



# Social Purpose and Pedagogy in the Baby Room of UK Nurseries: Exploring the What, How and Why of Working with 0–2 Year Olds

Mona Sakr<sup>1</sup> · Kayla Halls<sup>1</sup>

Accepted: 21 October 2024  
© The Author(s) 2024

## Abstract

This article builds on conversations about the nature of a pedagogy specifically for babies, which are defined in this paper as 0–2 year olds. To do this, we explore articulations of social purpose and social pedagogy among 15 baby room educators working in UK nurseries. Our findings suggest four types of social purpose and four types of social pedagogy that inform what baby educators do, how they do it and why they do it. The baby educators in our study articulated their social purpose in terms of providing a secure foundation for childhood and adulthood; acting as a support system for parents; enabling healthy early development; and inspiring learning across the lifespan. Correspondingly, they identified their social pedagogy in terms of giving care and nurture to meet physical and emotional needs; cultivating parent partnerships; planning activities, interactions and resources around developmental goals; and creating provocations to stimulate learning based on individual interests. We hope that this typology helps to deepen our understanding of what baby educators experience and the pedagogies they enact day to day, as well as acting as a reflective tool for baby room educators to use to deepen their practice.

**Keywords** social pedagogy · babies · infants · baby pedagogies · social leadership · social purpose

## Introduction

At the time of writing, England is facing a significant shift in its approach to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) with the extension of the age range of children eligible for a subsidised nursery place. Children as young as nine months old are, for the first time, able to access fifteen subsidised hours of provision each week during school term-time (39 weeks across the year). The shift has prompted a sharp increase in attention directed at the provision currently available for 0–2 year olds, which has traditionally been something of a ‘closed book’, seen broadly as relating to families’ private choices rather than public interests. Questions are now being asked on the public stage in England, about what high-quality ECEC for this age group looks like, how the ECEC workforce are equipped to provide for 0–2

year olds, and what professional learning might be made available to respond to this need.

The research presented in this article is a contribution to the national current but also speaks to global dialogues around ECEC for this age group. It centres and expands on our understanding of pedagogy in the ‘baby room’ of English nurseries, by bringing the concepts of social purpose and social pedagogy to bear on interpreting the approaches that educators take in the baby room. We explore how baby room educators think about and articulate their work in relation to having a social purpose and a social pedagogy. In turn, this contributes to a greater understanding of the professionalism of baby room educators and has practical implications for the development of baby room policy and practice, as well as the development of professional learning for baby room educators.

---

✉ Mona Sakr  
m.sakr@mdx.ac.uk  
Kayla Halls  
k.halls@mdx.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Middlesex University, London, England

## A Note on Terminology

Before moving onto a review of the relevant literature, we want to explicitly acknowledge that we use particular terminology in this paper, which comes with its own associations

and potential challenges. We refer to 0–2 year olds as ‘babies’. We recognise that in other parts of the world, this age group or individuals within this age group would be described as ‘infants’ and/or ‘toddlers’. We have chosen to use ‘babies’ because in an English context, to which our research relates, this is a typical term used to explore the care and education of 0–2 year olds. To describe the environment in which babies are educated and cared for, we use the term ‘baby room’, which is the most common way in England to refer to the learning environment for the youngest children in the nursery. Following on from this, we refer to our participants—those working in the baby room—as baby room educators. We use the term ‘educator’ to more effectively convey the contribution of this workforce to the education of children.

## Baby Educators and Baby Pedagogies

Those who work with babies often report feeling that their contribution is undervalued (Brophy-Herb et al., 2024). In past research, baby room educators have articulated feelings of having to always convince others of the worth of their work, including other colleagues, managers, and parents (Davis & Dunn, 2019; Powell & Goouch, 2012; McDowall Clark & Baylis, 2012).

A lack of value and status for the work of those who work with babies professionally comes hand-in-hand with a lack of vision around what constitutes a ‘baby pedagogy’. We use this term to draw attention to the work of caring for and educating babies as first and foremost a pedagogical act. The term ‘pedagogy’ has a powerful role to play in early childhood education and care, because it enables us to engage with the complex network of values and practices that shape the education and care of young children (Stephen, 2010). It can be difficult for baby room educators to develop and understand their own pedagogical approach, when they are under pressure from multiple directions. Baby educators in a study by Powell and Goouch (2012) expressed how they were often under pressure to respond to parents’ anxieties (for example, around sleep or eating) as a priority above engaging with their own sense of professionalism and pedagogical integrity.

In discussing the nature of a baby pedagogy, Recchia and Shin (2010) discuss an ‘infant practicum’, which is developed through working specifically with 0–2 year olds. They argue that educators working with babies are particularly adept at following the child and fostering what Magda Gerber calls an ‘intent watchfulness’ (Hammond, 2021), which in turn cultivates a deep respect for child-led learning. Similarly, Salamon and Harrison (2015) argue that educators working with babies are often experts in making attentive

and careful observations, documenting learning and communication among babies in deeply attuned and creative ways. Tadeu and Lopes (2021), in their research with Portuguese baby room educators, found that baby pedagogy was characterised by an emphasis on individuality and relationships.

While we know that the experiences children have before the age of two years are profoundly important for their learning, development and wellbeing in childhood and adulthood, professionals who work with babies are typically portrayed as ‘just’ providing care. Professionals working with babies are perceived in relation to this sense of ‘just’-ness; that they are ‘just’ wiping noses or ‘just’ giving cuddles or ‘just’ playing on the floor (Sakr and Halls, 2024). Thus, part of developing baby pedagogies is re-imagining care as a fundamental thread that runs through education, rather than seeing care and education as two separate elements (Gleasure et al., 2024; O’Hara-Gregan, 2022).

Cultivating a new understanding of care feeds into the possibilities of what a baby pedagogy might look and feel like. Shin (2015) proposes a ‘pedagogy of care’ in which caring is seen as an entanglement of physical, emotional and intellectual engagement. Changing a nappy or bottle feeding are acts of caring but they are also learning experiences from their beginning to their end. Learning and caring cannot, therefore, be separated from one another (Cutler, 2022; Taggart, 2016). A vision of interwoven learning and care is at the heart of Emmi Pikler’s approach, which is developed through *Resources for Infant Educators* (RIE) materials for educators in the US (Bussey & Hill, 2017). *RIE* suggests that care *is* curriculum. That is, care routines are seen as a rich opportunity for babies’ learning. During a nappy change for example, a baby is learning through their communicative exchange with the adult. They are learning not just language through this exchange, but many other things about the world including how consent works, how to work with others, how to meet some of their own physical needs and how to move their body to express themselves (Rockel, 2009).

## Social Leadership

Social leadership is a model of leadership in ECEC that stresses the need to lead with social purpose. Models of leadership in the sector, often borrowed from private business, have not typically reflected this (Nicholson et al., 2020). In O’Sullivan and Sakr (2022), we suggest that this reality is due to the economic fragmentation of the sector, which occurs when ECEC is provided through a mixed market economy, as it is in England. As a result of this economic fragmentation, leaders often see their work in terms

of ‘making ends meet’ or securing financial sustainability rather than prioritising the social purpose that most likely brought them into the sector in the first place.

The model of social leadership proposes multiple interwoven elements, the most important of which is social purpose: ‘social leadership starts and ends with social purpose’ (O’Sullivan and Sakr, 2022, p. 13). In the social leadership model, social purpose is defined as the way in which individuals and organisations seek to make the world a better place: to ‘be an engine for good and a positive force in society’ (p. 17). The second element in the model is the implementation of a social pedagogy, which is conceptualised as the processes through which the social purpose can be brought to life and realized in daily practice. For example, if a leader articulates their social purpose as increasing social capital among young children and families, it should be clear how they achieve this through the social pedagogy which is implemented every day in the setting.

In the research presented here, we explored the extent to which educators who work with babies make sense of their work in terms of a social purpose and a social pedagogy and whether their articulations regarding the contribution they make implicitly or explicitly capture their social purpose and pedagogy. The aim of uncovering this is to see whether such a vision of social purpose and social pedagogy might infuse, deepen and extend the emergent understanding of baby pedagogy described in the previous section. This might in turn help to bring a stronger foundation of professionalism to those who work with babies, and in turn expand the potential for high quality care and learning in the baby room.

## Research Design

This study explores the following research questions:

- Do baby room educators articulate their work in relation to a social purpose?? If so, how is this social purpose conceptualised?
- Do baby room educators think about their work in relation to a social pedagogy? If so, how is this social pedagogy conceptualised?

We have taken an interpretivist approach to the research, prioritising people’s perspectives, experiences, beliefs and actions rather than seeking an objective or singular ‘truth’ (Hammersley, 2012) and recognising our own positionality in relation to the study and its findings (Hughes, 2020).

We are two researchers with particular relationships to the topic under study and the participants in this study. The first author’s research has particularly focused on leadership

in the baby room of UK nurseries and they provide professional learning experiences in this space. This positioning is relevant to the study because the participants in this study were found through pre-existing networks of the first author, established mostly through professional learning experiences for baby room leaders. The second author has worked as a baby room professional both in the US and the UK, before entering academia as a researcher. This positioning is relevant because it shaped how the interviews were conducted (relaxed, open, empathic) and the rapport established between participants and researcher. It is worth noting that both authors place great value on the contribution of educators who work with babies and are invested in seeing greater value placed across the sector on a deeper understanding of baby pedagogies. We are therefore not impartial analysts of the data we have gathered, but hope instead through this research to impact the sector in a way we perceive to be positive.

The research involved 14 semi-structured interviews conducted online with baby room educators recruited from across the UK. The semi-structured interview schedule translated into engaging conversations, where the researcher (the second author) was able to probe and encourage responses. This was important because we have found through our research that baby room educators can sometimes lack confidence and that reassurance and a relaxed tone is therefore vital. In addition to the 14 interviews, we included the views of a 15th participant via a written response to the interview questions. Originally the 15th participant had agreed to being interviewed, but closer to the event, felt hesitant and nervous about the opportunity. We offered an alternative approach which was for us to send her the interview questions via email and for her to respond in writing. While the written responses did not enable us to probe and the participant to expand upon ideas, we felt that it was important to approach this scenario inclusively and find a way for this particular participant to still be a part of the study.

The interviews lasted between 15 and 30 min and were hosted online. The questions in the interview explored whether participants saw their work in relation to a social purpose and social pedagogy. Our questions explored this both explicitly and implicitly:

- Tell me a bit about how you became a baby room leader and why you chose this career for yourself.
- What values do you bring to your work as a baby room leader? How do those values show up in the work that you do?
- Are you guided by a social purpose?
  - Do you think about your work in terms of making the world a better place? How so?

- Tell me about your pedagogical approach.
  - How would you describe your pedagogical approach?
  - What's most important in your pedagogy with babies?
  - How did you develop your pedagogy?
  - Who has inspired your pedagogical approach?
  - How do you communicate this approach to others?

The question 'Do you see your work in terms of making the world a better place? If so, how?' was used to understand whether participants felt that they were making a social contribution through their work in the baby room. Although we asked them first the question 'Are you guided by a social purpose?', we found that the question 'Do you see your work in terms of making the world a better place?' was more helpful in enabling participants to reflect on their perceptions of working in the baby room in a wider social context. To support openness, we designed questions that we felt would best support participants to explore their thoughts, feelings and experiences. The design of these questions was based on our experience of conversations with baby room educators as part of our day to day work.

All 15 participants were baby room educators in nurseries across the UK. Our participants came with different levels of experience of working with babies, ranging from a few months to many years. Thirteen of the 15 participants were based in England, while one was working in Scotland and another in Northern Ireland. All of the participants held at least a level 3 qualification in early years education, which is a pre-degree qualification that constitutes the basic requirement of all staff working in an English nursery (with higher qualifications required in the other three nations of the UK). All of the baby room leaders worked in private nurseries. This is as you would expect since at the time of gathering data children under the age of two years were not eligible for subsidised funding and could therefore only access ECEC through private or voluntary settings. All of our participants are women.

Ethical approval from Middlesex University was obtained prior to data collection and we followed the ethical guidelines of the British Education Research Association (BERA, 2018). We have anonymised all of the comments that are shared in the findings section below, using pseudonyms rather than codes as a way to create a stronger sense of the participants as whole people. The comments we have included here do not include any details that could be used to identify a particular individual.

The audio recorded interviews were professionally transcribed and then checked for accuracy by the second author, who had gathered the data. We coded the transcripts,

following the stages outlined in Braun and Clarke's (2020) reflexive inductive thematic analysis. This involves identifying keywords and phrases in the transcripts, developing codes as a way to start seeing patterns between keywords, and finally organising these codes into a thematic map comprising themes and sub-themes. We carried out this process individually first, before combining our emergent thematic maps to collaboratively construct the final set of themes. Reaching the final thematic map depended on dialogue, as there were many similarities between our individual maps but also some differences. For example, while we both distinguished between articulations of social purpose that focused more on secure attachment, learning and family relationships, only Author 1 had distinguished between a focus on learning that was articulated in the language of development versus a more open conceptualisation of learning and learning dispositions across the lifetime. To decide collaboratively whether such a distinction was analytically useful, we returned to the coded quotes and discussed the difference in relation to the data. Discussing such distinctions helped to strengthen the analysis, and the final list of themes was reached through a collaborative and iterative process.

Reflexive inductive thematic analysis is a development on Braun and Clarke's (2006) earlier model of thematic analysis, because it highlights the positioning of the author in the development of themes. It readily recognises that part of thematic analysis is the researcher's interpretations, which are themselves shaped by many factors pertinent to the researcher. What this practically means is that were we to share our dataset with another researcher, it is likely that their emergent themes would show some similarities but also differences (just as in the case of our individual thematic maps, which have both fed into the development of the final map we share here).

While analysis depends on the positioning of the person/people carrying it out, we have also applied various indicators of quality in qualitative research. Following the understanding of credibility as proposed in Tracy (2010), we have illustrated each theme through multiple quotes as a way to 'show rather than tell' the theme. Quotes have been chosen that best illustrate the themes in action, but we have also tried to give a clear sense of the extent to which this theme was general across participants or more specific to particular individuals. In our analysis, we have noticed not just *what* participants have said, but *how* they have said it, as an attempt to delve into tacit knowledge and what remains unsaid.

## Findings: Articulating Social Purpose

Four themes emerged when we looked at how the baby room educators had articulated their social purpose.

1. Providing a secure emotional and social foundation.
2. Acting as a support system for parents.
3. Hitting developmental milestones.
4. Inspiring learning across the lifespan.

Each theme is expanded on below with illustrative quotes from the participants.

### Providing a Secure Emotional and Social Foundation

Eight of the participants explained their purpose in terms of providing a secure emotional and social foundation in the first two years of life. For example, Mileysi expressed that secure attachment in the baby room acts as a foundation for life and Ada explained her purpose as helping children to feel secure, safe and happy so that they can thrive in later life:

We're helping these children grow up and become adults at some point, and I think obviously birth to 5 is such an important age and teaching them a lot of lessons and values. (Ada)

Sammy at first shrugged off the idea that her work was driven by a wider social purpose that would contribute to making the world a better place ('I wouldn't say making the world a better place... it's more the children, I'm making their lives better') but later agreed that through making individual children's lives better she was impacting positively on the world: 'So I suppose it is making the world a better place, because then they'll grow up having that love and care, and the development they need to reach the goals in their life'. Puneet also imagined the babies as future adults: 'we help them to better people, which will make our world better'. The baby room educators present early positive interactions and trusting relationships as the basis for producing a generation of people who are 'better people'. What makes people 'better' seems to be that they have are capable of loving and trusting others ('having that love and care') and building meaningful relationships:

I think it's massively important for their development as they grow up and get older to know that people can be trusted, and that they know their safety, and they're able to manage risks confidently. (Puneet)

Comments relating to this idea of building a secure foundation often indicated that the baby room acted as a substitute home and family for the babies. The implication was that in

an ideal world, babies would spend their time at home with a loving family in order to gain a secure emotional footing in the world. Following from this, some of the baby room educators expressed their role in these terms, that is, as a substitute home, family and parent. For example, Natalie said 'we are their family— it's our job to make them feel loved and cared for' and Molly described her contribution as 'ultimately being their mum... that nurturing, making sure their needs are met'. The repeated use of the term 'home from home' across several interviews shows the importance that baby room educators placed on providing emotional and social support which they associated with a loving home environment.

### Acting as a Support System for Parents

Five participants talked about their relationship with parents when articulating their contribution to the world. They saw their work at least partly in terms of providing a helpful support system for parents and carers, which in turn benefited the babies.

Kim talked passionately about reassuring parents and supporting them, so that they felt less lonely and anxious. She saw this as particularly important following the pandemic, which she felt had made parents and families feel more isolated and unsure of how to meet their babies' needs.

For parents coming out of COVID, I think that makes a difference as well that we're here for them to lean on... They were lonely, they were anxious, I've had so many more parents now getting upset, crying more, anxious about bring their child in...you are there emotionally for parents. (Kim)

Puneet also focused on the need to soothe parents' anxiety as a baby room educator:

You can pick up on the parents anxiety through the children's anxiety. When the parents are very anxious, and they *have* to leave their children because they *have* to work, and there's no other option and you can see that the parents are breaking their heart having to do that, the children are picking up on that...So I think, for the baby room, it is utmost importance of having that trust and relationships with parents to know that actually, it's okay. (Puneet)

Margaret and Coral's responses placed a similar emphasis on the relationship with parents, but they were less focused on providing an emotional support system for the parents, and instead emphasised practical teamwork with parents. For example, Coral explains:

We also try to work with the parents. So they find it easier at home. If there have been hard times with the babies, we try our best to help as much as we can just so everybody's happy and we all have happy lives.

The quote illustrates how from Coral's perspective it is important that parents are thriving as parents, that they 'find it easier at home'. Thus, the relationships with parents do not only matter for the sake of what happens in the baby room day to day, but are important as a way to build up parents' confidence with their children. From this perspective, the baby room educators see themselves as in a team with the parents supporting healthy development, through reassurance and guidance.

### Hitting Developmental Milestones

Five participants emphasised that their main purpose was to enable early development among babies, so that the babies successfully achieve developmental milestones in the first two years of life. Coral explained that following an initial settling period, in which the emphasis is on safety, security and trust, her focus would shift to thinking about developmental milestones for the baby to move towards:

When the babies leave our room... we want them to have started talking, communicating. We hope they can walk and have just simple self-help skills like feeding themselves, and as long as all of them are met by the time they leave, then we're happy. That's our main goal. Nine times out of ten, they do. (Coral)

Similarly, Eve expressed her role as 'to make sure they're meeting important milestones' and Zara also focused on milestones: 'it's the first milestones where we put so much effort into getting them to sit, from rolling over to sitting, to crawling, to walking, to talking'. Mileysi adopted a similar list of milestones: 'crawling, getting them to walk, getting to feed themselves'. An interesting feature of all of these comments is the portrayal of these developmental milestones as effortful. Rather than positioning crawling and walking as processes that will naturally unfold if babies have adequate opportunity and stimulation, the baby room educators use phrases like 'we put so much effort into' and 'getting them to', which seem to indicate that a common perception is that early healthy development is dependent on adults' level of commitment and investment of energy.

### Inspiring Learning Across the Lifespan

Three participants understood their contribution in terms of deepening and extending babies' learning in such a way

that they would inspire learning across the entire lifespan. This went beyond both providing a secure emotional and social foundation and hitting developmental milestones and instead engaged with a broader and more open sense of learning. One of the participants, Lisa, explained that the first two years of life would shape the rest of a person's outlook on life:

Everything they learn from the age of when they're conceived until two, that shows me what they might be when they grow up, how they're going to interact with people, how they'd solve problems, how they'd help themselves to help the world.

Similarly, Stacie's described the impact of the baby room in a way that goes well beyond a secure emotional and social foundation: 'we say they've developed their wings to fly'. The emphasis in these comments is on independence, agency and potential: 'they're the thinkers and doers of the future' (Stacie). The aspiration here is to prompt curiosity, creativity and imagination in a way which stay with individuals for the rest of their lives:

What we do will enhance them for the rest of their lives. Through our environment and all the beautiful resources that we provide, the provocations that we set up. It really inspires their curiosity and imagination...to encourage the awe and wonder in the children. These are the skills that they need to have for the future, so if we can start now and they can have all that here, then when they go to school and on and on and on they'll have that instilled for them forever. (Stacie)

Zara also places the focus on encouraging positive learning dispositions, rather than securing specific milestones. She talks about role modelling positivity to the babies:

I think we are their first role models, so it's good practice for us to always be positive and always have a 'can do' attitude in our room...the children are learning from us because we are their first role models. (Zara)

### Articulating Social Pedagogy

To learn more about how baby room leaders carried out their social purpose through pedagogy, we asked them to articulate the pedagogy of the baby room. Four themes emerged from participants' responses to this question. These were:



1. Giving care and nurture to meet physical and emotional needs.
2. Cultivating parent partnerships.
3. Planning activities, interactions and resources around developmental goals.
4. Creating provocations to stimulate learning based on individual interests.

Each theme is expanded on below with illustrative quotes from the participants.

### Care and Nurture to Meet Physical and Emotional Needs

Eight participants described their pedagogy in terms of providing loving care and attention in order to meet the physical and emotional needs of each baby. Mileysi likened the work to the nursing profession, which highlights the extent to which the focus is on physically caring for others. Natalie echoed this focus on care:

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... the way we hold them, the way we talk to them... if they need a wee cuddle.

Stacie also stressed care and security and wanting to make the baby room feel like home. Ada described the pedagogy of the setting as 'attachment-led', which again highlights the importance to her of cultivating close and loving relationships with the babies.

Care was typically conceptualised by the educators as something that would be given by the educator to the baby, rather than as a more reciprocal act, as Sammy's comment shows:

While they're at nursery, their life is better being at nursery because they are cared for, they're getting the care that they need. They're getting the nappy changes, the feeding, the developing the learning. (Sammy)

The repetition of 'getting' in Sammy's comment, and the final statement that the babies can 'gain that development' prompts us to consider and possibly problematise the positioning of the babies and the educators in relation to one another. In particular, care seems to be presented as something that is showered upon babies and received by them passively. Their development is not necessarily within them, but instead something that they 'can gain' (Noddings, 2005, 2012).

Ana's conceptualisation of care appears to be distinct from this in that it centres on tuning into babies' needs as

they are (actively) communicated and responding to them in order to cultivate a trusting relationship. The following anecdote captures this sense of care as a bi-directional exchange rather than as something which is bestowed upon the baby by the adult:

So, we have a little girl in, at the moment that loves to listen to 'Baby Shark' and that is something that helps settle her. So, I, literally, listen to 'Baby Shark' all the time, like, I'm quite happy to go and put it on. She'll stand by the door and she'll say, 'Baby Shark,' and I'll go and get the music and we'll have it, so, I think I'm quite in tune to how they're feeling. (Ana)

From this perspective, care involves interpreting babies' communication and tuning into what they are agentively sharing in the moment. This suggests a less passive view of babies' care.

### Cultivating Parent Partnerships

Eight participants emphasised the importance of developing close relationships with parents as part of their pedagogical approach. For example, Kim described drawing the parents into the nursery through 'stay and play' and having reassuring conversations while Natalie explored the importance of deepening communication with parents:

...stripping back and finding out about children's backgrounds, parents backgrounds, their emotional wellbeing. If the child is upset in the morning, there is a cause to that, and there might be something at home going on. So we need to sort of care and ask the parents, 'Is everything okay?' (Natalie).

Building on this, Ada expressed the view that strong relationships with parents are as important as the relationships with the babies and similarly, Puneet explained that developing trust among babies is dependent on gaining the trust of the parent. This is done through reassurance and building the confidence of the parent to interact with staff in the baby room. Similarly, Molly expressed that it was important to 'put their [parents'] mind at ease'.

Some of the educators saw their relationship with parents extending beyond reassurance and trust, to include offering practical support and guidance to parents around the care of their baby:

When they to come to us for advice, like for safe sleeping, we advise them on that, and like, with the transition of like going on from formula to cows' milk.

We can't really tell them what to do, because that's not our place, but we can give them advice. (Sammy)

In Coral's baby room, she described how they meet with parents on a monthly basis through home-link meetings to discuss their baby's development. They also send home activity bags to support parents' engagement with their baby at home and to prompt deeper conversations about development. Interestingly, the way that Coral and Sammy talk about their role in relation to parents is akin to what we might expect in the UK of health visitors, who aim to build the confidence of new parents in caring for their baby and supporting their development.

### Planning Activities, Interactions, and Resources Around Developmental Goals

Five participants' articulation of their pedagogy centred on how they plan support for babies to meet developmental milestones, such as talking, walking and feeding themselves. For example, Kim shared an example of a baby who they are trying to help become more mobile. When this baby has 'tummy time', they do not enjoy it and so that has become a starting point for Kim's planning:

We've been working out how we can help her to be on the move a bit more because she's getting frustrated. So how can we help? And we realized with the mobile back out, that's helped her.

Margaret described planning around children's next steps, focusing on particular children, setting specific goals and laying out the right resources. For example, if a child was working up to taking their first step, they would make sure that lots of walking aids were available: 'we've got lots of different things to hold onto and walk around in our nursery'. The parents are drawn into this developmental planning:

The first month that they're in, we will be focusing on them watching, seeing where they are, seeing where their development is and then we will set a next step for them and then we'd speak to the parent and say, this is what we are working on here at nursery for the moment. (Margaret)

Similarly, both Stacie and Carol focused on routines and resources to support with development, and interactions centred around demonstrating, modelling and narrating skills to the babies:

It starts by just you demonstrating, so we're always constantly demonstrating and talking about what

we're doing. So we start off by putting the shoes on the children for them, talking about it, showing them what we're doing, and as time goes on they will then start to try. (Stacie)

### Creating Provocations to Stimulate Learning Based on Individual Interests

Five participants explained that their pedagogical approach involved finding out about babies' individual interests and responding to these with provocations that would deepen child-led learning. Lisa described a range of approaches and models that they implement in the room as a way to deepen learning. These included taking inspiration from High Scope in how they extend vocabulary among the babies, and implementing a 'Physical Club' where indoor equipment would be brought out to give a boost to babies' gross motor development. As well as these learning activities, Lisa stressed recognition and respect for children's agency: 'we are giving the children that empowerment to know what they want to do and how they want to do it'.

Puneet described using in-the-moment planning, having focus children, following children's interests, relying on key person knowledge and parent insights to understand what children are interested in and how this can become the launchpad for activities and interactions:

We have these relationships with the parents to say, 'Next week your child is going to be my focus child. Could you tell me about anything that they might be interested in at home', and we again keep that dialogue open all the time. (Puneet)

This approach allows for flexibility and sometimes this means that care routines work around child-led interests:

It's okay if we have lunch half an hour late today because they're having fun. (Puneet)

Stacie also described the importance of knowing your key children's interests and building on these to 'further that interest by adding lots of curious things'. Pasang similarly explained that they follow the child's lead and find out from the parents what a child likes and what experiences they have had at home. They can then plan for a balance of familiar and novel experiences.



## Discussion

We identified four themes in how baby room educators articulate their social purpose and four associated themes in the articulation of a social pedagogy. Building on a rich tradition of attachment-led practice, many of the educators focused on providing a secure emotional and social foundation through care and nurture (Page, 2018; Elfer & Page, 2015; Dolby, 2023). Other baby room educators placed an emphasis on acting as a support network for parents and building parents' confidence through strong and meaningful relationships. This builds on conceptualisations of the work of infant-toddler teachers in the US as suggested by Lang (2016), who puts forward a co-caring model for establishing meaningful relationships between ECEC provision and families. Sometimes, baby room educators focused on their role in supporting babies to hit developmental milestones in the first two years of life, such as walking and talking. Previous research has explored how the developmentalist paradigm can frame and often limit baby room practice (Sakr, 2023; Sakr and Halls, 2024; Cheeseman, 2017), so that educators feel under pressure to teach babies how to do particular things rather than explore learning in a more open way. Finally, the research presented here suggests that some baby room educators see their contribution as inspiring lifelong learning dispositions among babies. They tend to focus on child-led learning, through provocations that respond to children's interests, as a way to spark curiosity, creativity and imagination. This type of practice has been highlighted in previous research that shines a light on how open-ended learning can manifest in the baby room (e.g., Cheeseman, 2017; Degotardi, 2017).

We hope that exploring baby room educators' perspectives and experiences through the lens of social purpose and social pedagogy can help us to build a deeper understanding of baby pedagogies as they manifest currently and what they might look like in the future. From the analysis presented here, we can see that baby pedagogies do not follow a single thread and that even for individual participants, there is typically more than one facet to their pedagogical approach with babies. In viewing the purpose-pedagogy relationships presented here, we can begin to ask questions about whether one of these ideals is more desirable than the others. Alternatively, we might explore whether these articulations are not in fact distinctive ways of carrying out a baby pedagogy, but are in fact entangled threads of a fuller and richer baby pedagogy. This builds on the ideas of Rockel (2009) and Shin (2015) around a 'pedagogy of care', as well as Richardson and Langford's (2022) 'care-full pedagogy'. In these approaches, care routines are opportunities for emotional connection, development in all domains and a chance to share deeper messages about learning, exploration and

independence. If we take this multi-faceted approach, the benefits of providing care and nurture to offer a secure physical and emotional foundation does not need to be compared against the benefits of creating provocations to stimulate lifelong learning. Instead, these are potentially two complementary dimensions of what unfolds in the baby room and baby room educators are striving for a web of practice that spans these perspectives on social purpose and pedagogy.

There are implications of the research presented here for policy and practice. The article constitutes evidence for the professional impact of baby room educators on the lives of very young children and their families. This supports a view of the baby educator as a professional and the need to support professionalisation across the sector. In a UK context, this depends on a suite of interwoven measures including appropriate remuneration for those who work in the baby rooms and the development of specialist qualifications and professional learning pathways for those who work with under-2s. Developing practice in the baby room depends on open dialogues as part of initial training and ongoing professional learning about what is currently occurring and our aspirations for the future. The quotes and commentary presented in this article can be a helpful way to provoke discussions about current and future practice. For example, research can help to push back against limiting developmentalist discourses that fixating baby room educators on hitting milestones rather than taking a more open and creative approach to learning. The research therefore has relevance to training providers who want to develop professional learning tailored to the baby room context.

We recognise that the categorisation of social purpose and social pedagogy that we present here is far neater than the reality of people's actual experiences and perspectives. Our participants' own realities are much messier than a list of themes suggests, though we think the list is a useful tool. We also recognise that, with a sample of 15 participants, we have not gathered a comprehensive list of possible articulations of social purpose and social pedagogy. We expect that were this research to be extended with other baby room educators, other articulations of social purpose and social pedagogy would emerge. Future research could deepen the dialogues opened up here through engaging a wider and more diverse sample of participants, perhaps with comparisons between baby room educators that work or have been trained in different contexts. It would also be helpful for future research to look at the articulations presented here in action. Rather than relying on baby room educators' explanations of their social purpose and social pedagogy, it would be insightful to see how these articulations play out in the everyday action of the baby room through observations of practice.

## Conclusion

In this article, we worked with the interviews and written responses of 15 baby room educators to contribute to dialogues about baby pedagogies. We hope that the findings expand on our understanding of provision for 0–2 year olds, by offering an insight into how different baby room educators make sense of what they do, how they do it and why they do it. Our findings present four themes in how baby room educators articulate their social purpose (providing a secure foundation for childhood and adulthood; acting as a support system for parents; enabling healthy early development; and inspiring learning across the lifespan). We also present four themes in the articulation social pedagogy (giving care and nurture to meet physical and emotional needs; cultivating parent partnerships; planning activities, interactions and resources around developmental goals; and creating provocations to stimulate learning based on individual interests). While we recognise that these articulations of social purpose and social pedagogy among baby room educators are not comprehensive and would benefit from further exploration, we hope that they offer a useful starting point for developing dialogues around the work of baby room educators and emergent baby pedagogies.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>
- British Education Research Association (2018). *Ethical guidelines for educational research*, (4th edition). <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018>
- Brophy-Herb, H. E., Stacks, A. M., Frosch, C. (2024). The effects of a relationship focused professional development intervention on infant and toddler teachers' mindfulness-based strategies for coping. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 52, 243–257. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01416-0>
- Bussey, K., & Hill, D. (2017). Care as curriculum: Investigating teachers' views on the learning in care. *Early Child Development and Care*, 187(1), 128–137.
- Cheeseman, S. (2017). Narratives of infants' encounters with curriculum: Beyond the curriculum of care. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 18(1), 55–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949117692243>
- Cuttler, M. (2022). Pedagogical leadership in practice with babies. In M. Sakr, & J. O'Sullivan (Eds.), *Pedagogical leadership in early childhood education: Conversations from across the world*. Bloomsbury.
- Davis, B., & Dunn, R. (2019). Professional identity in the infant room. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 44(3), 244–256.
- Degotardi, S. (2017). Joint attention in infant-toddler early childhood programs: Its dynamics and potential for collaborative learning. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 18(4), 409–421.
- Dolby, R. (2023). 'Supporting educators' emotional work with infants and their families around transitions at the start of the day', *Early Years*, 43(3), 576–589. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2023.235911>
- Elfer, P., & Page, J. (2015). 'Pedagogy with babies: perspectives of eight nursery managers', *Early Child Development and Care*, 185(11–12), 1762–1782. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2015.1028399>
- Gleasure, S., Devine, D., Martinez Sainz, G., et al. (2024). This is where the care can step up: a typology of nurturing pedagogies in primary schools serving low-income communities during COVID-19 closures. *Journal of Early Childhood Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-024-01636-6>.
- Hammersley, M. (2012). *What is qualitative research?* Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hammond, R. A. (2021). Seeing infants differently: Magda Gerber's contributions to the early care and education field and their continuing relevance. *Early Childhood Development and Care*, 191(7–8), 1302–1315.
- Hughes, P. (2020). *Doing early childhood research*. Routledge.
- Lang, S. N. (2016). 'A cocaring framework for infants and toddlers: Applying a model of coparenting to parent–teacher relationships', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 34, 40–52. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2015.08.004>
- McDowall Clark, R., & Baylis, S. (2012). Wasted down there': policy and practice with the under-threes. *Early Years*, 32(2), 229–242.
- Nicholson, J., Kuhl, K., Maniates, H., Lin, B., & Bonetti, S. (2020). A review of the literature on leadership in early childhood: Examining epistemological foundations and considerations of social justice. *Early Child Development and Care*, 190(2), 91–122.
- Noddings, N. (2005). Identifying and responding to needs in education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 35(2), 147–159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640500146757>
- Noddings, N. (2012). The caring relation in teaching. *Oxford Review of Education*, 38(6), 771–781. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2012.745047>
- O'Hara-Gregan, J. (2022). Caring for the carers: The intersection of care and mindful self-compassion in early childhood teaching. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01432-0>
- O'Sullivan, J. & Sakr, M. (2022). *Social Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care: An Introduction*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Page, J. (2018). Characterising the principles of professional love in early childhood care and education. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 26(2), 125–141.
- Powell, S., & Gooch, K. (2012). Whose hand rocks the cradle? Parallel discourses in the baby room. *Early Years*, 32(2), 113–127.
- Recchia, S. L., & Shin, M. (2010). Baby teachers': How pre-service early childhood students transform their conceptions of teaching

- and learning through an infant practicum. *Early Years*, 30(2), 135–145.
- Richardson, B., & Langford, R. (2022). Care-full pedagogy: Conceptualizing feminist care ethics as an overarching critical framework to interrupt the dominance of developmentalism within post-secondary early childhood education programs. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 23(4), 408–420. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14639491221120037>
- Rockel, J. (2009). A pedagogy of care: moving beyond the margins of managing work and minding babies. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 34(3), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/183693910903400302>
- Sakr, M. (2023). The everyday advocacy work of the baby room leader. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14639491231168942>
- Sakr, M., & Halls, K. (2024). ‘Dissensus’ and the emergence of activist leadership in the baby room of UK early childhood settings. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17461979241241514>
- Salamon, A., & Harrison, L. (2015). Early childhood educators’ conceptions of infants’ capabilities: the nexus between beliefs and practice. *Early Years (London England)*, 35(3), 273–288. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2015.1042961>
- Shin, M. (2015). Enacting caring pedagogy in the infant classroom. *Early Child Development and Care*, 185(3), 496–508. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2014.940929>
- Stephen, C. (2010). Pedagogy: The silent partner in early years learning. *Early years*, 30(1), 15–28.
- Tadeu, B., & Lopes, A. (2021). Early years educators in baby rooms: An exploratory study on professional identities. *Early Years*, 1–16. Available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2021.1905614>
- Taggart, G. (2016). Compassionate pedagogy: The ethics of care in early childhood professionalism. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 24(2), 173–185.
- Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight “big-tent” criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative inquiry*, 16(10), 837–851.

**Publisher’s Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.