What in the world is happening to babies? A critical perspective of research and support for baby room practitioners in England[1]

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The Politics of Daycare

A flurry of attention and activity has arisen in the early years community as a result of the Coalition Government's decision to provide from 2013 an entitlement to free (government-funded) early education for children who are identified as being from the least privileged backgrounds, according to multiple indicators of disadvantage. However, this paper argues that babies (not yet two) are also worthy of attention and have been subject to ongoing political neglect, which has contributed to discrimination against those who care for them in daycare settings. The staff – mostly women – who work in 'baby rooms' in institutional, group daycare settings rarely access professional development opportunities and work in isolated and fraught conditions. These are not conducive to work-focused dialogue of a kind that can enrich their work and the babies' experiences. Using data from a sample of baby room staff in England, we reflect on various constructs of these women's roles and identities and ask, 'what in the world is happening to babies?' We also offer suggestions for professional development that may resonate with colleagues outside the English context.

In England, many babies are cared for by people other than their parents, stirring up debates based on ideological, economic and socio-political grounds. Various studies have suggested that more mothers have been taking up or returning to paid employment after childbirth and that this has meant that use of formal childcare in England has increased in the last few decades (UNICEF, 2008; OECD, 2011).

When families in England are categorised by certain characteristics and their childcare uses are examined, different patterns emerge from the data: for example, use of formal childcare seems to decrease in accordance with levels of 'multiple disadvantage' (Speight et al., 2010: 17); and certain ethnic groups seem less inclined to use formal childcare than others (Smith et al., 2012:

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[1] This paper contains extracts from a keynote given at the TACTYC Annual Conference 2012.

55). These studies suggest that economic, social and cultural factors play a role in families' decisions about childcare for their babies.

Population projections for England predicted that 727,000 babies under one and another 689,000 between one and two years of age would be living in England in 2012 (Office for National Statistics, 2011). If a third of them experience some kind of formal childcare in England this year, then this amounts to some half a million babies. The extent of childcare use for these babies is too sizeable an issue for it to continue to be sidelined or overlooked in political or policy circles.

In a context where childcare provision sits within a mixed economy with private providers forming a majority, it is estimated that 'between 2012 and 2015, the total UK childcare market will continue to increase in value, reaching £7.2bn' by 2015. This is largely due to, 'the rising cost of childcare and the continued economic recovery.' Much of this market value relates to provision for children from birth to five (Key Note 2011:1).

The idea of the value – or value for money – of different kinds of care comes into the equation when the complexities of childcare decisions are explored. The Government's Commission on Childcare, which Elizabeth Truss MP is leading, is preoccupied with the economics of childcare – its affordability – and models for its governance and regulation (DWP, 2012).

In England, an entitlement to 15 hours of free early years education a week begins when a child is three-years old or, from September 2013, two if (s)he is from the 'most disadvantaged' families in the population. So the financial outlay for a baby's childcare can be high. Our research revealed an average cost of £5 per hour for baby room care in project settings while an annual childcare costs survey (Daycare Trust 2012) reveals an average of £4 per hour nationally for babies and an annual average spend by families of £5,103 per baby.

Potentially this means that if half a million babies spend the national average of 20 hours a week in daycare provision, the financial outlay would amount to around £2.5 billion a year. This vast sum, which generates significant tax revenues for Her Majesty's Treasury, is too substantial to merit the sustained political silence about babies' daycare.

In childcare reports that have recently made headlines in England (e.g. (Ben-Galim 2011, 2012; Alakeson and Hurrell 2012; Centre for Social Justice 2012; Truss 2012), the dominant discourse around affordability arguments is one of equity, justice and social inclusion, particularly where women's position in relation to men is concerned or low-income versus higher-income families. It is also evident from analysis of children's rights literature and scrutiny of policy documents that babies' rights rarely figure in political considerations except where these coalesce with political goals or imperatives (Powell and Goouch, 2012).

We now have mountains of evidence from many different sources and disciplines with which to make a case for the importance of what happens to babies and young children. It is used to support arguments for early intervention and for offering an entitlement to free early education of a 'good quality' to young children, especially those from backgrounds that have been classed as disadvantaged (e.g. Allen, 2011a, 2011b). But it is also harnessed to support claims that babies should not experience institutional daycare (Sunderland, 2011) or to demonstrate the effects of infants' distress in such contexts (Sigman, 2011). There is conflict about the longer-term effects developmentally, and consequently for society, when children have spent varying amounts of time, from infancy, in different kinds of daycare arrangements that may differ in terms of quality.

The Baby Room Project

In the Baby Room Project, we were supported by an 'Expert Group' of colleagues with extensive knowledge and expertise in early childhood provision and research. They challenged us to refine the focus for our research and our theoretical position. Broadly speaking our overarching aim was genuinely exploratory – 'what happens in baby rooms?' - but over time we developed a more critical eye and stance and an aim to highlight the political nature of babies' daycare and the social positioning of those who care for them. As we began to explore the processes and practices of daycare for babies, which was highlighted as a gap in research (David et al., 2003), we wondered, 'Who does care for the babies? What do they do and how do they describe and rationalise their work?'

The Baby Room Project began in September 2009. It has combined research and professional development activities, involving women working in 25 daycare settings in the rooms set up in accordance with statutory requirements (DCSF 2008, DfE 2012) to accommodate babies from 'birth' to two. Women caring for 360 babies from 7 weeks to 18 months of age took part in the

project on a voluntary basis and were self-nominated, although some were encouraged to do so by their managers.

The participants came together every few weeks to share their experiences, challenge each other's ideas and to begin to reflect critically on their identities, roles and practices and what might inform and sustain or unsettle and fracture them. In addition, from September 2010 a team of early years advisory teachers joined the project from a Local (Education) Authority. Through case study work examining talk practices in baby rooms, which we facilitated and supported, they sought to enhance their own knowledge and understandings of babies' institutional care.

Baby work: Who are the 'baby workers'?

We identified those who work in baby rooms as predominantly young women, with low qualification levels; they were often among the least experienced in their nursery. The project participants reported that they were rarely able to access professional development – and, importantly, any professional development that was offered was rarely targeted at baby room practice or offered specialised support. It seemed highly significant to us that opportunities to engage in work-focused dialogue were few or non-existent. In other educational and professional contexts this is frequently either an assumed or required aspect of work. Further, it seems to be universally acknowledged – and accepted – that pay and working conditions for those employed to work with young children, outside of the school sector, are poor. However, the lived realities of this are stark, with examples given of employees working with babies for up to five hours without a comfort break and with lunch breaks most often taken with the babies.

Participants suggested that they had low professional esteem and lowly status. We employed opportunities through research activities and professional development to gather participants' perspectives of how they understood and could describe their roles and collected layered information from at least three of our data sets which amplified participants' perspectives on their sense of identity. These were: an activity called 'a day in the life of...' where participants wrote about a typical working day; questionnaires which asked about the nature of their role and seminar activities and discussions of work practices, where participants talked freely about what they did, why and how they carried out activities with babies. Additionally the work provided us with a forum for discussion, opportunities to support participants' abilities to articulate these

perspectives and time and space for people to share details of practice and their existing knowledge and understanding.

It was notable that during the project participants consistently described functional aspects of their work and these dominated how they appeared to conceive themselves at work. Activities and routines took centre-stage and were enthusiastically discussed, although this combined with a paucity of explanations or any rationale. A lack of self or voice was evident in discussions. And so, in answer to the question 'who do you think you are?' the central responses given in the project consistently related to the fulfillment of tasks – of feeding, cleaning, laying to sleep and, occasionally, playing with babies.

Project Conclusions

The nature of the people employed to work in baby rooms is at the heart of any development case we would like to make, although we acknowledge the significance of others' focus on structures and ratios. We also acknowledge academic debates and challenges surrounding notions of the professionalisation of the workforce, with attendant concerns about nationally imposed and narrowly defined criteria and standards. However, we would like to offer an argument in favour of what we describe as 'authentic professionalism'; the idea of professionalism which comes from within, from who we are, our levels of commitment, our expertise and experience. From our project we have been able to see the stark difference between minding babies and the mindful care of babies: simply raising the levels of 'qualifications' alone will not result in mindful care.

In our reflections, reported in more depth and detail elsewhere (e.g. Goouch and Powell 2012; Powell and Goouch 2012; Goouch and Powell 2013) we have been thinking of three significant factors in relation to baby rooms:

The nature of the role – training is required in relation to the functional elements of day to day care. However, within the 'caring for babies' role should come the expectation of enquiry and critical engagement – not just the 'what?' but 'why?' To facilitate this, there should be an expectation that practitioners will engage in continuing professional development.

We have been puzzling about **the nature of knowledge** required for work with babies. In relation to content, knowledge of national and international policies and practices, knowledge of others' theories of practice, of the diverse nature and cultures of families and communities as well as knowledge of babies and child development are all important. However, there is a problem that 'knowing' about, for example, child development pre-supposes a common definition of 'knowledge'.

The nature of the people employed to care, and for this it's difficult to envision how real changes can be made without reference to political values and national recognition of the importance of the care of babies. However, constructions of those who work with babies and young children must be made or the void will be filled by transitory politicians or those with commercial or other axes to grind. The beliefs that guide professional decisions should be reasoned beliefs, those that have come from years of deliberation on the interconnectedness of theory, research and practice.

In the project we were concerned with the nature of the journey from the current position to a new insightful, principled location. We learned firsthand about Bruner's notion of a duality of landscape (2004) in thinking about human experience: a landscape of action and a landscape of consciousness. In the project the landscape of action was represented by practice talk and the landscape of consciousness by participants' developing ability to re-present, reflect on, re-consider, and better understand not only what was happening with and to babies in their care but also why adult decisions and actions were taken.

Vygotsky (1986) wrote about the difference between signalling and signifying our world – with signalling represented by description and signifying by evaluation and analysis. Participants signalled events and incidents but discussions allowed them to begin to signify. We employed talk and storytelling to facilitate this, to represent discursive opportunities: through telling the stories of who they understood themselves to be, what they understood themselves to be doing and why, our project participants were engaging with us in powerful transformative professional development.

Amongst the politics, the business developments and the qualification debates, we're hopeful that the participants will do more than, as Newman says, hold this kind of developing knowledge in their hand or take it to market but may instead begin to build their own philosophical frame.

However, all structures, and constructions, need support and we wonder now how to offer ongoing nourishment and nurturance of the kind not found in toolkits.

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