

Putting Baby in the Corner: where do babies belong in Early Years?

The Debate

The 'babyroom' is a unique space; one that is a vital part of life for an ever-growing population of England's 0-2 year olds, and their families. It is a space of nurture and everyday thriving that should be at the forefront of early childhood education and care. This is not only as 'square one' on a child's journey through the labyrinth of formal education but also as a special professional space for those being inducted into what it means to balance and integrate educational and caring practices. The babyroom relies foremostly on diligently responding to babies' rapid neurological development - their fascinating capacity to learn and grow - but also to support their intrinsic need for secure attachments and heartfelt care (Bowlby, 1982; Degotardi and Pearson, 2009; another v recent ref?). Despite this cornerstone role, official frameworks of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policy recommendations appear to be fragmented so that their practical applications for our youngest children in the babyroom are missing. Chasms exist between what we know as an ideal of babyroom education/care practice and what happens in reality. The babyroom, and those who practice within it, remain undervalued and unsupported, as a challenging balance is sought between managing the tightrope of what research tells us, the limitations of policy and the practicalities of doing practice.

The fundamental definition of care is inherent to the daily practice of the babyroom: from feeding schedules to sleep routines, practical aspects of care are the clock it ticks by. But, threads of Early Years policy lead away from the essentiality of care practices to Early Years life, consequently silencing those who work, and play, in environments constructed around and through care.

Throughout the early years sector, "examples of children's invisibility can still be found in policy documentation" (Baldock et al, 2009, p.143; Davis, 2015). The Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) was designed to qualify the professional with in-depth knowledge and understanding of child development from *birth* to 5 years, encompassing a direct and thorough demonstration of the Early Years Foundation Stage and experience of how the Early Years directly influence later school success founded upon uniquely attuned practices from birth. This introduced the exciting

prospect of building an experienced Early Years workforce with long-dreamed-of-status, who would raise the bar of the significance of the professional identity of an Early Years practitioner with equivalent qualifications to their school teaching colleagues (DfE, 2013, p.7).

Despite this hope, the reality of the EYTS has fallen short of the initial researched recommendations (refs). Concerns have been raised over several years now about the social recognition and professional parity of the Early Years Teacher qualification with that of QTS (Wild et al, 2015; Kay et al, 2019; Osgood et al., 2017). Early Years Teachers are, unlike their school colleagues, left without a payscale, pension, and, until recently, a Teacher Reference Number (TRN). Despite the political adamancy that “we need to move decisively away from the idea that teaching young children is somehow less important or inferior to teaching school-age children” (DfE, 2013, p.27), the reluctance to offer professional equity between teaching in a ‘classroom’ versus a ‘playroom’ sends a less buoyant, progressive and upbeat professional message.

A dominant discourse prevails through the development of, and criteria for, the EYTS that shapes the Early Years as a platform for ‘school readiness’. This assumes the playroom to be no-more-than the training zone for the classroom, where children are readied for the academic rigours of the school environment. As the politician, Truss, highlights in the executive summary of the very document introducing the EYTS - *More Great Childcare* (2013), “if we want our children to succeed at school, go on to university or into an apprenticeship and thrive in later life, we must get it right in the early years” (ibid). In other words, the Early Years are conceived only as the academic springboard from which a child will fly into academic success and employment security. Such a desire for the next generation to “thrive” is constructed solely as their ability to contribute later to society, through the knowledge - the education - they are filled with in their schooling experience. By enmeshing the EYT with such ‘educational success’, it means that the ‘schoolification’ of Early Years shapes the function of the Early Years Teacher. Their role becomes one in which they must consider, and adapt, school-age-appropriate pedagogies, however uncomfortably, to ‘be’ the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). This constructs the Early Years Teacher as nothing more than a ‘Less-Than-School-Teacher’ and denies the particularity of babyhood, the needs of the youngest children, and the complex skills, knowledge and capabilities of the Early Years Teacher, this calls upon.

In the babyroom, the focus on 'school-readiness' means that it is an irrelevant speck on the 'school readiness' map, which is shaped by the dominance of a political discourse that reverberates instrumental 'education', 'school-readiness', and 'productivity', but also by the total erasure of 'care' from policy. The absence of a discourse of professional care, results in a damaging disregard for the specific needs of the 0-2 babyroom child and their family. It ignores the vital need for the consideration of a potential alternative to the current normative, reductive discourse of who can be validated as an early years specialist in the shape of the Early Years Teacher (Powell and Gooch, 2015).

The Early Years Teacher Status redesigned the Early Years Professional Status, recognised between X and Y, so as to "more closely match the Teaching Standards for classroom teachers" (DfE, 2013, p.27). As such, the Teaching Standards for Early Years (TSEY) form an important criteria by which Early Years Teacher's qualifications are regulated and judged. It seems logical, then, to use the documentation of these standards to shape and acknowledge practitioner conduct, knowledge, and performance as an EYT.

My reading of the TSEY documentation reflects the priorities of the EYFS for "readying children for school" (DfE, 2013, p.6). The EYTS holds the discourse of educational achievement at the forefront of its design: "graduate leadership is the best way to improve [attainment] outcomes for young children" (DfE, 2013, p.27). The title itself, for granting the position of 'teacher' status, connotes strong associations with the school classroom. This in itself highlights a focus on discourses associated with schooling that consequently disengages with the importance of specialist babyroom knowledge encapsulated within ideas of 'care'. The Early Years Teacher Status requires a demonstration of, not only pedagogical understanding and practice, but also of leadership and management of Early Years, and of having convictions that 'drive change' (ref - could you find a ref for this?). By concentrating on a discourse of school-readiness within initial training, the EYT qualification can't help but foreground 'change' as that which is associated with, and measured by, 'school readiness' values.

Much debate has centered on the role that school-readiness strategy has within the Early Years (refs). A political emphasis on 'school readiness' comes with ethical dilemmas and prioritizes what is considered academic at a cost, particularly for the youngest children in the system, because "there has been a shifting emphasis from care to education in government policy in England" (Wild et al, 2015, p.230). As a

former 0-2 EYTS practitioner myself, I agree with the assertion that our contemporary landscape of Early Years policy and practice is one in which “changes to the Teachers’ Standards (Early Years) have reduced the focus on the needs of the youngest children” (Abrahamson, 2018, p.4).

Recommendations

Whilst it is important to consider what is present and problematic within the Early Years field, “recognition of absence helps us to address voids and splits [...] absence supports us in moving from the focused and static to considering the potential alternatives” (Alderson, 2012, p.13). The absence of discourses surrounding care leave the babyroom - practitioners and children - negotiating the remoteness of a framework designed to support and safeguard it. The result is a damaging disregard for the specific needs of the 0-2 baby and a vital need for the consideration of a potential alternative to the current script (Powell and Gooch, 2015). One way of doing this might be to require explicit implementation of Early Years Standards. This could involve: a demonstration of specific knowledge of the developmental needs of 0-2 year olds; and an ability to attend appropriately to care procedures that link directly to the safeguarding and thriving of babies. Attention to the necessity of care within the TSEY documentation could work to dispel the misconception that to be an Early Years Teacher is to exclusively support children old enough to learn to ‘subitise and segment’ (ref).

Despite a political emphasis upon the first 1001 days, the majority of children only meet their first Early Years Teachers when they enter preschool at the age of 3 years (Department for Health and Social Care, 2021).

Educational achievement and school-readiness discourses bleed into the design and conduct of the EYTS, where “graduate leadership is the best way to improve [attainment] outcomes for young children” (DfE, 2013, p.27). The established ‘attainment’ driven values of Early Years Initial Teacher Training (EYITT) contribute to the attitude that the EYTs are most appropriately fit to the preschool age. But the pedagogical emphasis of this training is just one aspect that gears the EYT towards the 3+ age group. From a manager’s perspective, one major political perk allows an EYT to expand the 1:8 ratio to 1:13 with 3-4 year-olds (DfE, 2013, p.32) but must maintain the 1:3 ratio of a Level 3 practitioner within the 0-2 range. Within a

difficult Early Years staffing climate and a cost of living crisis, it would seem economically logical for the Early Years Teacher to be utilised to focus on the 3 plus group. The over-presence of EYTs in the preschool, in turn, leads to an absence of qualified teachers working with our youngest 0-2 groups in babyrooms. Incentives should be introduced to equalise opportunities for the graduate-professionals to work fairly throughout the whole 0-5 age range they are trained for whilst ensuring they are equipped to 'care' appropriately.

'Care' is deemed significant only when framed around the critically attainment-led aims of policy: to create a productive, commodified, standardized platform for measurable, educational success. Such essential aspects of care are merely facilitators to 'success', where the ability to 'care' is a passive, taken-for granted prerequisite of the 'real work' that an EYT qualifies with the specialism for. Aspects of care remain absent and unseen independent from educational outcomes, diluting the significance and professional talent of those who work to care. Where the EYTS claims to train EYTs to "make the care and education of babies and children their first concern" (NCTL, 2013, p.2), the curriculum forges a deep cavity into which the specialist knowledge of 'care' falls away, and, with it, the specialist knowledge and understanding of how "babies" differ to "children".

For the babyroom practitioner, the current EYTS journey is an enigma relying on instinctive knowledge to creatively meet unrealistic, unimportant targets that ignore the essentiality of the care and thriving needs of babies. The magic of the babyroom is what the practitioner can bring to it cultivating a special sense of care and enabling meaningful moments to blossom. For the EYTS to truly reflect what it means to understand the full 0-5 age range, critical attention must be paid to how a paradigm of 'care' is centrally represented in a knowledgeable, creative, caring professional reading of the EYTS practitioner in all their 0-5 age range complexity.

It really is time to change the common perception that to work in a babyroom, as a qualified Early Years Teacher, is to be left holding the baby (and a red-faced and screaming one at that).

References and further reading

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