. The LEAP project has been piloted in five EY settings across northern England and an evaluation was conducted to gather insights from key people to inform its scalability and transferability.

Methods

Feedback was gathered from at least one EY practitioner from each of the five settings (n=8 staff members in total), using either remote interviews or written responses. Observations and discussions also took place with children from three of the settings (n= 20 children in total), while a fourth setting shared photos taken during the LEAP activities. Despite sending reminders and providing various options for taking part, it proved difficult to engage parents/carers in the evaluation. Two parents took part in WhatsApp interviews but had limited knowledge of the project. Data were analysed using a framework based on the evaluation questions.

Key findings

The evaluation findings demonstrate that the LEAP project was successfully implemented in each of the five pilot sites and that positive impacts were reported by those involved. Practitioners gained skills, knowledge and confidence in using creative, movement-based approaches that could be used in their everyday practice. Children enjoyed the varied activities and experienced benefits in terms of enhanced school readiness. There was evidence that the LEAP project contributed to meeting each of the early learning goals within the Department for Education's Early Years Foundation Stage Framework, suggesting potential longer-term impacts in terms of supporting children to achieve better educational outcomes.

Feedback received via one EY practitioner indicated that some parents/carers had attempted to take part in the take-home activities but experienced barriers that included lack of space at home and having English as a second language. Lack of space was also identified as a challenge for nurseries, along with limited capacity to deliver the activities during periods of staff absence. Enablers included the child-led approach, use of resources that could be accessed easily, and small group sessions that allowed children to explore the activities fully. On the whole, the LEAP project was viewed positively, as highlighted by the quotes below.

I really enjoyed it. I think it did bring on my confidence. [...] It's given me quite a few good ideas to take back to the setting. (EY practitioner 1)

"The children thrived and learned a lot. [...] [They] gained confidence and developed lots of new language."
(EY practitioner 6)

Discussion and recommendations

This evaluation indicates that the LEAP project could be scaled up and implemented in other settings across the UK. There are likely to be particular benefits for children living in socioeconomically deprived areas, who have a higher risk of not being school ready than those in less deprived areas. However, challenges may be encountered in attempting to engage low-income families. Future delivery should build on what worked well about the pilot project and target settings where the LEAP approach offers something new. The benefits experienced by children and practitioners should be highlighted in promoting the project. Future research should recognise the specific challenges associated with conducting research in EY settings, involve accessible recruitment methods and materials, and adopt flexible approaches to gather feedback from children.

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Introduction

Background to the LEAP project

Northern Ballet is a ballet company based in Leeds, northern England. Established in 1969 as the Northern Dance Theatre, the company is renowned for its innovative and diverse repertoire that blends classical ballet with modern dance styles and dramatic storytelling. One of the key features of the company is their commitment to community engagement and education. They run various outreach programmes, workshops and classes aimed at making ballet accessible to a broader audience, including initiatives for schools and programmes designed specifically for children and young people. Since 2010, Northern Ballet has delivered early years (EY) projects in children's centres and nurseries across Leeds and Bradford. Led by a community dance artist, these projects introduce young children (aged 2-5 years) to dance using sensory resources and storytelling based on popular children's books. They also encourage EY practitioners to develop the confidence and skills to deliver movement activities themselves.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Northern Ballet created a remote project for EY practitioners to use independently; this was the inspiration for the LEAP (Little Explorers And Parents & families) project. The aim was to offer an accessible way for pre-school children from disadvantaged areas of northern England to engage in movement, music, storytelling, and multisensory experiences. A scheme of work was developed to be delivered weekly, or over a week, with five sessions, each lasting around one hour. The learning sheets and full resource package were inspired by the popular story *There is a Tribe of Kids* by Lane Smith. EY practitioners took part in a two-hour remote training session delivered by a community dance artist to equip them with the skills and confidence to deliver the LEAP activities. They were also given practical advice on the timing of sessions and equipment needed, as well as being encouraged to think about how they would document the project. The resource package provided a framework to follow to engage the children, with flexibility to enable a child-led approach to learning and accommodate those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This allowed the children to explore and discover different ways of moving.

The LEAP project was deemed hugely valuable by the six centres involved during the pandemic and Northern Ballet therefore wanted to develop this idea to reach more EY settings across the UK. They also sought to develop the focus around wellbeing and to explore how opportunities for family engagement are perceived, which was not part of the initial remote project. This approach has been piloted with five EY settings across the North East and North Cumbria who have not accessed Northern Ballet's work before. An open advert was issued inviting settings to apply to be part of the LEAP pilot. Of the 14 applications received, five were selected based on factors including SEND levels, geographical spread, and being located in areas of high socioeconomic deprivation (based on the index of multiple deprivation, IMD). The five nurseries are not named in this report to maintain the anonymity of the staff, families and children involved.

Research context

It has long been known that children possess an innate desire to move and that movement in childhood is important for a child's physical and cognitive development (Tredgett, 2015; Swift, 2017). Movement in children specifically develops gross motor and fine motor skills, improving range of motion, coordination, strength and endurance (Faber, 2017). Research conducted in North East England noted a strong association between physical activity, motor skills and the likelihood of achieving school readiness in 4 and 5 year olds

(Jones *et al*, 2021). Movement also provides an opportunity for cognitive development by contributing to neurological organization in the brain and complex thought process growth, as well as intertwined communitive, emotional and social development. Bodily movement becomes a powerful tool for young children when learning to express themselves (Faber, 2017). Creating opportunities for children to move encourages bodily awareness and a consciously expressive and communicative child through intentional movements and gestures. Research conducted in school settings in the US found that movement in the classroom built confidence and social skills (Gehris *et al*, 2014). Relationships between educators and students were also strengthened as movement promoted emotional connections and trust.

Arts-based approaches are similarly well evidenced, although there remains a lack of clarity on how these should be implemented into formal education and what role the teacher plays in this method of learning (Twigg & Garvis, 2010; Samuelsson *et al*, 2009; Nutbrown, 2013). These approaches are based on the theory that humans need the arts to develop a holistic understanding of the world and the society that they live in. Children are no exception to this. An Australian study highlighted that art is perceived as an ideal mode of education and learning for the young brain, given children's unique sensory and aesthetic interpretation and response to their surroundings (Twigg & Garvis, 2010). However, it also found a lack of qualifications and inadequate guidance resulted in many teachers not being confident enough to conduct sessions involving the arts. Similar findings were identified in the aforementioned study by Gheris *et al* (2014), where participants highlighted a lack of training for teachers on movement-based activities. This suggests a need both for interventions to improve skills and confidence amongst educators in delivering these activities, and for research to build the evidence base in relation to the use of creative approaches in EY settings.

Evaluation aims and questions

Northern Ballet – in conjunction with the North East and North Cumbria Child Health and Wellbeing Network – sought to commission an independent evaluation of the LEAP pilot project. The aim was to gather insights on the project structure so that it can be scaled up to be accessible to any EY setting within the UK. Questions to be answered through the evaluation were as follows:

1. How has the LEAP pilot project been implemented, in terms of learning from any challenges and highlights identified by the EY settings?
2. What are the barriers and enablers to being part of the project, as an individual or setting?
3. What are the views and experiences of key people involved, namely:
 - a. The EY practitioners
 - b. The children
 - c. Their parents/carers and families?
4. What impact has the LEAP project had on EY practitioners, children and families, in terms of confidence, relationships, wellbeing and educational outcomes?
5. Which elements of the LEAP project are scalable and transferrable to other settings?

Methods

Data collection

The evaluation utilised the following qualitative methods and key informant samples to provide in-depth insights into the implementation and reported impact of the LEAP pilot project:

i) Interviews with EY practitioners

Representatives of the five EY settings involved in piloting the LEAP project were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview to explore their experiences of: joining the pilot, accessing and using the training materials, working with Northern Ballet, and delivering the activities. We were particularly interested in learning from what had worked well and where challenges had occurred, as well as any observed benefits from these activities. See the interview and focus group topic guides at Appendix A for further details. Participants were offered the option of an in-person or remote interview at a mutually convenient time and venue (preferably their place of work). We also offered the option for EY practitioners to be interviewed in pairs or small groups if more than one person had been involved in the project. Remote interviews took place (via Teams) with staff members from four of the five settings. In the fifth setting, staff illness meant that the interview had to be cancelled twice and the nursery manager asked if the staff members could instead provide a written response. The interview questions were converted into a Microsoft Word template, which was sent out and returned as an email attachment. Table 1 below summarises the different approaches used.

Table 1: Data sources used in the LEAP evaluation

EY setting	EY practitioners	Children	Parents/carers
Nursery 1	Remote interview with 2 staff members (participant IDs 1 & 2)	Group discussion with 6 children (4 boys, 2 girls); observation of full LEAP session	1 reply slip received; no reply to follow-up emails
Nursery 2	Remote interview with 1 staff member (ID 3)	Group discussion with 7 children (5 boys, 2 girls); observation of partial LEAP session; use of floor book to generate discussion	No replies received
Nursery 3	Remote interview with 2 staff members (IDs 4 & 5)	Group discussion with 7 children (5 boys, 2 girls); use of photo collage to generate discussion	7 reply slips received; only 2 parents responded to questions via WhatsApp
Nursery 4	Written response from 2 staff members (IDs 6 & 7)	Scanned copy of floor book provided with photos and notes taken during LEAP sessions	No replies received
Nursery 5	Remote interview with 1 staff member (ID 8)	No involvement	No replies received but feedback was gathered by the EY practitioner

ii) Group discussions and observations with children

Our intention was to undertake informal group discussions and observations with children involved in the LEAP pilot project in each EY setting. These activities would allow us to generate insights into children's views and

experiences of taking part in the activities and identify any benefits they felt they had experienced. To do this, we explored the use of creative methods which promote the agency of children from the target age group (Sun et al, 2023). For example, the use of hand puppets to encourage discussion, combined with a draw-and-tell approach, has proven to be successful in previous research with young children (Coyne et al, 2021). We decided to use a similar approach in this evaluation, taking a hand puppet and drawing materials (felt tip pens and paper tablecloths) along to each focus group. See photo 1. However, the drawing materials were not used as they were not felt to be needed in order to generate discussion. Furthermore, we realised after the first focus group that the hand puppet seemed to be more of a distraction than an aid. In the second and third focus groups, Kermit stayed in the researcher's bag for most of the discussion and was only brought out at the end to greet the children, who were all keen to give him a high five or a hug.



Photo 1: Kermit on his way to co-facilitate a focus group

We relied on staff within the EY settings to help in identifying and approaching children as potential participants and sending information about the evaluation to their parents/carers. There were delays in organising the focus groups due to the time taken to receive University ethical approval for the evaluation, which led to a delay in sending out this information. Further delays arose due to the lack of response from all but one of the parents/carers. We requested an ethics amendment (described below) to conduct the discussions without these responses, but by this point significant time had passed since delivery of the LEAP project. The evaluation plan had also included an option to observe some of the sessions, to better understand how the project was being implemented. Staff from nurseries 1 and 2 kindly agreed to re-create a full or partial session as part of the focus group, which was very useful both in demonstrating how the project was delivered and in prompting recall amongst the children. The discussions with children from nurseries 2 and 3 also involved use of photos taken by staff during the LEAP sessions, which was helpful in prompting further discussion. This type of photo elicitation method has proven to be useful in previous research with children, as a way to make research fun (Epstein et al, 2006; Whiting, 2015). The discussions and observations took place within the EY settings, in the rooms where the children had taken part in the LEAP activities.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to speak to the children from nurseries 4 and 5. Due to limited staff capacity, they were not able to re-create a LEAP session for us and did not feel the children would be able to recall taking part in the project. The manager from nursery 4 provided a scanned copy of their floor book, which included collages made up of pictures and notes taken by staff during the sessions. This was helpful in demonstrating how the sessions had been delivered and also showed children enjoying the activities. There was no form of involvement from the children in nursery 5.

iii) Parent/carers interviews

Parents/carers of the children who had taken part in the LEAP project were invited to take part in the evaluation using a combination of interview-based methods. The interview topic guide (Appendix A) covered the following topics: their views on the project and take-home activities; whether their children had talked about (or demonstrated) the activities at home; what impact they thought it had on their confidence, wellbeing or other outcomes; and any suggested areas for improvement. We provided a range of options in an effort to maximise involvement, including in-person and remote interviews, email interviews, and providing responses

via WhatsApp or another messaging service. Benefits of the relatively new method of email interviews include lower costs, efficiency, anonymity, and comparable data quality to face-to-face interviews (Ratislavová & Ratislav, 2014). We assumed the same would also be true of interviews conducted by WhatsApp, which provided the further advantage of being able to probe the participants' responses in 'real time'.

Unfortunately, the response from parents/carers was very low, as shown in table 1. Initially, only one reply slip was received and this person did not respond to subsequent emails to arrange a time for interview. Reminders were sent by the nurseries and eventually one setting managed to get all of the parents to respond by asking them to complete the reply slips in person. We contacted these parents and two responded to questions asked via WhatsApp, but demonstrated very limited knowledge of the LEAP project. Four others either asked for the questions to be sent via email or expressed an interest in a remote interview, but did not respond to follow-up emails. One responded to say they were too busy to take part in the evaluation at the present time. No replies were received from nursery 5, but the EY practitioner reported having spoken to each of the parents/carers and shared their views during her interview. While it was useful to gather this feedback, receiving it second-hand meant we were not able to probe the responses to gain further insights.

Data analysis

Qualitative data generated through this evaluation were analysed using the framework method, which is a systematic approach to data analysis that can be particularly useful where multiple researchers are working on a project (Gale et al, 2013). The EY practitioner interviews were audio-recorded (with participants' informed consent) and transcribed, before being considered alongside fieldnotes taken during the observations and discussions with children and the downloaded WhatsApp conversations with parents. A coding framework was then used to analyse the notes and transcripts. This framework was derived from the evaluation aim and questions, in terms of the need to identify successes and setbacks in relation to how the LEAP project has been implemented. It also enabled us to capture evidence demonstrating whether and how the project is helping children to meet early learning goals, for example, in terms of: communication and language; personal, social and emotional development; physical development; literacy; expressive arts and design; and understanding the world (Department for Education, 2023).

Ethical considerations

Two separate applications for ethical approval from Newcastle University were submitted. The first concerned the EY practitioner interviews, which were deemed low risk and therefore approval was granted without further review (ref. no. 41026/2023). The second concerned the focus groups with children and interviews with parents/carers. Given that this sample involved young children and adults recruited via gatekeepers (the EY settings), it was deemed potentially high risk and the study documentation needed to undergo full peer review. Delays arose from the application being submitted during the University Christmas break. Amendments were requested and final approval was not received until mid-February (ref. no. 2679/40119), which delayed the data collection as described previously. An amendment was submitted and approved in April, to extend the evaluation end date and move from an active to a passive consent process with parents/carers. This was deemed acceptable given that the evaluation was low risk, involving qualitative methods only, and we were not expecting to uncover any sensitive issues. Furthermore, the nursery managers acted as the responsible adult tasked with protecting the children in their care and had already given their consent for us to reach out to children for the purpose of taking part in the evaluation.

The evaluation conformed to the highest ethical standards in health and social research and complied fully with GDPR regulations. It was also informed by good practice guidelines for research with children and young people (Shaw et al, 2011). All data has been treated as confidential and stored securely in a Newcastle University network folder to which only research team members have access. Personal data was destroyed at the end of the project, while research data will be stored securely for 10 years in line with Newcastle University data management guidelines. Tailored information sheets and consent forms were used to obtain informed consent from the adult participants, who were assured that they could exit the evaluation at any time and without giving a reason. For children, the consent process was explained verbally and visually using appropriate techniques and they were asked to verbally assent to taking part in the evaluation. The children received age-appropriate rewards (goody bags containing stickers, bubbles, Play Doh and a Mr Men book) to thank them for their participation in the group discussions, while parents/carers received a £20 shopping voucher for taking part in the WhatsApp interviews. Individual participants and settings are referred to using ID numbers throughout this report to preserve their anonymity.

Findings I: Implementation of the LEAP pilot project

The evaluation findings are organised into two chapters, which describe: 1) how the LEAP pilot project was implemented in EY settings; and the 2) the reported benefits of taking part for practitioners, children and families. The findings are illustrated with the use of anonymised quotations from the participants and photographs taken by either nursery staff or a professional photographer (Ian Paine) during the sessions. The present chapter focuses on the views and experiences of EY practitioners involved in delivering the project.

Motivation for joining the pilot

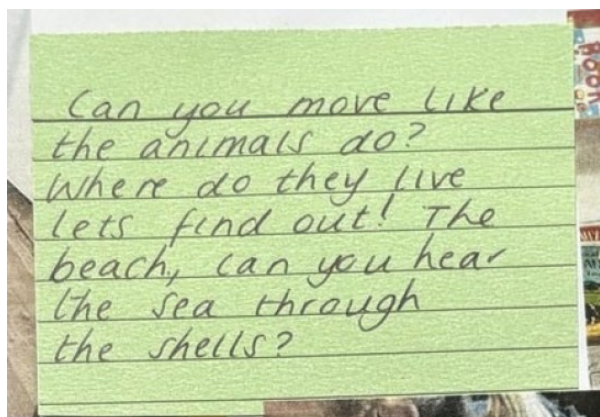
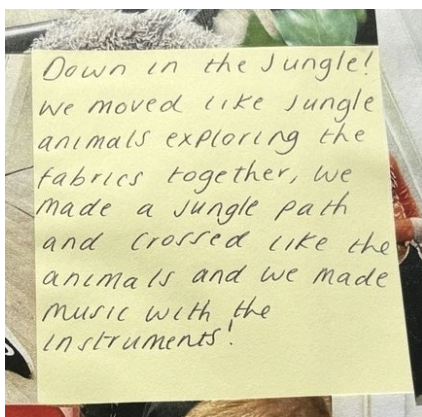
EY practitioners reported being keen to take part in the pilot to gain new skills and knowledge, develop their confidence and try something different that might be of benefit to the children they work with.

I quite liked the idea of the storytelling, the music, the movement. I do like that sort of thing myself and that, I think, it was just something to support my knowledge and understanding. (EY practitioner 3)

While the practitioners each had experience of delivering the individual elements within their EY settings, the LEAP project offered a creative approach that involved linking these elements together in a new way. This is illustrated by the following quote and photos 2 and 3 below.

It's something that interests me definitely. Kinda just get into your like small group of children out there and develop and make them come out of their comfort zone. Especially when it's around storytelling, just getting a bit more creative as well with it, trying something new. Yeah. Because I feel like with storytelling as well, sometimes it can be the same old. You sit the children down. It's quite basic. We'll flip through the pages. We'll read the story. You don't actually get into the process of it. You just kind of read the words, and once you get to the end, that's the end. But this [the LEAP project] is kind of like, each page has a different creative background to it. (EY practitioner 1)

Photos 2 and 3 (from a collage produced by staff in nursery 4)



For some EY settings, the project provided the opportunity to offer something different to children with additional needs or who came from more disadvantaged backgrounds. There was variation in whether staff selected children from these groups to ‘test’ the project or whether they targeted the pilot at “children that would get the best out of it the first time” (EY practitioner 4), i.e. avoiding those with SEND.

The head teacher wanted it to be children who access pupil premium, so that was something else that would support those as well, those children as well. And within that pupil premium group there was a child with additional needs. So we had a very mixed group. Yeah, I think that it worked okay. Like I said, it did, that child that had the additional needs kinda dipped in and out, as it were. It was appropriate for him. But some of the activities he was really engaged in, some of them not so much. I suppose that was, you know, for the majority of children they all managed to get something out of it. (EY practitioner 3)

Views on the training

Most of the feedback received on the training provided by Northern Ballet was very positive. EY practitioners had no issues with the online mode of delivery, which was felt to have worked well with small groups.

It was really good to be fair. It was quite interactive as well. And I liked that part about it, how we were demonstrated and shown the types of actions and the types of things that you do with the storytelling. And then just giving us some ideas how we can then forward that onto the children. [...] I do think we got the benefits from that [doing it online] because we were such a small group. We weren't kind of pushed to the side. (EY practitioner 1)

They particularly liked the fact that the training was interactive and gave them an opportunity to try the activities, which helped to build their confidence in subsequently delivering these to the children.

[The training] was really useful. Especially as it was based on that first session. So you can sort of see how it was supposed to run, and you got the feel and an idea as to what was supposed to be. And I think that's what gave me a bit of confidence to think, actually, yes, I can do that. And the first session was really successful. (EY practitioner 3)

Practitioners in one setting had not been aware that the training would take place online, but were happy with what they received. They also liked being given the chance to take part in the activities.

We weren't sure if someone was coming out. We didn't actually know. We thought someone was going to come out and show us, like, initially the first kind of session and then we follow it. But I think it was quite good as well that we actually had to take part in this little parents room and we had to do all the movements and things that she was doing. (EY practitioner 4)

One practitioner felt that the LEAP project offered little above what they already deliver within their EY setting (nursery 5), in terms of creative storytelling and movement-based activities. However, they did acknowledge that the training delivered by the community dance artist from Northern Ballet was interesting and helped to reinforce their existing approach.

The training, it was OK. A lot of it we do within the setting anyway. We're very active for the children, with the group of children we have had for the last couple of years. We need to be physically active with them. So we'll read a book and we'll act it out anyway. So the training was interesting, but for myself and

my colleagues, it was kind of what we do anyway. [...] it was kind of just expanding on things we would do anyway. (EY practitioner 8)

Experiences of delivering the sessions

On the whole, practitioners reported positive experiences of delivering the LEAP sessions and described the activities as fun for both the adults and children involved. The project incorporated a child-led approach, which meant that children's needs and preferences were prioritised during the sessions. This is illustrated by the quote below and was also observed during the evaluation visits, where children were encouraged to suggest activities (e.g. "What animal should we be from the story?") but were not pressured to take part if they did not want to (e.g. one child chose not to touch the jelly during a messy play activity).

We were given some ideas of what to do, and it was: "how we move our body from our toes to the top of our head". Basically, full body movement of warming up. And she [the Northern Ballet practitioner] says, "So, here's some ideas, but also get your children involved and see what they can come up with." So, we were kind of asking the children, "Right, how can we warm our fingers up today?". So, sometimes we would have piano fingers or sometimes we would shake our fingers. And it was just things like that. Same as like, "How are we going to stretch our legs today?" "How are we going to move our arms?" and then, "How are we going to move our full body?". Sometimes we'll run around the room. Other times they would do some jellyfish dances. We got all kinds. (EY practitioner 1)

Practitioners felt they were either provided with or could easily obtain everything they needed to deliver the LEAP sessions, combined with being given autonomy to tailor the activities to the children within their specific setting. There were positive comments on the resources received from Northern Ballet, which practitioners were able to keep and use again with different groups of children.

I felt that the sessions ran really well. You know, everything was either provided with the resources or we had, you know, the list of things that, you know, you might want to supplement it with. And so I know... and I think everything was sort of really well documented and resourced. And the things that we needed, we were able to get quite easily. (EY practitioner 3)

In terms of the story used in the LEAP pilot, most EY practitioners felt it was a good choice that helped to encourage the children to use their imaginations, as illustrated by the quote below. This view was reinforced by the observations, where children demonstrated excellent recall of the different animals in the book and enjoyed pretending to be those animals. In each of the discussions children showed concern and empathy for the main character in the book ("The boy was sad; he bumped his head and cried" (Child at nursery 3)). See photos 4 and 5 on the following page for an illustration of how the book was used within the LEAP sessions.

There wasn't that many words in the story so it did use a lot of their thinking and imagination, wasn't it? And then their recall, like, they were, you know, "what animals were we saying last week?", we would always do that. And yeah, we recap it at the beginning. So yeah, I think that that's really good. (EY practitioner 5)

Only one EY practitioner disagreed and felt that the story did not hold the interest of the children they work with, as shown in the quote below. This may have been linked to the usual approach within their setting (nursery 5), where they reportedly use lots of movement and creative activities alongside storytelling as

standard. However, the practitioner did acknowledge that their own lack of enthusiasm may have influenced the children's enjoyment of the book.

It may be possibly just the way we deliver books. And I don't know if myself and [name of colleague], who delivered the project – [name] has left now – there's nothing in it we found to get us motivated about. It was just like, "There was a herd of this, there was this, and there was that". It just, there was nothing to like, like A Bear Hunt, that's going on an adventure. They're doing this, that there were just... I just found it was just there wasn't much to hold their interest. (EY practitioner 8)

Photo 4 (taken by Ian Paine) and photo 5 (nursery 3)



As part of the evaluation, EY practitioners either demonstrated all or part of a LEAP session or provided photos showing the children taking part in the activities. The discussions with children also took place in the rooms used for the LEAP sessions, which helped to demonstrate that having sufficient space within the EY setting was an important factor in delivering the project. Photos 6 and 7, along with the quote below, illustrate how space was used within the sessions for different creative activities.

Photo 6 (nursery 4) and photo 7 (nursery 3)



We've got this big room that we're in now, it's got a big open space hall, and so we'll bring the children in, and we had eight of them. As they would walk in, the CD was already playing for them and it was warm-up time. So we went through the warm-up, and then we got into the routine of you'd sit down in a comfy area and we'd have the story. [...] And then, obviously, after that, it was more of the physical activities. And then there was always a sensory activity, too. And then we would usually jump back to another physical activity. But through all that as well, we were talking about the story and how it all links in together. Some of them now still talk to me about, "Can we be a turtle in the jungle?" It's what I keep hearing. So they do love it. And then, after we've done all those activities, it was time for a little cool-down, which was usually just kind of a chill out where you get the pens, the paint and just things like the chalk. (EY practitioner 1)

Staff from nursery 3 delivered some of the LEAP activities outdoors for health and safety reasons, but this was not always possible due to bad weather. Not all nurseries have access to outdoor areas or appropriate indoor spaces, and this was felt to be a potential barrier to delivering the project.

It just depends on what area, what space you've got, because obviously we found sometimes when it was wet outside, you are quite restricted to maybe if you want to do things on a bigger scale. Because obviously when you like, you've got the water and you've got everything else, it's just a safety thing. So obviously we've got like the laminate floor and so it can be slippery. So most of the times we've gone outside. But I think the only thing that if we weren't so lucky to have the space that we've got, some centres may find it difficult if you've got the challenge of the weather and things. (EY practitioner 4)

A key challenge experienced during the pilot project was staff and child absences, generally due to illness. LEAP sessions could not be delivered when the nurseries were under-staffed; this resulted in there being a longer gap between some sessions and then others that had to be delivered in quick succession.

Our setting, with the need of the children we have and staff sickness that we had before that point, point of the year, it doesn't lend itself to us delivering it fully because there was times we couldn't get out. I think there was one week we ran two sessions back-to-back. Week two and week three had to go back-to-back straight after. It's because there was no way we were going to get them done. We had missed a week because we had a vomiting bug in the room and children being sick and we had them stay in the room to deal with the unwell. So, kind of, it was hard to fit it in with the same children and the same children get the same out of it. (EY practitioner 8)

The quote above illustrates specific challenges linked to taking part in the pilot and a perception amongst staff that the same children had to attend each week; this person went on to say, "Trying to keep the control group the same was quite challenging" (EY practitioner 8). Where children were absent in some of the other settings, sessions tended to go ahead with smaller numbers. This represented both a challenge for staff and a positive for the children who were able to attend.

I think it was mainly the attendance of the children. Because we had a bit of a period where we had a lot of illness within that group. So it was, one week we had two children, which was nice because they did get quite a lot out of it, because it really is a small number. But yeah, I think that was the biggest challenge we had at that point. (EY practitioner 3)

Having to select a smaller number of children to take part in the LEAP sessions was identified as both a challenge and highlight of the pilot project overall. The practitioners in nursery 3 gave the example of one child who they thought would have benefitted from the project, but they did not include her because her scheduled pick-up time came before the end of the sessions. This is illustrated by the following quote.

Sometimes she would come through with mum when we were still busy and even mum looked a couple of times, thinking, "Why are you over there? Where are your friends?" So, I think it may be a little bit hard for some parents seeing as well. But obviously we explain so they knew what it was for, it was just a little group, but yeah. And that's just because certain children leave at, you know, at certain times. So we didn't want to choose a child to leave halfway through any of the sessions. (EY practitioner 5)

Overall, the small group sessions were felt to be beneficial for the children, particularly within larger settings. In nursery 5, the EY practitioner described finding it challenging to leave some children out but recognised that those who took part in the sessions had benefited from the smaller class size. This is discussed further in the next chapter in terms of the reported impact on the children's confidence levels.

You were leaving the other children in the room and they were getting upset that they'd been left and they couldn't get to take part. [...] [But] it was nice in a small group. You got more out that you took and got more out of it, being in a small control group, than if it had been in a class of 24, which we do have. It would have been overwhelming for some of the children and they would have I think held back a bit. [...] I think the children did enjoy it. Getting some what they called special time, so yeah. (EY practitioner 8)

Suggested areas for improvement

Some EY practitioners identified potential areas for improvement of the LEAP project, although each of these appeared to be specific to the individual setting. For example, staff from nursery 3 were the only ones to mention that they felt the recommended warm-up activity (which involved moving different parts of the body in turn) was too long, resulting in children losing concentration and starting to get bored. They made the decision to cut this activity short because the children "were sort of going off and doing silly little things and then maybe accidents would have been happening" (EY practitioner 5).

I think, for me personally, it was the warm-up session was too long because it was meant to be two soundtracks, but they started to sort of lose it a little bit in the distraction. So where it [the session] was meant to maybe be an hour, ours probably would have been about half an hour the first time. Then it was about 40 minutes from then. (EY practitioner 4)

In contrast, the only challenge reported by staff from nursery 1 was that some of the sessions felt 'stop/start' in terms of having to clear away the sensory activities to make room for the movement-based activities. They felt this could be remedied by having additional staff members involved, so that one could be tidying up while the others take the children to another part of the room to do a different activity.

Possibly the only thing would be the way that we would do it where it was kind of a physical activity, and then the sensory one, and then we'll go back to a physical. I think that's only because of the environment we were in, I felt as though we had to clear away. So, one of the weeks was the jelly. We had to clear

away all the jelly for the 'under the sea' theme to then have the space again available to do some physical movements. Other than that? No, I think it ran really smoothly. (EY practitioner 1)

The practitioner from nursery 5 was the only person to suggest that a different book might help to make the sessions more engaging and also to suggest that the project “would work better if there was somebody coming in to deliver it in our setting” (EY practitioner 8). There was reported to be limited capacity within nursery 5 to deliver the sessions in-house, as well as a high proportion of families with English as a second language.

So if it was going forward, like for our setting, I think we have 32 different languages spoken across the whole setting. So it will be a case of we may need a translator to translate them [the take-home resource sheets] into a few different languages. (EY practitioner 8)

This practitioner identified potential ways to engage the low-income families within their setting, who may have limited resources or space to take part in activities with their children at home. Suggestions included providing a copy of the book to each family or letting them know the name of the book in advance so that they might obtain a copy from the library. They also suggested providing the take-home activities electronically (although three of the five resource sheets did include a QR code where parents could find out more online). These ideas are detailed in the quote below and discussed further in the next chapter.

Some of the activities on the sheets, one parent said she found them quite challenging and not practical for the house, so maybe... But that might just be our parents because we do struggle to engage them in things anyway. So it I think it's very area dependent. Without sounding, putting the area we work in down – we do have a few working parents, but a lot of our parents are stay-at-home parents and it's not something that would interest them really. So it's more case of, “I'll let them go and play, give them an iPad”, which is not ideal. But maybe if it was something online, a link that they could click onto and there was a video they could watch and do it along with a video with the parents. I think that would appeal to a few more of our parents, where like they could stick the video on and the kid could be, their child could be moving to whatever they've been doing. That might engage the parents a bit more. I know that's causing more work, but I do just think for our parents who don't engage, if it's on their phone or if it's on a tablet, it might help them engage a little bit more. (EY practitioner 8)

There were no areas for improvement suggested by staff from nurseries 2 and 4, who reported that the project worked well for their settings and were grateful for the opportunity to be part of the pilot. There were plans to repeat the project in nursery 2; these were discussed during the practitioner interview and had been achieved by the time of the visit to meet the children.

We want to try again after Easter. I think so, because you have a different group of children who would all bring something different. So I think, even though you were doing the same sort of programme, I think the experiences would be different. (EY practitioner 3)

Findings II: Benefits of taking part in the project

This chapter details the reported benefits of taking part in the LEAP pilot project from the perspectives of the staff, children and families involved. These findings have been produced from analysis of the interviews with EY practitioners, the observations and discussions with the children, and WhatsApp interviews with parents.

Benefits to EY practitioners

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the EY practitioners reported personally enjoying taking part in the project and delivering the LEAP sessions. They described getting particular enjoyment from linking the various creative and movement-based activities to the storytelling process, which offered a new experience for most participants regardless of years of EY experience.

Obviously, I've been doing the job for quite a while now. So you have some sort of background experience. And you've got the confidence within your role. But I think to do something new, to have sort of tried it first before you've delivered, it was quite nice. (EY practitioner 3)

The project had provided the opportunity to develop their confidence and get ideas that could be used in other contexts, as illustrated by the quote below. Another practitioner provided the following written response regarding the benefits of taking part: “Staff and children gained lots of new skills” (EY practitioner 6).

I really enjoyed it. I think it did bring on my confidence, I suppose, with the staff. But also, it gave me more ideas for when you read the story, not just to read it page-for-page. Because I know, I've had a few years in childcare and reading stories, I've always tried to make it interactive, but nowhere near as interactive as it's meant to be. So it's given me quite a few good ideas to take back to the setting. (EY practitioner 1)

One participant described a feeling of intimacy arising from taking part in the activities with the children. This was reinforced by the observations, where the children could be seen sitting close to the EY practitioners, who would also take off their shoes, sit on the floor and engage in the activities with them.

When I did get on the floor and do things with them, it was nice. The kids would sit very close to you and get in the circle and things. So no, it was, it was a nice experience. (EY practitioner 4)

There was only one practitioner who felt the project had not benefitted them personally. This was the same person who described their setting as delivering activities similar to the LEAP sessions as standard, therefore taking part in the pilot was not felt to have provided any added value above their usual practise.

I don't want to sound like we're blowing our own trumpet, but that is the kind of thing we would do anyway. We're quite a creative team and with the children we've got, that's how we go about... Everything we do to get the children engaged is massive and over the top like, kind of thing. So that's how we work anywhere within the room. So, it sounds terrible saying I don't feel it gave us anything because it was, that's our practise anyway. (EY practitioner 8)

Others outlined plans to use the resources, ideas and skills gained through the pilot to benefit different groups of children. As stated in the previous chapter, one EY practitioner had already delivered the LEAP project to a second cohort within their setting. Another had plans to use the lessons learned as part of their schedule of summer activities.

I kind of never thought of doing a story like that and adding the other bits to it, like, you know, the sensory bits. But like I was saying, I volunteer and sometimes I work at [nursery 4] in the summer. And yeah, so I'm, I am going to maybe do a story and kind of adapt it to some, for some of the kids over the, over the summer. (EY practitioner 4)

Benefits to children

The practitioners described the children in their settings as having enjoyed and benefitted greatly from taking part in the LEAP project. One person said, “They all absolutely loved it” (EY practitioner 1) and their colleague went on to say they did not want the activities to end, as illustrated by the following exchange.

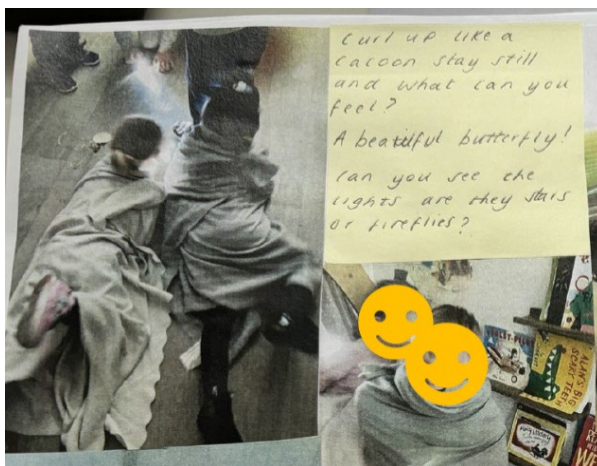
EY practitioner 1: You could always tell they were really happy. They always had a smile on their face. Always laughing, giggling away. They were getting really involved and actually into it as well.

EY practitioner 2: Sometimes they didn't want to go back to the room, they wanted to carry on doing it as well.

EY practitioner 1: Yeah. So it's quite sad to make it a 'cut it off' type of thing, to only have that one hour. And then they'll go back to the room and they will tell everyone – all the other boys and girls and staff in there – what they've been doing.

The activities were described by staff as being fun and this view was reinforced by the discussions and observations with children. They were able to recall parts of the story – particularly the different animals involved – and were keen to demonstrate the movements that represented each animal, for example, by pretending to be a jellyfish or butterfly. This is illustrated by photos 8 and 9 below.

Photo 8 (nursery 4) and photo 9 (taken by Ian Paine)



A key strength of the project was the variety of activities involved, which meant that there was generally something that appealed to each child in the group. When the children from nursery 3 were asked what they did during the LEAP sessions, they listed the following activities: “We jumped”, “Dancing”, “Music”, “Reading stories”, “Followed shells”, and “Built dens with torches”. The quote and photos below illustrate this variety.

You know, some children really enjoy the creative activities. Some of them really enjoy the sensory ones. Some of them maybe didn't enjoy the sensory ones as much, but enjoyed the music and movement side of it. So, I think between them, they all managed to access something at, you know, a really in-depth level.
(EY practitioner 3)

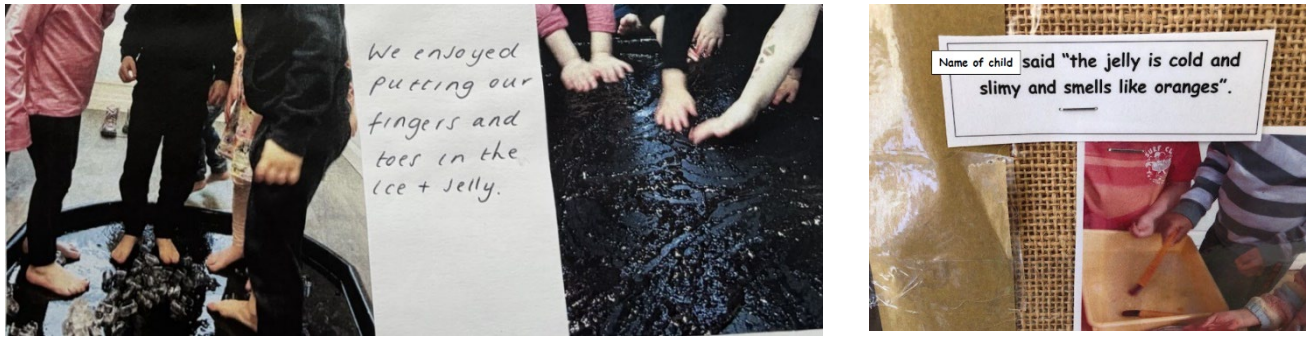
Photo 10 (taken by Ian Paine) and photo 11 (nursery 4)



The children were very interested in either demonstrating the LEAP activities or looking at pictures taken during the project and recalling the things they had done. Although they seemed to enjoy all of the elements, most were particularly enthusiastic about the sensory activities and agreed that they would like to do more of these in future. When children from nursery 1 were asked about their favourite part of the LEAP project, they responded with, “Playing with ice” and “Eating jelly”. Children from nursery 2 recalled that, “We were pretending jelly was jellyfish”. These activities are shown in photos 12 and 13 on the following page.

Staff also highlighted these activities as benefits of the project, with one practitioner stating that, “The children got some lovely sensory experiences and the use of music was beneficial” (EY practitioner 7). In nursery 5, where activities similar to those used in the LEAP project were delivered as standard throughout the setting, there were reported to be advantages to offering these to the children in smaller groups.

They really enjoyed it, the like focused activity, being away from the rest of the room, bringing them out of the room. I think what, they got more out of the sensory play without other children coming in on it. So, like if it's out in the room, we'll have to say, “Only two at the minute and then take turns”. Where it was... It being in a controlled environment, in a group, in small groups, they could all just join in and do it as they want. I think they got more out of it. (EY practitioner 8)

Photo 12 (nursery 4) and photo 13 (nursery 3)

The discussions and observations with children demonstrated how much they were able to remember about the story and activities, and there were also examples of learning related to the story. For example, in nursery 2, the children and staff members pretended to be caterpillars, wriggling around the room and wrapping themselves up in cocoons. The EY practitioner asked, “*What happens to caterpillars?*” and a child replied, “*They turn into butterflies*”. The written responses from practitioners at nursery 4 also highlighted learning and language development as benefits of the project.

“The children thrived and learned a lot. The children were always eager to engage. [...] The children gained confidence and developed lots of new language.” (EY practitioner 6)

“Confidence growth in the children each week. It was nice to see this develop over time. [...] Confidence in movement and exploring textures and relationships with each other. More new language used. [...] Our children gained a lot of new skills from the experience.” (EY practitioner 7)

These benefits were linked to reported improvements in school readiness. Each aspect of the LEAP project was felt to help with increasing school readiness, from getting the children used to being in a weekly routine to providing opportunities for them to develop their gross and fine motor skills.

Yeah, I do think school readiness more because it's getting them kind of into a routine of, “Right, story time. So, we will sit down and this is how it goes”. And then, after story time it's got the physical side of it where they are moving all their muscles and everything. Then also in the cool down when they're doing the creative ones, it's still developing their fine motor skills which you still need to be school ready for when you're going to go to school and get a pen in your hand. It's got its perks definitely. (EY practitioner 1)

The basic act of asking the children to take off their shoes at the start and put them back on at the end of each session was also felt to be an important skill that the project helped to develop. The LEAP sessions provided children with an opportunity to practice and demonstrate this skill, and it was highlighted by some practitioners as an observable example of progress over the five-week pilot.

With it being like a really small group, you could sort of concentrate on the needs of that group. I mean, even to the basic level of, you know, starting the session by taking your socks and shoes off, I mean, that's an ideal one for school readiness for sort of like the PE sessions. And say, by the end of five weeks they were really independent at doing that, you know. Week one you were talking them through it, you know – take one shoe off, take one sock off. And by the end of the five weeks, we sat on the mat, they

took them off and put them away straight away without being asked. You know, that, it was that kind of progress I think that we saw. (EY practitioner 3)

The project was reported to have fostered a sense of independence and built confidence amongst the children taking part. As stated in the previous chapter, EY practitioners were encouraged to incorporate suggestions from the children, which gave them a sense of ownership over the sessions. Staff in multiple sites described how, by the end of the pilot, some of the children would lead the warm-up activity for the rest of the group. Other examples were given – and observed – of children making suggestions and seeing what they could bring to the activities, which was felt to have been facilitated by the small group setting.

Again, to see the confidence in the children, because some of the – the room that we used isn't accessed by all children. So they're not used to that environment. So to see them move confidently throughout the nursery and use a different space. Again, by the end of the five weeks, I will say I had at least two of the boys – actually, it was the boys that were running the warm-up. And I was just, I was just there as the adult in the room. Really, he's like, "Right, we're going to do this right, we need to do that right. Oh, we did this last time". And so it was nice to see them remembering and actually take ownership of their learning. (EY practitioner 3)

Benefits to families and wider stakeholders

There was little evidence of impact of the LEAP project on parents, families or wider communities. The resource sheets were reportedly distributed after each session, but most of the practitioners had received no feedback on these and therefore had no way of knowing if families were taking part in the activities at home. This was reinforced by the WhatsApp interviews with two parents, who did not seem to know what the LEAP project was or what it involved. One remembered their child bringing the sheets home ("We did get sheets, so many" (Parent 1)) but could not recall taking part in any of the activities.

Each week we always send the little – I'm not saying homework sheet – but the sheet that you take or prepare to then get involved in the activities. But none of them [parents/carers] have actually brought any feedback to us, so I don't know if actually, if it's getting done. So on our behalf, we're sending it out. I don't know if it's getting done at home. (EY practitioner 1)

There was one example given of a child who was keen to tell their parent about the LEAP sessions when they were dropped off at nursery, but this seemed to be the extent of their involvement in the pilot.

I know [name of child] has been talking about it because [name of colleague] was saying. And then when she came in this morning, she said they've been looking at the photographs on the way in, and [name of child] was talking about different things that they've done. (EY practitioner 5)

One practitioner had managed to gather verbal feedback from each of the parents and carers of the children within their EY setting. This highlighted a range of issues experienced by families that included feeling uncomfortable taking part in the take-home activities, not having access to the book and not being able to read the resource sheets because English is their second language (as mentioned in the previous chapter).

One parent said she really struggled with just getting the sheet because she didn't have the book and she didn't know what the story was. [...] She'd never read the story before, so she struggled to connect with it. And she didn't understand what her child was talking about. We had another parent saying she just

wasn't going to – don't blame me – do it because she had three other children at home and she just didn't have time to jump around like an idiot. One parent did try it and she said she felt like an absolute fool, so she did it for two weeks and then didn't do it again. We had another parent saying, "I do like a dance class anyway", so she didn't bother with it because she feels she goes to dance anyway. The little one who, we had a little boy who just sat and watched from the sidelines the whole time and he just didn't want to engage with it all at home with mum. And I think of one of our final children, English is an additional language. So the sheet was in English so Mum couldn't read it and take part in the activities anyway. (EY practitioner 8)

While this feedback may seem overwhelmingly negative, it does suggest that at least some of the parents had engaged with the resource sheets and attempted the activities. However, it also indicates that some families – particularly those on low-incomes – experienced barriers to taking part. These issues are discussed further in the next chapter, in relation to the scalability and transferability of the LEAP project. The only other reference to wider stakeholders involved governors in one EY setting, who were reported to have a positive view of the project, as shown in the quote below. The two parents who took part in WhatsApp interviews were also grateful that their children had had the opportunity to be involved, even if they had not engaged with the take-home activities or experienced any benefits themselves.

They [the governors] seem really quite happy that, you know, it had this positive effect, even though it was only a small group. (EY practitioner 3)

Discussion

Summary of key findings

The evaluation findings demonstrate that the LEAP project was successfully implemented in each of the five pilot sites. Individual practitioners were motivated to take part by a desire to learn new skills around creative storytelling, while EY settings generally wanted to extend the offer for their more disadvantaged children. Positive feedback was received on the training delivered by Northern Ballet, which was felt to have worked well being delivered online in small groups. Practitioners gained confidence in using creative, movement-based approaches and reported benefits from working closely with smaller groups of children. There were examples given of the skills, knowledge and resources gained through the LEAP pilot project being used with other children in the EY settings. Challenges experienced in delivering the project involved having sufficient space for the activities and lacking capacity during periods of staff absence. Children being absent was also mentioned as a challenge in terms of maintaining the same sample of participants over the duration of the pilot. However, EY practitioners felt that working with smaller numbers brought benefits for the children involved, particularly in settings with larger class sizes. Only one practitioner felt that the story used in the project was not engaging to the children they work with. Others reported that it encouraged them to use their imaginations, which was reinforced during the observations and discussions with the children.

Families had limited engagement with the evaluation. The two parents who participated in interviews were grateful that their children had had the opportunity to take part, but had very limited awareness of what the LEAP project involved. Second-hand insights – provided by an EY practitioner – suggested that at least some parents/carers of children in that specific setting had engaged with the project and the take-home activities. However, they reportedly experienced barriers to participation, including not having sufficient space at home for the movement-based activities, feeling silly doing these activities in front of their other children, and language barriers meaning they could not engage with the resource sheets. It was suggested that online activities might be more appealing to those living in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, although digital exclusion could be an issue for some households. Those on low incomes are less likely to have an internet connection in the home and the North East has the highest proportion of internet non-users of any English region (12.1%, compared with 7.0% in London) (ONS, 2019). Other practitioners reported sending the resource sheets home but not receiving any feedback from parents/carers. The governors in one EY setting were reportedly supportive of the LEAP project due to the perceived benefits for the children involved.

EY practitioners described various positive outcomes experienced by children as a result of their participation in the LEAP project. These ranged from children being happy during the sessions to positive impacts in terms of school readiness, i.e. the competencies a child possesses upon school entry that are essential to academic and social development (Bender *et al*, 2011). Evidence gathered during the evaluation has been mapped against the Department for Education's Early Years Foundation Stage Framework, as shown in Table 2 below on the following page. This indicates that the LEAP project contributed to progress against each of the early learning goals within the framework. There was less emphasis on mathematics but this was supported by one of the take-home activities. The observations and discussions with children provided evidence of progress against the other goals that contribute towards school readiness, which is particularly important in areas like North East England. The North East has the highest level of socioeconomic deprivation of any English region and deprivation in a family doubles the risk of a child not being school ready (Bandyopadhyay *et al*, 2023; Munford *et al*, 2022). The movement-based approach used in the LEAP sessions particularly encourages the

development of motor skills, which research has shown are strongly associated with the likelihood of achieving school readiness (Jones, 2021). It is therefore likely that the project will have longer-term impacts in terms of supporting children to achieve better educational outcomes.

Table 2: Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (Department for Education, 2023)

Area of learning and development	Early learning goals	Evaluation evidence
Communication and language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listening, attention and understanding Speaking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children listened attentively to the story and then answered questions to confirm their understanding They were encouraged to articulate their views and preferences during the LEAP sessions
Personal, social and emotional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building relationships Managing self Self-regulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The project helped to foster closeness between children and EY practitioners Children managed themselves and their peers during the sessions, e.g. by leading the warm-up
Physical development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gross motor skills Fine motor skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They were encouraged to move their whole bodies, e.g. warming up individual body parts and then walking, crawling or jumping like animals Sensory, music and art-based activities (often used as a 'cool-down' exercise) involved fine motor skills
Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comprehension Word reading Writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EY practitioners asked questions linked to the story, e.g. on the life cycle of a butterfly Some children were able to read parts of the book
Mathematics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number Numerical patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One of the take-home activity sheets involved an 'animal dice game', where numbers 1-6 were linked to different animal sounds and movements
Understanding the world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> People, culture and communities The natural world Past and present 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children were encouraged to think about and discuss who is in their 'tribe' Activities included gathering and exploring natural materials, e.g. leaves, flowers, shells
Expressive arts and design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating with materials Being imaginative and expressive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Craft and art-based activities were used as cool-down exercises Children used their imaginations to pretend to be animals moving in different environments

Reflections on the evaluation process

A number of challenges were experienced in conducting the evaluation, which present lessons learned for future research in similar settings. Northern Ballet were very clear in their communication with EY providers that they would be expected to participate in and support the evaluation. A project information sheet was produced and circulated to those selected to join the pilot; this explained the commitment to both the LEAP project and the evaluation and included an introduction to the evaluators. The project lead from Northern Ballet also provided an email introduction to the evaluation lead once the pilot had commenced in each setting. Nevertheless, the level of response from the five nurseries was variable. As a result of delays in agreeing the evaluation contract and obtaining ethical approval, there were delays in contacting nursery staff

to invite them to take part in an interview. These issues were compounded by there being limited resource for the evaluation. It was hoped that one or two undergraduate students would provide additional capacity as part of their final-year dissertation projects, but this did not occur for various reasons. Instead, funding was secured from Newcastle University to employ a student intern for one day per week for 10 weeks. The intention was that they would support the discussions with parents/carers and children; however, the internship ended before most of these activities could take place. Ethical approval was granted in mid-February. Evaluation information packs were sent out to nurseries as soon as possible afterwards for distribution to parents/carers, but these arrived during the half-term holiday. We secured an ethics amendment in April, but the Easter nursery closures created further delays in sending out information.

Given our experience of conducting research with vulnerable and marginalised groups, we had not anticipated the challenges of engaging parents/carers and can only speculate on the reasons for this. One, we had to rely on nurseries to send out information about the evaluation. While we are confident that the initial information packs were given to parents/carers, we have no way of knowing if any written or verbal reminders were given. Two, the documents provided in the packs may have been overly complex, particularly for those with literacy issues or English as a second language. While every effort was made to use accessible language, the information sheet included a lot of detail to explain that they were being asked to consent on behalf of their child and also consider taking part in the evaluation themselves. Having to complete and return a consent form for their child and a separate reply slip with different options for their participation may have been overwhelming. Three, parents/carers may have had limited involvement with or knowledge of the LEAP project and therefore not felt qualified to take part in its evaluation. All three of these assumptions are supported by our experience with nursery 3. A staff member provided the completed reply slips, rather than these being returned in the prepaid envelope provided, and it appears that they asked parents/carers to complete these in person (but not the child consent form). All parents/carers were contacted at least once but only two took part in WhatsApp interviews and both had to be reminded of what the LEAP project was.

Obtaining approval to adopt a passive consent process meant that we were able to visit the nurseries and speak to the children without written consent from their parents/carers. It was challenging to coordinate these visits, as the children and staff members involved in the LEAP project were only present on certain days (and significant time had passed since completion of the project in four of the five nurseries). While the EY settings were supportive of the evaluation, often several emails and reminders had to be sent before receiving a reply. In nursery 4, staff illness meant that interviews were cancelled twice at short notice and a written response to the questions was provided instead. It was useful to have this input, but we were not able to probe the responses, and we were also not able to visit and speak to the children. Staff in three of the other settings were very helpful in organising and supporting discussions with the children. In line with the child-led approach taken in the LEAP project, we remained flexible and attuned to what the children were comfortable with and kept the discussions short to ensure they were not wearied by the experience. They seemed happy to show and tell us what they had done during the LEAP sessions, as well as being excited to look at photos of themselves taking part in the activities. The photos also allowed for an assessment of intervention fidelity, demonstrating that the project was delivered in pretty much the same way across different settings.

Recommendations for future practice and research

This evaluation has several implications for the scalability and transferability of the LEAP project, as well as for future research and evaluation of similar interventions in EY settings:

- Build on what worked well about the pilot; for example: adoption of a child-led approach; online training that promoted the skills and autonomy of the EY practitioners; use of resources that could be accessed easily; and small group sessions that gave children the space to explore the activities fully.
- Target future delivery at settings where the LEAP approach is feasible and offers something distinctive from the usual offer. This might involve refining the application process to ensure EY providers are clear on what the project involves and what capacity and resources are required.
- Ensure that contingencies are in place to deal with unavoidable challenges, such as staff and child absence. The project plan may also need to be adapted for settings with limited indoor space and higher proportions of children with additional needs.
- Explore different ways to engage parents/carers and families, recognising that they may not have the capacity or interest to be actively involved. Those on low incomes or with English as a second language may experience barriers to participation that need to be overcome, for example, by producing resources in other languages or digital versions of the take-home activities.
- Promote the positive impacts of taking part in the project, in terms of increased school readiness but also children's enjoyment of the sessions. The sensory activities tended to go down particularly well, although the variety of activities offered meant that all children found something to enjoy.
- Emphasise the benefits for EY practitioners not only in terms of the skills, knowledge and confidence gained to successfully deliver the LEAP sessions, but also in terms of resources and ideas that can be used to enhance their everyday practice.
- Recognise that there are specific challenges associated with conducting research in EY settings; for example, children often attend nursery on particular days and so there may be limited flexibility in organising visits. The ages of the children mean that timely contact is particularly important, to minimise the time lag between a project taking place and gathering views on that project.
- Ideally, meetings with nursery staff should take place early on in a study or evaluation, to explain what is expected of them and answer any questions they might have. This is crucial given their key role as gatekeepers in recruiting children and families to the research.
- While detailed participant information sheets may be required by ethics committees, these could be supplemented with short study recruitment videos and/or tailored reminders from nurseries. These modes of communication are likely to be more acceptable to parents/carers.
- Flexible, child-led approaches can help in gathering meaningful feedback from young children. It is important to make the research activities engaging to keep their attention. This may involve creative methods and child-friendly props, including the use of photos to prompt discussion.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview and focus group topic guides

INTERVIEWS WITH EARLY YEARS STAFF

Questions

1. How did you hear about the LEAP project?
2. Why did your centre decide to take part? [some may not be able to answer this]
3. Can you tell me about the training and support that you received from the project?
 - a. Probes: views on the online approach, whether face-to-face delivery would be more or less accessible, did they receive enough information
4. Did you experience any challenges or difficulties in delivering the activities?
5. What were the highlights of delivering the activities?
6. What did you personally enjoy or gain from being part of this project?
 - a. Probes: confidence, relationships, wellbeing and educational outcomes
7. What do you think the children and their families gained from being part of the project?
 - a. Probes: confidence, relationships, wellbeing and educational outcomes
8. Have there been any unexpected outcomes or wider impacts?
9. Can you think of any ways in which the project could be improved?
 - a. Probes: the application process, training, activities, resources, stories
10. Would you recommend the project to other EY providers? Why/why not?
 - a. Probes: elements that could be scalable and transferrable to other settings

INTERVIEWS WITH PARENTS/CARERS

Questions

1. How did you hear about the LEAP project?
2. Can you describe your understanding of what the project involves?
3. What do you think your child enjoyed or gained from being part of the project?
 - a. Probes: confidence, relationships, wellbeing and educational outcomes
4. Is there any aspect of the project that your child did not enjoy?
5. Has the project had any wider impacts on you or your family?
 - a. Probes: use of the resources at home/with other children, whether the child has talked about or demonstrated the activities to others
6. Can you think of any ways in which the project could be improved?
 - a. Probes: activities, resources, stories
7. Would you recommend the project to other families? Why/why not?

DISCUSSIONS WITH CHILDREN

Opening:

- Introduce ourselves, including the glove puppet (Kermit the frog)
- Explain how the discussion will work; Kermit wants to have a chat about the LEAP project so that we can find out how to make it better and share it with other children
- Let them know they are free to move around and take a break whenever they need to
- Remind them that everything they say is important so we will be taking notes but their names won't be used when sharing what they say with other people
- Any questions before we start?

Topics to be covered:

1. Their understandings of what the LEAP project involved
 - a. Prompt: Ask if they can show us some of what they learned
2. Things they enjoyed about taking part in the activities
 - a. Prompt: How it made them feel
3. Anything they did not enjoy or that could be made better
 - a. Prompt: Activities they would like to do more or less of while at nursery
4. Wider impacts, in terms of whether they took things home to share with their family
 - a. Prompt: Ask about the resources sent home and whether they were used
5. Whether they would recommend the project to other children

Closing:

- Anything to add? Any questions for us?
- Reminder of what happens next, i.e. how findings will be used
- Thank them for their time and let them say goodbye individually to Kermit
- Give out small gifts (or leave with nursery staff to be distributed later)

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The North East and North Cumbria Child Health and Wellbeing Network is part of the North East and North Cumbria Integrated Care Board (ICB). To find out more about the network please contact them via nencicb.northernchildnetwork@nhs.net. You can access their work into arts and creativity via the website: <https://www.nenc-healthiertogether.nhs.uk/resources/child-health-and-wellbeing-network-chwn-shared-resources/arts-and-creativity>.

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