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*Original Research Article*

ecr

Journal of Early Childhood Research
1–13
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DOI: 10.1177/1476718X241279348
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# Constructions of babyhood among baby room leaders in the UK

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## Abstract

The research presented in this article scrutinises how baby room leaders construct babyhood and how this impacts their practice. Our research feeds into a growing body of research that challenges the dominant developmentalist paradigm in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and instead highlights possibilities for self-determination, agency and reciprocity in the baby room. Through an inductive thematic analysis applied to 15 interviews with baby room leaders across the UK, we consider how baby room leaders construct babies as receptacles of care, find joy in being needed and make sense of babies' learning through developmental checklists and milestones. We pay particular attention to the questions that emerge when we consider baby room educators' joy in being needed: how this can reinforce a perception of babies as completely dependent while simultaneously highlighting their agency and the extent to which their actions shift the emotional landscape of those around them. Our research calls for more provocation, reflection and problematisation that specifically focuses on baby pedagogies and the constructions of babyhood on which these pedagogies are founded.

## Keywords

babies, babyhood, baby room pedagogy, developmentalism, postdevelopmentalism

## Introduction

In the global landscape of research in early childhood education and care (ECEC), there has been less focus on the provision that exists for 0–2 year-old children when compared with research that explores provision for older children. It has been noted by others that baby room professionals often have a low status within and outside of the sector and their perspectives and experiences have often been a neglected area of research (Davis and Dunn, 2019; McDowall Clark and Baylis, 2012; Redman et al., 2022). There are various reasons for this. The lack of funding and subsidisation associated with the very youngest children is likely to explain this to some extent, although Cheeseman et al. (2015) argues that the lack of research around baby pedagogies reflects a narrow view of the babies themselves that positions them as 'waiting to learn' until they are older (Cheeseman et al., 2015: 383) as opposed to actively learning in the present. It follows that baby

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room professionals are then positioned as 'minding the children' instead of educators. Our research is therefore part of a wider project to re-position those working in the baby room as professionals, educators and pedagogues and to recognise the key influence they have on the youngest children in ECEC. Simultaneously, the research positions babies themselves as agentic social actors who are valuable and worthy of study.

This research delves into how babyhood is constructed by baby room leaders (BRLs) as well as how this construction impacts their practice. We begin by considering research that has focused on the baby room so far. We then offer a critique of the dominant developmentalist paradigm that frames early childhood pedagogy and the need to challenge this paradigm through a postdevelopmentalist lens of the baby room centring babies' self-determination, agency and reciprocity in the care dynamic. After presenting our research design, which consists of semi-structured interviews with 15 BRLs, we detail our findings, which suggest that BRLs construct babies as receptacles of care, find joy in being needed and make sense of babies' learning through normative milestones. We consider opportunities, as suggested within the findings, to call for more critical reflection on how babyhood is constructed within the baby room. We suggest that BRLs' own reflections on 'being needed' act as a powerful provocation to trouble the perceived 'neediness' of babies and instead focus on the dynamic care relationship and the impact that babies have on the emotional landscapes of those around them.

## The baby room

In ECEC, care and education are placed in an uncomfortable dichotomy (Davis and Degotardi, 2015; Richardson and Langford, 2022). In the English context, private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings are often positioned as providing 'care' while parents go to work. This is placed in opposition to maintained nursery schools and school-based nurseries which are seen as providing essential early education and learning experiences intended to counter educational inequalities. Despite this division, a large body of literature demonstrates that professionals that work in settings perceive care and education as intertwined, and that this is particularly true when working with babies (Redman et al., 2022).

Care is foundational to the pedagogical practices of baby room professionals (Davis and Degotardi, 2015). According to Shin (2015: 499, emphasis added):

> Young babies need pedagogical caring (a teacher who not only educates but also cares about those he/she educates) and 'professional love' in the form of individualised and personal care to develop *respectful and reciprocal relationships*.

Caring activities such as nappy changes, bottle feeding or helping a baby to sleep at naptime have significant learning potential for young children (Davis and Degotardi, 2015). Moreover, involving children in routines such as nappy changing communicates their own agency and self-determination by showing them that they are involved in a reciprocal interaction, where their choices and behaviours impact on the affect of those around them. Baby room professionals often describe their pedagogy in terms of care and tend to avoid definitions of what they do that prioritise 'teaching' or 'education' (Davis and Detogardi, 2015), and understanding the work of those in the baby room in terms of care has been associated with negative discourses surrounding the role. For example, the work done in the baby room and toddler room is often seen as a job that 'anyone can do' (Lally, 1995: 59 cited in Redman et al., 2022: 2120). This ties into maternal discourses which posit that the skills to work with babies come from 'instinctive and innate' mothering tendencies (Shin, 2015: 496), devaluing the pedagogical choices and specialised knowledge of baby room professionals. It

follows that if mothering qualities are innate and caring for young children is women's work, the job of a baby room professional requires little training and is therefore of low value (McDowall Clark and Baylis, 2012). In ECEC settings, it is common for those with degrees to be placed with older children, perpetuating the false belief that you do not need a high skill set to work with babies (Goouch and Powell, 2012; McDowall Clark and Baylis, 2012). This is in direct opposition with the fact that baby and toddler teachers have highly specialised knowledge, critical reflection skills, are responsive to diverse needs and act ethically on a daily basis (Davis and Dunn, 2019).

As noted above, it is likely that this demeaning view of baby room professionals also comes from a low opinion of babies themselves (Davis and Dunn, 2019). The youngest children in ECEC settings are often viewed as receptacles of care that are fully dependent on adults (Rockel, 2009). Through this lens, babies and toddlers are seen as 'simply cared for until they reach a stage where they might be productively prepared for school' (McDowall Clark and Baylis, 2012: 239). This positions baby room professionals as 'just minding the children' (Goouch and Powell, 2012). Moreover, this positioning ignores the reciprocal nature of all caring interactions in which babies communicate their needs and acknowledge that their needs have been met (Noddings, 2005, 2012). These actions require a level of agency and engagement that reveal babies as powerful social actors.

## *(Post) developmentalism and babyhood*

Viewed through a developmentalist lens, young children's experiences are understood in terms of domains of capacity (physical, cognitive, social and emotional) which needs to be 'filled up' or brought to maturation in order to bring the child closer to adulthood (Osgood and Sakr, 2019; Richardson and Langford, 2022: 409; Sakr et al., 2023). From this perspective, babyhood is viewed as 'an apprenticeship for adulthood' (Gabriel, 2021: 49) where children are constantly pushed to reach the next milestone on a journey towards toddlerhood, childhood, adolescence, and so on until they are fully actualised adults. Developmentalism is the dominant paradigm of ECEC practice globally. It is encoded through our fascination with developmental milestones, checklists and assessments (Gabriel, 2021). It leads to the categorisation of children as either developing 'normally' in line with expected timelines, or as 'deviant' when children do not develop in the expected way. Of course, those labelled as deviant tend to be those who already come from backgrounds of economic disadvantage; developmentalism thereby reinforces educational inequalities (Burman, 2017). Children are measured, taught and cared for in accordance with where they fall on this standard spectrum of development. This standard was developed through tests carried out in laboratory conditions that arguably have little relevance to the day to day experiences of young children (Burman, 2017). Moreover, this standard was not developed based on a representative sampling of all children. Because of this, developmentalism provides an avenue to understand the average rate of development of *some* children, but not *all* children. However, this major limitation has not curbed the pervasiveness of developmentalism within ECEC.

Having a set norm for development 'makes abnormality possible' (Burman, 2017: 22). Burman is suggesting that developmentalism creates, through its normative models, a fear of 'abnormal' development, which perpetuates the discourse of the 'at risk' baby, leading to children being regularly measured from fear of them 'falling behind' (Lupton, 2012: 46). Those who do 'fall behind' may receive extra support, but they can also be saddled with a stigma that follows them throughout their schooling and adulthood (Burman, 2017). Moreover, they are often separated from their peers, tested more frequently and bombarded with interventions in an effort to play catch up (Burman, 2017; Osgood and Sakr, 2019).

We must also consider that developmental psychology is a product of the culture in which it is made. Burman (2017) argues that colonialism is written into developmental psychology and the

developmentalist paradigm that dominates so much of ECEC. Colonialist mentalities have shaped the fundamental tenants of developmentalism which thrive on a self/other dichotomy where power dynamics can lead to the control and regulation of bodies that are unlike our own. In the context of this article, the self/other binary (Lupton, 2014) can be applied to the normal/abnormal child dynamic as well as the adult/baby dynamic. A deficit view of those who do not meet the constructed norm means that, as noted above, they can often be over-regulated until they reach the the perceived 'standard'.

Postdevelopmentalism is an umbrella term for theoretical and methodological traditions and innovations that disrupt developmentalist views of children and childhood. Postdevelopmental approaches to childhood can range from sociocultural explorations of children's experiences to posthuman and feminist new materialist renderings of childhood in which children are constructed through their interactions with the 'more-than-human' (Osgood, 2019). Postdevelopmental researchers of childhood typically acknowledge that there is room for inconsistencies, changes and variations in child development, but dwell in this space of uncertainty instead of trying to solve it (Land and Frankowski, 2022; Richardson and Langford, 2022; Sakr et al., 2023). Post developmentalists question the standard belief that children reliably develop in ages and stages and instead tune into individual moments and experiences in order to engage with the richness of childhood. In relation to babies and the baby room, a postdevelopmental approach tends to call for an emphasis on close and slow observation of babies' social, cultural and material interactions (Osgood, 2019). Richardson and Langford (2022: 417) use the term 'care-full' pedagogy to define 'a way of being in relation to oneself and others'. This perspective pushes us to view the baby room as a space of relating with babies as opposed to a field of developmental milestones.

## *Baby room pedagogies through a rights-based lens*

When thinking about caring, often times, the discourse of the child as helpless rises to the surface and 'reinforces unequal power relationships which silences the child's voice and denies him/her agency'. (McDowall Clark and Baylis, 2012: 232). In this dynamic, the caregiver is seen as having the power and dispensing care into the waiting child. However, this is challenged by seeing babies as part of a dynamic web of 'interembodiment': just as baby room professionals act on babies, babies also act on baby room professionals (Lupton, 2012). Lupton (2012: 40) states the following about mothers and babies:

> Through touching-being touched, moving-being moved, feeling-being felt, hearing-being heard, the bodies of the mother and baby come close, or bend to each other, and then spread away from each other. . . The baby's body is as active a participant in this relationship as is that of the mother

This quote details the delicate push and pull that occurs between mothers and babies. While this particular quotation speaks to the mother-baby dynamic, this can be extended to understand the carer-baby dynamic where the adult and child are part of a web of mutually occurring action and relation. In this dynamic, while the baby room professional is tasked with providing care, the contribution of the baby is twofold.

First, the baby shares their needs with the baby room professional (Noddings, 2005, 2012). When enacting a rights-based approach to care, it is essential that the carers consider the perspective of the baby and what they may be expressing through their bodies, gestures and vocalisations. Secondly, babies respond to the baby room professional and show that the care has been received (Noddings, 2005, 2012). Without this, the act of caring remains incomplete (Noddings, 2012). Shin

(2015: 498) notes that 'This reciprocity is essential in the caring encounter, which makes the caring encounter valid, rewarding, and meaningful'.

This ushers us into thinking about a rights-based view of the child which acknowledges babies as competent beings who act upon their world in the present, recognising them for who they are now as opposed to solely who they will become (McDowall Clark and Bayliss, 2012). Loizou and Charalambous (2017) suggest that adults can operationalise a rights-based pedagogy by valuing play as a space for children's learning and development; holding space for children to express their ideas, needs and wants; and ensuring that adults view children as equal partners in care and education. Part of this is acknowledging that young children have a unique and valuable perspective on life and, therefore, that their voices should be incorporated in decisions that impact their lives. If ECEC professionals hold this as true, then adults are tasked with listening to children's ideas and partnering with them in education and care (Loizou and Charalambous, 2017).

When applying this to babies, educators must intentionally attune to babies' multi-modal forms of expression, for example through body language and vocalisations. Moreover, a rights-based pedagogy may stem from an attitude of partnership where babies are seen as 'agents in their own everyday lives' (Rockel, 2009: 7). Through this lens, educators can attune to babies' expressed needs and wants in order to enact a meaningful and relevant pedagogy. Salamon and Harrison (2015) found that the baby room professionals in their study valued the babies and toddlers as independent, competent social actors who were able to lead their learning and development. A growing body of research explores how baby room professionals make sense of babies' capabilities and how this construction of babyhood feeds into their practice. Our research aims to further knowledge and understanding about this by exploring the experiences and perspectives of baby room leaders working in UK nurseries.

## Research design

This study explores the following research questions:

- How is babyhood constructed in the accounts of baby room leaders working in UK nurseries?
- How do these constructions shape day to day practice in the baby room of UK nurseries?

This article stems from a wider study that considered the leadership experiences of baby room leaders alongside their social purpose, social pedagogy and how they informally develop the leadership of others. Our research is framed by interpretivism with a commitment to seeking to understand people's perspectives and experiences and the relationships between beliefs and actions (Hammersley, 2012). Therefore, this research seeks to grapple with the underlying thinking behind baby room leaders' behaviours. Moreover, in interpretivism, knowledge is contextually bound; as such, we recognise that both the participants' and the researchers' positioning impact upon the research findings (Hughes, 2020).

The research team is comprised of two researchers with different relations to the baby room. The first author has worked in baby rooms both in the US and the UK, while the second author's research includes a focus on baby room leadership and they lead professional learning experiences designed specifically for BRLs. Participants in this study were engaged through networks established by the second author and so there was already a level of trust between the participants and the researchers. Both members of the research team place significant value on the contributions of baby room professionals and baby room leaders to the sector, positioning them as an essential part of nurseries and society. We recognise that our positioning in relation to the baby room leaders may create an uneven power dynamic in terms of status within the field (McDowall Clark and Baylis,

2012; Redman et al., 2022). However, our familiarity with the baby room, through research, training and practice, has also enabled us to base the research on a common ground of experience and understanding.

We held 14 semi-structured interviews via online meetings with baby room leaders from across the UK, through the platform of Zoom. Semi-structured interviews allowed us to attune to participants' ideas and experiences that we may not have specifically addressed in the interview schedule; moreover, the semi-structured format supported the interviewer and participant to engage in a conversational back-and-forth that helped to build rapport and trust as well as deepen the discussion. Our 15th participant was hesitant to speak with us in an online meeting. We adjusted our research methods to address this expressed need by including a written response option which posed the same questions as the video call interviews, allowing the participant to share their input in a more comfortable way. While the written reflection did not allow us to probe in the same way as we were able to in conversations with the other participants, we felt that it was important to prioritise an inclusive approach. The 14 interviews plus one written response made for a total of 15 participants.

The participants were baby room leaders in nurseries across the UK. Baby room leaders (BRLs) are individuals who self-define as professionals working in the baby room with some leadership responsibility. Practically this translates into having some supervisory capacity within the room that typically serves 0–2 year olds in the nursery. UK nurseries are typically organised into 'rooms' suitable for different age groups (the baby room for 0–2 year olds, the toddler room for 2–3 year olds, and the preschool room for 3–4 year olds). We recruited BRLs with varying levels of experience leading in the baby room, ranging from a few months to over a decade. All of the BRLs had a relevant qualification in early years education. For the majority of participants, working in English settings, this was a level 3 qualification in early years education, which is equivalent to a pre-degree qualification. It is typically achieved through a local college setting through a combination of placements and academic coursework. This qualification is the basic requirement of all staff (including all room leaders and managers) working in an English nursery. All of the baby room leaders worked in private nursery settings. This is representative of baby room leadership in the UK, where children under the age of 2 years are not eligible for subsidised funding and therefore access care most typically through private or voluntary initiatives (PVIs).

Throughout the study, some of the participants asked to receive the questions in advance so they could prepare prior to their interview; this gave a sense of the baby room leaders being nervous and seeking to provide the 'right answers' to our questions. Additionally, as noted above, one participant was hesitant to speak in an online meeting as they felt they would not be able to convey their ideas through a conversation. We reflected on what the nervousness of the baby room leaders meant in terms of positionality within the research. This could stem from baby room leaders being viewed as having a low status across ECEC (McDowall Clark and Baylis, 2012; Redman et al., 2022), potentially stifling their confidence when looked to as a source of knowledge within research.

Therefore, being mindful of this dynamic, during the interviews, the researchers viewed their role as creating a safe and secure space for the participants to share their perspectives and experiences. At the start of the interview, the researcher would briefly share their background as a former ECEC professional. The interview questions centred around the daily experiences of baby room leaders such as their pedagogy and leadership practices. When appropriate throughout the interviews, the researcher would share some of their experiences working with young children in order to build rapport, helping the participant to feel more comfortable and to share more about their experiences and perspective. This conversational back-and-forth was key in the methodology. The interviews, held virtually through Zoom and Microsoft Teams, lasted between 15 and 30 minutes.

From these discussions, the underlying views of the leaders rose to the surface, allowing us to see how they constructed babyhood in their daily practices.

This study obtained ethical approval from Middlesex University, UK. The baby room leaders completed consent forms prior to participation. They were encouraged to voice any questions they had before and after the interview. We have upheld the ethical principle of anonymity throughout this article by using pseudonyms for the BRLs and we are not aware of any identifying details shared in the comments used to elucidate our findings.

The research team had the audio recorded interviews professionally transcribed and then reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. The research team conducted reflexive inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2020) whereby themes emerge from the data through (1) the identification of key words and phrases throughout the transcripts, (2) the development of codes that align with these keywords (so that keywords similar in meaning are represented through the same code) and (3) the organisation of codes into themes and sub-themes. The process is 'reflexive' in that we were aware of our own involvement in the data collection and analysis and how this shapes the findings that emerge. We recognise that were others to carry out a thematic analysis on the same dataset, the emergent themes are likely to be different. Initially, this process was undertaken by both of us individually. We then collaboratively developed this into a shared thematic map organised around three themes, which correspond to the presentation of the findings below.

## Findings

Through reflexive thematic analysis, we identified the following three themes:

1. Constructing babies as receptacles of care
2. The joy of being needed
3. Prioritising developmental milestones

Each of the themes is explained in more detail below and presented alongside illustrative quotes from the baby room leaders. We have used those quotes that either best elucidate the theme or enable further deconstruction of the theme, for example, because of a choice of words made by the participant that prompts further consideration.

### *Constructing babies as receptacles of care*

Many of the BRLs in our study constructed babies as fully reliant on their caregivers, especially for the first few months of life.

> They need you because most of them can't do anything for a few months. They can just barely sit and have a lot of needs. Edith

> They go from doing nothing- can't talk, can't walk, can't even eat- to being almost. . . I was going to say like a human being but they are already. But, you know, like a proper human being. Brianna

> They learn from us, they copy us, they suck everything from us, so I feel if we provide love and care for those children, that's the most important thing at that stage in life. Clara

It is interesting to note the use of 'they' in these comments, which brings a sense of 'otherness' to the babies (Lupton, 2014). Through this language, the interviewer is brought into alignment with

the BRL, forming and cementing the social category of adulthood as the acceptable standard. The self/other binary is reinforced through language such as: 'they learn from us, they copy us, they suck everything from us'. In this dichotomy, adults are conceptualised as those who give and babies are constructed as those who receive. The duality limits the potential to see reciprocity in the care and learning that goes on in the baby room.

The language of 'barely sit there', 'they go from doing nothing', and the repetition of the phrase 'can't' draws the researchers' attention to the aspects that form the babies' otherness. This language can be interpreted as perpetuating a deficit view of babyhood. Clara goes on to share the following:

> Later in preschool, they learn and have to do all that stuff. But in a baby room that's all they really need, is love and care, and I and my team, we try our best to provide that. Clara

In this quote, Clara begins to draw out a construction of the baby as a receptacle of care. She draws a clear line between babies and pre-schoolers based on their capacity for learning. In Clara's distinction, pre-schoolers 'learn' while babies 'copy us, they suck everything from us'. Thus babies' learning and development is imagined as a process of receiving something from the adults around them, while pre-schoolers more actively 'learn and. . . do all that stuff'. Within this discourse, adults are positioned as dispensers of knowledge and development in the baby room; the baby's learning is understood only in relation to the adult rather than as its own dynamic and agentive force in the world. Anna critically engages with this and suggests an alternative construction of babyhood, in which babies are curious and playful learners:

> I find when people are new to the team, a big thing is that they think they will just cuddle the babies all day. But babies don't want cuddles all the time. They want interaction and playing. I think people just assume that they want cuddles because they are babies. They think babies can't play, so why should teachers play with them? That's a big thing that needs to be put across to people: You're coming into work to play, not to just cuddle and sit. Anna

Anna points out that if we adhere to a pedagogy that strictly focuses on love and care, we may fail to engage in playful activities that stimulate and challenge babies. Viewing the baby room as a place to 'just cuddle the babies all day' mirrors the 'helpless' construction placed on the babies. Baby room leaders and practitioners are not solely caregivers, but provocateurs, facilitators of learning and play partners.

Simultaneously though, Anna's construction also creates a hierarchical view of the interactions ECEC professional have with babies whereby 'just cuddles' and learning are seen as distinct from one another, rather than entangled. One way to interpret Anna's comment above is to understand cuddles, touch and affection as lacking value while playful 'learning' interactions are prioritised. This plays into the ideas noted above where the structured learning that occurs in preschool is seen as more important than the affective care of the baby room.

## *The joy of being needed*

Interwoven with the view of the child as a receptacle of care was the BRLs' own personal needs – they joy of being needed:

> Do you know why I think [I enjoy the baby room]? I think it's because babies need us so much, they take everything in so quickly. So, for example, if you compare babies to pre-schoolers, pre-school, in a sense,

> still needs you but they're happy to go off and do their own thing. Whereas babies, they need you, they need your help. Brianna

In this quote, the BRL describes how giving care to the babies, or being needed, gives her joy and satisfaction. However, we also see how the perceived lack of capability in comparison to pre-schoolers is part of the draw of looking after babies ('babies need us so much').

Dina and Linda also expressed the personal satisfaction they find from babies needing their care.

> What I enjoy most about the baby room is that they need you. They want that comfort and you need to be there for them. Dina

> I am a mum. I've got two boys of my own but they grow up and they don't need you so I needed to be needed. So, I went into childcare and I loved it. Linda

Again, the BRLs shared that they are largely motivated by the affective nature of working with babies and in particular, the desire to feel needed by others.

While this construction potentially reinforces the construction of babies as receptacles of care, it simultaneously highlights how babies are social actors and providers of emotional satisfaction, flagging a reciprocal dynamic between the adults and babies. Dina and Linda note the initial action of the babies ('They need you') which evokes the baby room leaders' caregiving response. Once they provide care, the babies respond to show that the care has been received, as detailed by Sonia.

> You have to understand the babies and be one-to-one. You can't just be there and say, 'I'm doing my work'. It's a connection. They make me happy. Children make you happy. Sonia

It is this connection, this mutual relating, that indicates babies do not just soak up the care given to them – they also provide a response that some baby room leaders depend on for a sense of fulfilment, which in turn re-imagines the baby as a powerful social actor. In other words, when baby room professionals experience love within their role, they also need to credit babies with *being* loving. This prompts us to reflect on how babies might be capable, competent and capable social actors *as well as* vulnerable and needing care, and how both of these dimensions are fundamental to the joy and fulfilment of BRLs.

### *Prioritising developmental milestones*

The BRLs in this study typically saw what happens in the baby room in terms of development and more specifically the achievement of new developmental milestones:

> My main priority when a baby starts is that they feel safe, secure, and that they can trust us. However, we also have to think about when the babies leave our room. Obviously, we want them to have started communicating. We hope they can walk and have simple self-help skills like feeding themselves. If they can do that by the time they leave, then we're happy. That's our main goal. Patricia

In these quotes, the division between care and learning is evident. While care is seen as foundational to a good experience in the baby room, there is also a distinct pressure to think about what comes next and how to prepare the babies for this.

> When they move up to the over 2's, they get them ready for school but I think we have to do a lot with them as babies. We have to make sure that they're walking and make sure that they're meeting milestones at the right time. We help them progress a lot in that 2 years. Melanie

> Crawling, getting them to walk, getting them to feed themselves. . . That's our proud moment, that's why we are doing that. We are helping them, supporting them. Sonia

> The first month we have the babies, we see where their development is. Then we will set a next step for them and speak to the parents about our plan. We check the babies every 6 to 8 weeks to see if they've moved on from that and set them a next milestone or help them if they need it. Edith

Articulations of baby room pedagogy among the BRLs were framed by the dominant developmentalist paradigm, in which developmental milestones must be 'ticked off' before babies progress beyond the baby room. This intense forward momentum is driven by the pressure that is seen in the BRLs' language such as 'We have to make sure. . .' and 'that's why we are doing that'. Developmentalism may be one avenue to ensure babies are reaching their individual potential and can fully participate in learning environments. However, issues may arise if we see their worth as dependent on meeting these goals.

> They go from doing nothing- can't talk, can't walk, can't even eat- to being almost. . . I was going to say like a human being but they are already. But, you know, like a proper human being. Brianna

If 'proper' human beings are defined by the ages and stages of developmentalism, babies risk being positioned as 'less than' their older counterparts and always striving to reach the next milestone until they enter adulthood. There is a tension in the BRLs comments between the love and fulfilment that they find working with babies in the present moment, just as they are, and the need to achieve milestones in preparation for what comes next.

Alternatively, Tara notes the role of in-the-moment interactions in her pedagogy with babies.

> They're learning all the time through the interactions that we have constantly. Tara

This begins to hint at a way of learning that slows down and attunes to everyday interactions as they unfold in the moment, a 'slow pedagogy' (Clark, 2023). The emphasis on slow, rich interactions is seen in the BRLs' responses when they focus on love, care and affection:

> The main thing in working with babies is just to love them. You have to understand the babies and be one-to-one. You can't just be there and say, "I'm doing my work." It's a connection. Sonia

> The pedagogy is emotional and attachment led. In the baby room, they need a few more cuddles, it's all a little bit slower. Every kind of moment is a meaningful moment. Bella

It is interesting to consider what might be possible were the discourses of learning and care to be more successfully intertwined in baby room pedagogy. The BRLs in this research, when asked about pedagogy, articulated a vision of learning as something separate from care which organised itself around developmental milestones and 'next-room-readiness' rather than joyful, curious and playful experiences that unfold in the here and now.

## Discussion

Our findings highlight some of the ways that babyhood is constructed in accounts of BRLs and how these constructions impact upon their day to day practice. We found that BRLs sometimes construct babies as helpless receptacles of care that are dependent on adults to learn, grow and develop. The joy that BRLs articulated in relation to 'being needed' by the babies simultaneously positioned babies as more dependent while also opening up the possibility to recognise babies' agency in terms of the powerful impact that they have on the emotional landscape of those around them. In explaining the pedagogy of the baby room, BRLs' responses highlight a tension between the emphasis on achieving milestones with a dominant developmentalist logic and a desire to focus on rich, reciprocal interactions with babies and to revel to in a slow and affect-driven pedagogy.

Our findings feed into contemporary attempts to unsettle and deconstruct developmentalist logic within early years education (Osgood, 2023; Osgood and Sakr, 2019; Sakr et al., 2023). Thinking within the developmentalist paradigm, the BRLs' comments sometimes reinforced a hierarchy based on age, in which babies' perceived inability to do things that their older counterparts could do (such as talking, walking or feeding themselves) overshadows their agency and diminishes their humanity, rendering them immature and incapable (Lupton, 2014). According to Lupton (2012: 38), a constant focus on what babies will become, which is the modus operandi of developmentalism, positions their bodies as they exist now as 'lacking'. This effectively diminishes their agency and pushes adults to view babies as beings that must be shaped and pruned until they become 'adult enough' to participate in the world. On the other hand, other comments made by the BRLs challenge the dominant developmentalist paradigm. Their focus on how bodies connect and reach out to one another in the baby room, and how emotional landscapes are actively shifted and shaped through day to day interactions with babies, open up new possibilities for thinking about babies as powerful social actors that reconfigure the affective trajectories of those around them. The emphasis on love acts as a counter-discourse in baby room pedagogies and early childhood education more broadly (Kalliala, 2014; Page, 2018). While the concept of 'professional love' (Page, 2018), as well as the 'infant practicum' (Recchia et al., 2018), centre the affective realities of early childhood education, the findings presented here lead us to ask the question of how baby pedagogies centred on love might both enable a deeper recognition of babies' agency, self-determination and reciprocity and actively trouble the dominant developmentalist framing of early childhood education.

We hope that the ideas presented in this paper can offer a starting point to BRLs for thinking about and unpicking their own practices. We come to this dialogue in the spirit of the 'pedagogista' (Vintimilla, 2018), hoping to provoke questions, rather than provide ready-made answers. We make no claims regarding the generalisability of this research and recognise fully that our sample was limited in size and reach and cannot be used to make assumptions about the perspectives and experiences of other baby room educators. Instead, we conceptualise and offer up our findings as a launchpad for questions that can guide the reflections of baby room educators but also those designing training routes and professional learning for baby room educators. The research presented here highlights the importance of understanding baby room pedagogies as distinctive and exciting spaces to reflect upon and problematise.

## Conclusion

Through the research presented in this article, we have explored how baby room leaders working in UK nurseries construct babyhood as part of their everyday practice. Through qualitative data collection with 15 baby room leaders, we developed three themes at work in baby room leaders'

constructions of babyhood: (1) babies as receptacles of care, (2) the joy of BRLs in being needed and (3) making sense of babies' learning through a developmentalist lens that emphasises milestones and 'next-room-readiness'. Our analysis reveals tensions in the construction of babyhood among BRLs, which in turn represent opportunities for deepening reflections on baby pedagogies. In particular, the joy experienced by many BRLs with regards to 'being needed by the babies' presents an interesting ambiguity. On the one hand, the emphasis on 'being needed' seems to reinforce characterisations of babies as completely dependent and incapable. On the other hand, the intensity of joy and work fulfilment associated with 'being need' enables us to tune into babies' agency and their capacity to shape the emotional landscape of those around them. An emphasis on love and affect-driven practice in the training and professional learning of baby room professionals would help to challenge narrow developmentalist logic and open up possibilities for rich, slow and attuned interactions in baby pedagogies.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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