



Early Years: Finding Our Voice

The Leadership in Early Years Education RIG held an online symposium on Tuesday 19th January 2021. We welcomed three fantastic speakers to the event, bringing local, national and perspectives to the challenge of making ourselves – the early years sector – better heard in society and policy.

Our speakers were:

- Aaron Bradbury Coffey, academic, author and campaigner for the early years in England
- Taneshia Thompson, nursery manager in the London Early Years Foundation
- Ellen Dektar, advocate and policy influencer for childcare in Alameda County in California

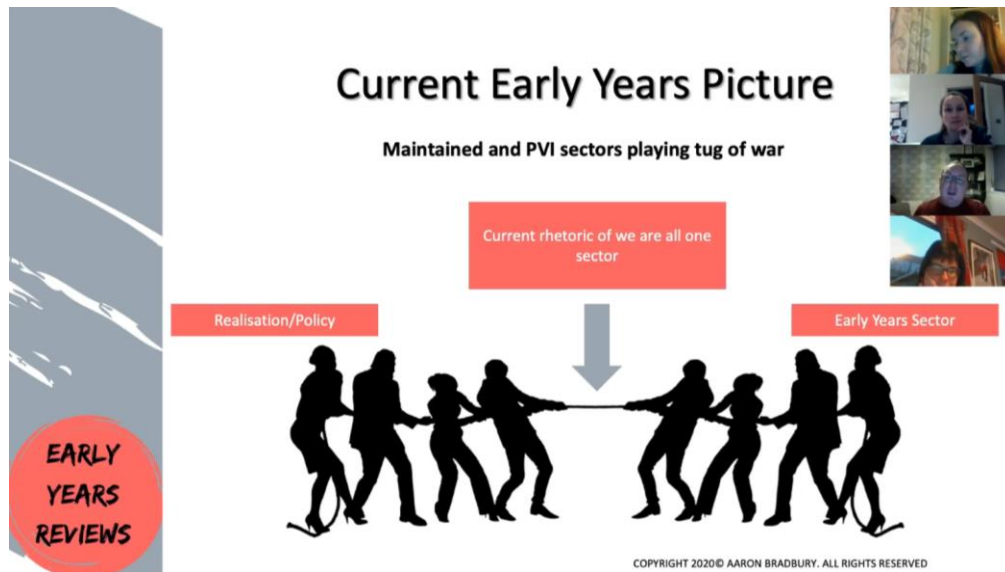
Each speaker gave a ten-minute talk on their professional views and experiences. These talks were followed by breakout room discussion for participants and then an open dialogue where speakers and participants could share their diverse perspectives.

“We need this conversation now more than ever”
– Aaron Bradbury Coffey



Aaron’s presentation focused on the ways in which we could build confidence and recognition among early years professionals, so that they are empowered to come together collectively. He considered the current status of the profession, including areas of division within the sector, and suggested how we could come together to create new ways of recognizing the practice of our early years workforce. Together with Juliette Davies of Early Years Matters, Aaron is founding the

Early Years Academy, which will offer new levels of recognition and support to early years professionals. The hope of this initiative is that professionals' confidence will grow – and as a result, so will their individual and collective voices.



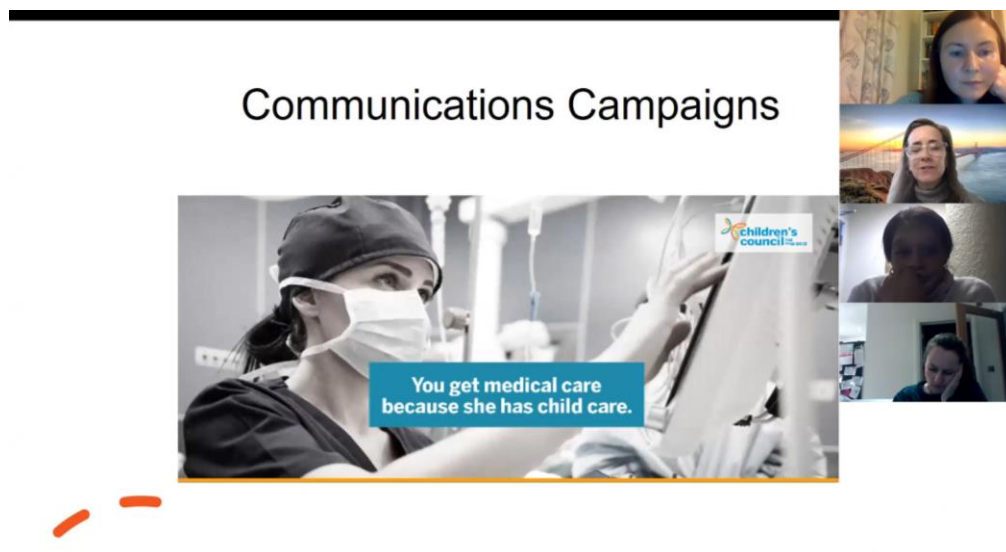
“If we want to build our early years voice, we’ve got to start within. We’ve got to start with our own practitioners, our own professionals.” – Aaron Bradbury Coffey



Taneshia talked about the creativity we need to bring to the task of sharing with parents the work that we do around early learning. In her work as a nursery manager, she places an emphasis on parent events and day-to-day communication, which build a more general understanding throughout the community about early years and what it stands for. She suggested that this parent understanding and voice is an essential part of changing wider policy affecting early years. How can we make change in society if we haven't even got the parents on board?

“It’s up to us to raise the bar and speak out about the importance of investing in young children.” – Taneshia Thompson

Ellen gave us an insight into the mechanisms for early years voice in California, US. She shared with us the approach that she takes in her work, advocating for more quality childcare. We learned about the role of data and communications in making this advocacy work, and considered the different messages that can be used to help to change public perceptions and policy.



“We engage policy-makers in the cause of childcare by taking them to see what you do. Children themselves are the best ambassadors for the work, so we take leaders out to see really great programs and couple it with policy information. As Mark Twain said ‘if you’re looking for a friend when you need one, it’s too late’ and so we do our best to cultivate long-standing relationships with philanthropists and policy-makers.” – Ellen Dektar

Following breakout discussions, we engaged in exciting dialogue about early years voice. Some of the key points emerging from the dialogue were:

- We need to counter divisions within the sector in order to find a collective voice
- At the same time, we need to avoid getting too focused on what each other are doing rather than looking to government and being clear that we need to raise funding across the board for this sector
- When it comes to communications in society and public information campaigns, there was acknowledgement that there are two aspects to the message: a) the rest of society can't function without childcare and b) early years education is essential for children's life outcomes
- There was some concern that if we focus too much in our messaging on the economic aspects of early years education (that others can work while we provide childcare), early years provision becomes an under-valued commodity, rather than the essential service we know it to be



“Early years voice? It’s about finding a way to tell our story and share what we do.” – Taneshia Thompson

Thanks to the speakers and all of the participants for a fantastic event. We’ll be running more events soon. The best way to hear about what’s coming up is to follow us on twitter: [ey_leadership](#)