

A photograph of two young girls in the foreground, smiling and clapping. The girl on the left has long blonde hair and is wearing a light blue dress with a pink cardigan. The girl on the right has dark hair with bangs and is wearing a pink dress with a colorful beaded necklace. The background is blurred, showing other people at what appears to be a community event. The title 'Community SPIRIT' is overlaid on the bottom half of the image.

Community SPIRIT

On a sunny July day, with the capital preparing to unite for the start of the Olympic Games, *TN* visited an early years setting bringing children and parents from every walk of life together all year round...

Inclusivity – more specifically, how to deliver it – is a key concern for every early years setting with even pretensions to being judged ‘outstanding’. At the best of those, it is an ethos made conspicuous by the policies in place, the actions of the staff and, as a result, the engagement of children and parents. The London Early Years Foundation’s twice ‘outstanding’ Queensborough Community Nursery is one such setting. In keeping with its community tag, its staff strive to reach out beyond its front door, to parents and further afield, while recognising that the individual needs and choices of each of its children are of paramount importance. Their efforts to ensure that everybody connected with the nursery feels like they ‘belong’ are yielding impressive results.

You don’t have to look far at Queensborough to get your first glimpse of inclusivity in practice – and that’s not because with space for some 30 children, this Westminster-based setting is relatively small. Its main room, supported by two smaller spaces and an outdoor area, plays host to children from ages two up to five, toddlers and preschoolers intermingling and interacting despite their differing stages of development. On the day of *TN*’s visit, it is a hive of activity, populated by children and staff of a range of ethnicities; amongst the former is an autistic girl, accompanied by her own learning support assistant. Bar the occasional, unavoidable tear, everybody – regardless of age, ability or background – is having a great time.

“It’s brilliant to see them all interacting with each other,” says interim manager, Bina Jeetoo of the mix of ages, after we escape the hubbub for the relative quiet of Queensborough’s office. “You see the older children looking after the younger children, the younger children role-modelling the older children’s behaviour. Even if we had more space, we’d still do it the same way – the children learn so much from each other.”

The integration of young and even younger seems appropriate for a setting whose intake is something of a melting pot. Alongside Bina is area manager Mona Majed: “There are various routes our children come from,” she explains. “Some parents pay for their child to come here; others are benefiting from government initiatives such as the two-year scheme. It could be that they are undertaking training and the job centre is actually paying for places for the families to come here – or they could be a parent who’s in need, so social services have allocated their child a place in the nursery. It’s a good mix.”

It is also a mix that presents Queensborough with certain challenges, perhaps most obviously a number of children who attend the setting with English as an Additional Language. As a consequence, the



I think we’re courageous at LEYF – if somebody has an idea, we’ll try it and then look at the outcomes. Even if it doesn’t work out, it’s all part of the learning process

MONA MAJED, AREA MANAGER

nursery offers communication, language and literacy sessions each Tuesday, and hosts a speech therapist, who provides additional support for those who require it. “Many of our children are actually trilingual,” Bina reveals, “we have one family in which one parent speaks Danish and the other speaks French. When they speak to the child they stick to their own languages and we do the English here, but the child is fluent in all three! In the case of children with absolutely no English, we’ll get to know key words in their first language as we’re settling them in and bonding with them – for example, for toileting or eating. On top of that, we use Makaton to encourage communication and speaking and sign at the same time, to support children with their language acquisition and understanding – it’s part of the routine for every child here.”

“Because it’s not only children with EAL who may have language difficulties,” Mona adds. “A child who speaks English with English-speaking parents may have them too. That’s why we use it with everybody; it’s an inclusive service.”

Important though this aspect of the setting’s provision is, inclusion at Queensborough is not only about supporting those with a specific need or needs: ensuring that every child is afforded opportunities to make choices about their time in nursery is another central tenet of Bina and her team’s practice. Regular ‘planning meetings’ take

place to canvass opinion, and even the youngest are involved. “For the older children, we’ll have them sitting around in a circle,” Bina says. “There’ll be a minute taker and a chairperson, and they’ll announce what kinds of things they’d like in the nursery, and what they’d like to do. We note these down and plan around them – we try to incorporate those ideas into what we do, be it our activities or local trips. It comes from the children, so their choices are at the heart of everything we do.

“With the younger group we use pictures,” she continues. “It’s slightly more limited because, of course, they can’t express themselves as well, but the pictures help them tell us what they might like out on a particular table, for example. We have the meetings about once every two weeks – the children have lots of achievable ideas, and they’re always so excited about the things we’re going to do!”

“I think the important thing is that children feel like they are in control, like they are responsible for their own learning,” Mona says of the approach, which has been in place across LEYF for the last two years. “Staff are there to listen and take notes and encourage the children, and the more children do it the more confident they become – after a while they can actually say, ‘Okay, we’re finished now’, or ‘You didn’t say anything!’.”

Look beyond the children and including parents in the life of the setting emerges as something of a speciality for Queensborough. Built upon a combination of accessibility (being as available to mums and dads, and as flexible in response to their needs, as possible) and variety (offering a relentless selection of activities, workshops and events), Bina and her team’s efforts are spoken of in glowing terms by Ofsted and, more importantly, are helping staff to support parents support their child’s development.

“We always believe that parents want to be involved, that they are really interested in what their children are learning,” Mona says of the former. “But sometimes there might be barriers because of time commitments, work, social factors or confidence. We try as much as possible to break these barriers. We say, ‘Okay, if you can’t do this, maybe we can do that’. Once parents know you’re doing everything you can to get them in, you’re eliminating the barriers to enable them to come and really fully work with you.”

“One of our hard-to-reach parents attended



a workshop with her child,” Bina continues. “She didn’t know anybody but we introduced her around to everyone and she stayed for the whole session and enjoyed herself. It was the first time she’d really challenged herself in that way, to come along, and I think that’s partly due to the people who are in the setting – about the team. I think she feels so welcome and reassured that her daughter’s in a safe place, it’s proven to her that we’re here for her and her child.”

“And what’s also important is that we’re not teaching parents what to do with their child,” Mona concludes. “We just want to work with them and share what they have to offer too.”

On the point of variety, you could almost write another article on what Queensborough has to offer. On the day of *TN*’s visit preparations for the summer fair are well under way – the theme is the ‘Mad Hatter’s Tea Party’, face painting, a bouncy castle, a raffle and auction have all been arranged, and everyone’s invited. A group of artistically-minded parents have been recruited to transform the setting with backdrops, props and posters. Throughout the year, every opportunity is taken to get mums, dads and grandparents in – be it to take part in African drumming activities in celebration of Black History Month or to play the piano sat in the main room. When parents are invited to participate from the moment their child starts at the nursery, it becomes an ethos, Bina suggests.

But the Queensborough team are perhaps proudest of their workshops. Held out of hours every couple of months, many offer practical ideas and advice for parents wishing to better support their child at home; others simply provide the chance to learn a new skill or craft – from origami to Christmas cake baking and yoga, they’ve done it. Again, it is the interests of the children that are key, though.

“Rather than just creating activity plans for parents to take home, we’ll also hold a workshop so they can see our suggestions in practice,” Bina says of the thinking behind the approach. “So, for example, we’ve had maths workshops after parents enquired about how they can help children with their number acquisition. We’ve also covered the revised EYFS; I did that with an emphasis on the home learning environment, so we had practical activities for the parents. The idea was to let the parents see what each activity entailed and how they could do it, and the children participated too. It’s wonderful



1. Doing things differently

1. “If you go into a LEYF nursery, you know it’s a LEYF nursery,” Mona says. “We’re a social enterprise and we’re not profit-making, so we invest everything with the community in various ways. We’re very community based; we do a lot of inter-generational work – we want the youngest and oldest to know

about us and use our facilities. We don’t exclude anybody, we work with all age ranges – even teenagers.

“We also invest in our future through our apprentices,” she continues. “We train them to the high standards we require and we give them all the opportunities to develop. We have people who have been with the organisation for 30 years, and they’re still developing and still enjoying it. The passion our staff have for the job is what really counts.”

watching them engaging together, and they went home with lots of ideas.”

With additional support provided in the form of take-home resources – a selection of bags, themed around different activities accompanied by observation sheets to allow parents to feed back into practitioners’ planning and children’s learning journeys – Queensborough’s efforts to involve mums and dads come full circle, enabling staff to better track the children in their care. It all adds up to a setting whose policy of inclusion – be it children in the planning of their activities, those with specific needs, or parents – is more than justifying the effort required to implement it.

3. As with children, parents and the local community, so too with practitioners. LEYF has made a conscious effort in recent times to build an inclusive workforce – most notably in relation to the recruitment of men, who now make up 19 per cent of staff. Queensborough’s eight-strong team includes a range of experience and youth, including male practitioner Chris and an apprentice, Sabah, who splits her time between working in the setting and studying at LEYF head office.

There is also a clear commitment to giving staff a say in the way the organisation is run, as Mona explains: “Everything is being reviewed at the moment because of the introduction of the revised EYFS, and everyone from every nursery is contributing in some way. We want all staff to feel like they’re a part of the decision making, so it’s not a case of changes being forced on them.”

The provision for inclusive practice is excellent and the unique qualities of every child are highly valued and respected

OFSTED

2. Situated in the basement area of a block of flats, Queensborough might not have the most floor space, but what it does have is put to excellent use. The main room is packed with activities to suit children of all ages, whilst the outdoor area is equally

replete with opportunities for meaningful play, plus a vegetable patch doing its best to defy the summer's heavy rains. Between the two is a multi-functional space that serves as a sensory area, a venue for sand and water play and even the setting's in-

house library – the latter enabling parents to visit and choose books with their children to take home. On the day of *TN*'s visit, the plan is to focus on physicality, so a variety of soft play activities have been set up for children to choose from.



2. Making space



Working together



4. Leading roles

4. “I’ve been with LEYF for 12 years,” says Bina, who has been standing in for Queensborough manager, Jean Hudson, since last December. “I used to be a fashion designer, but I retrained, started as an assistant, did my NVQ with LEYF and qualified in 2004. I’ve worked in four of LEYF’s settings and came here in 2009 as deputy manager.” An Early Childhood Studies graduate,

Bina is also a key person, leaving her with no shortage of responsibilities – luckily, deputy Tanya Clarke and the wider LEYF, are there to share the load. Area manager Mona has 14 years’ experience with the organisation herself, similarly starting out as a nursery assistant and rising through the ranks to her current role, which gives her the responsibility of supporting eight LEYF nurseries.