

‘Dissensus’ and the emergence of activist leadership in the baby room of UK early childhood settings

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Abstract

In the context of a chronically under-funded and fragmented Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector in England, there is an urgent need for models of leadership that emphasise action and advocacy. In the baby room, where pay, conditions and status are at their lowest, this is particularly the case. In this article, building on the model of activist leadership put forward by Woodrow and Busch, we consider ‘dissensus’ as a foundation for activist leadership among baby room leaders working in English nurseries. Dissensus is the willingness to express and explore differences, disagreements and tensions. In gathering the perspectives and experiences of 15 baby room leaders, we identified three threads of dissensus which we consider in this article: (1) the desire for baby room educators’ contributions to be recognised as more than ‘just care’, (2) feelings of resentment around being overlooked and undermined by ECEC colleagues outside of the baby room and (3) questions around pay and conditions in the baby room. We consider these threads of dissensus as a potential starting point for activist leadership in the baby room.

Keywords

activist leadership, advocacy, baby pedagogy, baby room, dissensus, early childhood education and care, early years, leadership, pedagogy

Introduction

The ECEC sector in England is under-funded, fragmented and suffering from a workforce crisis. Issues around pay, conditions and professional learning are more intense in the baby room of nurseries, which serve 0–2 year olds and their families (Sakr, 2023). In this context, there is a desperate need for visions of leadership that centre on advocacy and activism. In this article, building on the concept of activist leadership as suggested by Woodrow and Busch (2008), we consider ‘dissensus’ as a foundation for activist leadership. Dissensus is the willingness to express and discuss differences, problems and tensions. Without dissensus, ECEC professionals are trapped in a narrow vision of their caring role which equates care with consensus and ultimately keeping others happy. Our research looks for threads of dissensus as they emerge among baby room leaders working in

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English nurseries and asks whether these threads might represent opportunities for the development of activist leadership in the sector.

The first part of the article offers an introduction to the ECEC sector as it operates in England and an overview of leadership as it is (problematically) conceptualised in the sector. We then introduce the model of activist leadership as it is presented by Woodrow and Busch (2008) and focus in on the role of dissensus as a starting point for activist leadership. After outlining our research, we engage with three threads of dissensus present in our interviews with baby room leaders. These are (a) the desire for baby room professionals' contribution to be recognised as more than 'just care', (b) the resentment around feeling overlooked and undermined by ECEC colleagues outside of the baby room and (c) questions around pay and conditions in the baby room. In the discussion, we offer an expanded vision of activist leadership, which takes our findings into account by suggesting that professionals may be willing to express dissensus about particular issues and not others. In the case of baby room leaders, there was more confidence in challenging how their work was seen and understood with others but a heavy silence existed around the issue of pay and conditions for those working in the baby room. We argue that models of activist leadership need to consider the reasons underlying such silences and what would be required in order to break the silence.

Early childhood education and care: Context in England

England is like much of the world when it comes to ECEC funding in that the sector receives significantly less financial investment than other parts of the education system. OECD statistics show that while funding per year for education of children aged 5–18 years is well over 10,000 USD, only 4000 USD is spent on children aged 0–5 years (OECD, 2022). ECEC in England is provided through a mixed economy, where about 75% of places for children are provided through diverse forms of private and voluntary initiative (PVIs) while the rest are provided via state-maintained settings, such as nursery schools or nursery classes within primary schools. This mixed economy, each part of which contains considerable diversity, has been shown to lead to a two-tier workforce. Pay and conditions of those staff working in state-maintained settings is significantly better than those seen within PVI settings (Bonetti, 2020). Similar hierarchies have been remarked upon in various other global contexts, including Australia (Cumming et al., 2015) and the US (Johnson Harbach, 2015).

While recognising these differences across the sector, it is fair to say that pay and conditions are uniformly poor (Bonetti, 2020). Pay received by those working as ECEC professionals is equivalent or less than pay received by unskilled retail workers. Furthermore, there is a lack of investment in qualifications, training pathways and professional learning for those working in the sector and gaining qualifications that go beyond the entry-level baseline does not significantly change an individual's earning capacity or even their professional status (Early Years Workforce Commission, 2021).

The English ECEC sector faces a current recruitment and retention crisis. The number of paid staff working in the sector is in decline and 84% of providers self-report that they are unable to recruit the staff that they need in order to effectively run their provision (Early Years Alliance, 2021). According to members of the workforce, the most common reasons for leaving the sector are feeling undervalued as well as the poor pay and conditions (Early Years Alliance, 2021). This mirrors the statistical realities highlighted by Bonetti (2020). The knock-on effects of an unhappy workforce are felt most acutely by those working in the poorest areas of the country, where the challenge to recruit and retain staff is most apparent. In the context of a mixed and largely privatised economy, the provision of ECEC is shaped by structural inequalities. Those areas which most need high-quality ECEC are those most likely to struggle to secure it (Johnson Harbach, 2015).

The challenges outlined above are even more acute when we consider the context of the baby room in particular. Baby rooms, which typically serve 0–2 year olds, are not currently in receipt of any government subsidies for ECEC. That is, all of the children in the care of the baby room are there because of the fees paid by their parents or guardians; it is an entirely privatised part of the sector. The pay and conditions of those working in the baby room are typically poorer than for professionals in any other part of the sector. As one baby room professional expressed in an interview with Powell and Goouch (2012), ‘in education, early years is at the bottom isn’t it? and in early years, we’re the lowest of the low’ (p. 120). Professionals who work in the baby room have been shown to feel under-valued and that their expertise is unrecognised (Davis and Dunn, 2019; McDowall Clark and Baylis, 2012).

Problematic conceptualisations of leadership in early childhood education

There has been less of a focus on leadership in ECEC when compared with other parts of the education system. Coleman et al. (2016) have explored how leadership in ECEC is diverse and often ‘accidental’ in that ECEC professionals find themselves leading without any formal training or preparation. This can go hand in hand with a reluctance to use the word ‘leadership’ to define professional responsibilities. In our research on leadership, we often encounter the refrain among participants of ‘but I’m not really a leader’ even when individuals have clearly defined leadership and management responsibilities, such as leading provision in a particular part of a nursery setting.

While there is growing recognition of the role that leadership can play in achieving positive outcomes for children and families via ECEC and narrowing inequalities (Douglass, 2019), there is a severe lack of formal leadership development in the English ECEC context. Most professionals in the workforce hold a Level 3 qualification (a pre-degree qualification) and this is the only requirement imposed upon the managers of settings in England (Ceeda, 2019). There is a recently launched National Professional Qualification in Early Years Leadership (NPQEYL) but leadership development initiatives have been plagued by the reality that professional learning in the sector does not significantly boost either pay or status (Bonetti, 2020). Without an infrastructure to support the professional advancement of individuals in the workforce, leadership development sits within a fragmented landscape of qualifications and training routes that do not reliably lead to promotion or additional professional responsibilities.

Perhaps in response to fragmented and disjointed systems for workforce development, conceptualisations of ECEC leadership in England and the UK have tended to focus on pedagogical leadership rather than organisational leadership (e.g. Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2015; Murray and Clark, 2013). Paedagogical leadership is conceptualised as available to all those working in ECEC regardless of their position in the official hierarchy (Sakr and O’Sullivan, 2022); it responds to international research emphasising the need for distributed leadership in ECEC (e.g. Bøe and Hognestad, 2017; Heikka et al., 2021). While the idea that ‘everyone can lead’ is an exciting one, we also need to ask whether the disconnect between pedagogical and organisational leadership has hindered leadership development across the sector and created a situation where those with the most formal leadership responsibility do not necessarily have access to high-quality leadership development opportunities.

It has been noted, particularly in the work of Professor Julie Nicholson, that in the fragmentation and under-investment that characterises ECEC in many parts of the world, conceptualisations of leadership have failed to engage adequately with social justice (Nicholson et al., 2020). While ECEC professionals have a strong sense of wanting to make the world a better place (Sakr and O’Sullivan, 2022), our sector-specific models of leadership tend not to prioritise this dimension of

leadership and leadership development. There is therefore a movement across the globe to re-focus ECEC leadership on advocacy and activism (Nicholson and Kroll, 2015; Nicholson and Maniates, 2016). We see this through, for example, the large proportion of leadership development initiatives in ECEC that focus on action research and critical inquiry as vital tools (Sakr et al., 2023).

Activist leadership and dissensus

The movement to reconceptualise leadership in ECEC with a stronger focus on social purpose and critical inquiry has shifted focus onto the importance of activism and advocacy as aspects of leadership in the sector. In this article, we make use of Woodrow and Busch's (2008) articulation of activist leadership in ECEC, which builds on the idea of the 'activist professional' in education more broadly, as introduced through the work of Sachs and Groundwater-Smith (Groundwater-Smith and Sachs, 2002; Sachs, 2000). In the vision of activist leadership which we invoke in order to make sense of our research with baby room leaders, leadership begins with a willingness to embrace and work with difference and conflict: what some refer to as 'dissensus'. In our research, we have tried to grasp the potentials for activist leadership in the baby room by looking for threads of dissensus.

Woodrow and Busch (2008) argue that activist leadership is urgently needed in ECEC in order to advocate for children and families in the face of increasing marketisation across the sector. They highlight how ECEC professionals are working in 'a sea of mixed and often competing messages' (p. 86), responding to market forces and the demands of parents as customers in ECEC, while simultaneously being held to account through public bodies, most notably Ofsted. Although Woodrow and Busch were writing more than 15 years ago, the same contradictory pressures are present in the English ECEC context today, arguably, on even starker terms. The majority of ECEC places are offered via private providers and increasingly through large global chains who, in the aftermath of the pandemic, have bought smaller nursery businesses encountering financial difficulty. Therefore, even though ECEC is carefully monitored through an inspection regime that treats it as a public good, commercial dynamics reverberate across the sector and shape what it means to be a professional and a leader in the field. Woodrow and Busch argue that in this situation, the answer must lie in a groundswell of bottom-up activism and advocacy in the sector.

Being an 'activist professional' involves recognising that conflict and difference exist, but also that they are generative (Groundwater-Smith and Sachs, 2002; Sachs, 2000). The activist professional does not automatically seek consensus and agreement with others, but recognises that caring for others can involve disagreement and what Hughes and MacNaughton (1999) refer to as 'dissensus'. Woodrow and Busch (2008) recognise that dissensus can be particularly difficult for professionals working in ECEC where showing care is typically equated with pleasing others. In the context of the baby room for example, caring for very young children is often associated with unquestionably adopting the same routines and practices as parents at home without questioning these. In our research with baby room leaders, we have found that most pedagogical decisions and explanations seem to lead back to consensus with colleagues, parents, managers and wider society. Our interest in this article however, is in searching for examples of dissensus. We see these examples as threads that, if pulled upon, might open up potentials for activist leadership in the sector.

Research questions

- What examples of 'dissensus' are present in baby room leaders' perspectives and experiences?
- Who and what do baby room leaders question and challenge?
- To what extent do baby room leaders embrace conflict and difference as part of their leadership?

Methodology

The findings presented in this article are part of a wider study exploring the leadership experiences and approaches of baby room leaders working in the UK. Our research was framed by interpretivism (Creswell et al., 2006) with a commitment to exploring and sharing the subjective experiences of baby room leaders, as they emerge through critical dialogues and reflections. Our research is also framed by pragmatism (Hammond, 2013; Morgan, 2014) with an emphasis on generating research and inquiry that is helpful to those informing the research. In this case, we hope that our research into baby room leadership is genuinely useful to baby room leaders and the ECEC sector in the UK and further afield.

In seeking to understand more about the experiences of baby room leaders, we collected data via 14 semi-structured interviews with baby room leaders and one written reflection which addressed the same questions as asked via the interview. The interviews were held online in order to make it possible to engage with baby room leaders in different parts of the country and to fit into their busy working days. We used semi-structured interviews as a way to probe experiences and perspectives while maintaining rapport and trust. The conversational approach that we took to interviews was particularly important given that many of our participants explicitly voiced their under-confidence in expressing their own ideas. It was this under-confidence which led to the inclusion of one written response, where the participant wished to share their views but found the framework of an online interview intimidating.

All 15 participants were baby room leaders in nurseries across the UK, predominantly in England. While we have focussed the framing of this article specifically on the English ECEC context, recognising that there are important differences in ECEC provision across the four nations of the UK, we have included quotes from all of the baby room leaders when they relevant, even if they go beyond the English context.

The baby room leaders were recruited through networks associated with the project *Baby Rooms – Inspiring Leaders (BRIL)*, which is an initiative led by the first author. BRIL brings baby room leaders together for targeted professional learning. As a result of this network, all of the baby room leaders were acquainted with the research team. This was important for their confidence and trust, which as already mentioned, can be particularly low in this part of the workforce.

The baby room leaders recruited worked in private nursery settings of diverse types. Some worked in family-run single-site nursery businesses, while others were part of much larger nursery groups. They had varying levels of experience in working in ECEC and leading a baby room in particular. This ranged from just a few months of leading the baby room to over a decade in that particular role and organisation.

Our focus in conducting the interviews was ensuring that participants felt safe and secure when sharing their perspectives and experiences. Our questions focussed on the background of the participant (understanding their ‘journey’ to baby room leadership), articulations of their social purpose and pedagogy, as well as how they supported the leadership of others. The interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes and varied in terms of the level of interviewer prompting required. At all times, we endeavoured to strengthen the confidence of the participants in sharing their views and making their voices heard. We did this through affirming their thoughts and perspectives throughout.

This study obtained ethical approval from Middlesex University and is in line with the ethical principles outlined by the British Education Research Association (British Education Research Association (BERA), 2018). We have ensured anonymity throughout the presentation of the findings, using pseudonyms and generic descriptors. However, we recognise that our participants will recognise themselves in what we have written and may disagree with the ways in which we have framed their contributions. In the spirit of dissensus and activist leadership, we seek to use these

potential disagreements as the basis for discussion and dialogue. Thus, we have shared a draft of this article with all 15 participants and invited comments and questions at all stages of the research.

The interviews were audio recorded and then professionally transcribed, before being checked by a member of the research team. Since our analysis for this article focussed on forms of dissensus, we approached the transcripts with this broad theme in mind – looking for tensions and disagreements, even when these were only quietly expressed. Having located examples of dissensus, we collaboratively organised these into three threads. Each thread represents a problem or issue as identified by the baby room leaders. We made the decision to attend to all forms of dissensus voiced rather than just paying attention to those that were voiced across multiple interviews. Thus, as you will see in the findings below, the final thread of dissensus focussing on pay and the flow of money in the sector, was only explicitly raised by one of the baby room leaders. We think it is still important to attune to these ideas as they can tell us about the state of activist leadership among baby room leaders. Indeed, the very absence of others' questioning and challenge around pay is itself a reality that we need to question and consider.

Findings

A thematic analysis of the interviews suggested three threads of dissensus among baby room leaders. These centred around:

1. More than 'just care'
2. Feeling overlooked and undermined
3. Questioning pay and conditions

In the following sections, we outline each of these threads and share illustrative quotes. As mentioned in the methodology above, we have not privileged threads depending on the number of voices that could be heard in relation to this idea or theme. We have engaged with all forms of dissensus that emerged and tried to pay attention to the silences also – most notably the silence of most of the baby room leaders regarding their own pay and conditions.

More than 'just care'

Many of the BRLs were keen to express that their work should be seen as more than 'just care'. They articulated the significant impact of practice in the baby room on individuals, families and wider society. In the quote below Paula comments on the perception of others in the nursery who undervalue what happens in the baby room. She describes how the work of the baby room creates the foundations for what comes next: 'we build them for you, for the next room':

I think we have quite a big impact to be fair. We are the starting point for the babies as they grow older. So we're getting that foundation for them to achieve the goals they need for the next rooms. But that's why the baby room, because it is in part undervalued of what we actually do, because people just think, oh, you just sit with babies, you just feed them, and that's it. We are the foundation for the babies, we build them for you, for the next room. (Paula)

Paula's comment points towards the tension that exists when it comes to valuing the care aspect of working with babies: 'people just think. . . you just sit with babies, you just feed them'. The repetition of 'just' in connection with care routines highlights a fundamental tension in early years education, which is particularly pertinent in the baby room. BRLs are looking for a language that

enables them to express how important the care of babies is. As Johnson Harbach (2015) argues, what is needed is a radical reconceptualisation of care work within wider society so that the care of young children is instead seen as a public good rather than a private responsibility undertaken by families. In our interviews, BRLs were looking for a way to articulate their contribution to this public project of caring for young children. Francesca's comment below highlights this private/public tension:

I think what we do is so important to children. . . I know there's such a taboo about children going to nursery in the baby room but it helps them so much with their communication skills. . . I think, for parents as well, not just for children, we are a massive support. For parents coming out of Covid, it makes a difference to have people to lean on. So I think childcare is a massive thing, and it does change the world because you're shaping the future. (Francesca)

Francesca's comment identifies the major contribution that the baby room can make, not just to the individual babies in the care of the room but also to parents and families – particularly as they emerge from the fearful and isolating realities of the Covid pandemic. At the same time there is recognition of a social discomfort relating to the idea of babies in early years education: 'there's such a taboo about children going to nursery in the baby room'. Thus, baby room educators are having to not only advocate for the benefits to babies and families of the baby room but are having to overcome the challenge of society questioning whether babies should be in a baby room at all. Clearly, Francesca feels some negative judgement for the work that she does and is hoping to re-write the script that surrounds the reality of babies attending nursery. Among the participants in the study, there was repeated mention of the number of hours that the babies were nursery suggesting that this was at least a question mark in the minds of the BRLs.

On the other hand, some BRLs felt that they were supported by society in re-writing the narrative that surrounded babies in the baby room. Initiatives such as the '1001 days' in the UK supported baby room educators to understand their own role and contribution and helped them to feel more confident in articulating this contribution to others:

I have done lots of research lately into this movement called 1001 Days or something. . . I've done so much research about how important those years are because if we didn't give them a great 2 years first start of life and we didn't help them develop, then they won't be a great adult in a sense. So, everything they learn from the age of when they're conceived until 2, 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. So, for me, everything a child learns from the age of 2, shows us what adults are going to be like. So, for me, that's why it's so important to have a great Baby Room. (Cady)

Overall, the BRLs were asking critical questions about the nature of the contribution that they make to society. They were unsure that others recognised the value of the care in the baby room and there was even a feeling of stigma surrounding the baby room, reflecting a tendency in society to see the care of babies as a private responsibility that should be carried by the family (and predominantly women within the family). On the other hand, research and social movements gave BRLs a critical platform on which to question and challenge and push back against these social perceptions and advocate for the value in their work.

Feeling overlooked and undermined

As mentioned above, there was repeated mention among participants regarding the number of hours that babies spend in the baby room. This was associated with a social taboo around the care

of babies in the context of a nursery, rather than at home with families. But the attention paid to the number of hours babies were in the baby room also related to how the baby room educators saw their work and the demands of their practice. Baby room practice was equated with consistently offering love and care over prolonged periods of time, as Priya and Carrie both express:

The care side is probably the most important, because, you know, we have children that can be here from half past 7 until quarter past 6, some children would be here 5 days a week. If you were to see our nursery, you would see that we've got lots of quiet, cosy corners, places that children can just have that moment where they can just sit down, and reflect, and, you know, they don't have to play if they don't want to. We want it to feel like home here for them, not that they're just coming to nursery. (Priya)

The most important thing for me is the love and care. As long as we provide love and care for those children. . . We are open from 7 to 6. Some children are here from 7 to 6 Monday to Friday. . . we are their family. 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. (Carrie)

Carrie's use of the phrase 'they suck everything from us' highlights the intensity of the work and the sense of needing to constantly meet the babies' needs. The word 'suck' feels particularly poignant in thinking about work with babies; babies do literally 'suck everything' in order to meet their nutritional and comfort needs. What is evoked through the phrase is the ambivalence of caring for babies and the potential for it to be physically and emotionally draining. Coping with these demands is a fundamental part of being an effective baby room educator.

Against this backdrop, feeling that others do not understand or value what you do can be particularly galling:

I mean, I think we do often get overlooked. I think we get compared a lot to, 'Well, it works for toddlers, and it works for preschool', and it's really difficult sometimes to try and explain that: 'That's great. But, actually, it's not as black and white as that in a baby room. It's a very grey area. Yes, it's great that you do your observations this way, or you do your planning display. But actually. . .' And trying to explain that sometimes just gets tedious, because the baby room is a different experience to nursery as far as I'm concerned. Everything to do with the baby room is completely different to toddlers and preschool. (Bharda)

Bharda's comment draws attention to how professional learning resources and training tend to focus on those working with older children. In the toddler and preschool rooms, practice is different while in the baby room – it is, as Bharda expresses, a 'very grey area'. This suggests that practice in the baby room is not dominated by doing planning or observations in a particular way, but that these practices are peripheral to something much more fundamental but also much more amorphous – perhaps the 'love and care' mentioned in the comments above. The consistent offer of love and care *is* a grey area, which might not always feel right or wrong and certainly cannot be ticked off on a 'good practice' checklist.

Angelica similarly explains that others just 'don't understand the baby room':

I mean, I have good experiences but I feel like other people don't understand the baby room and that's what we struggle with the most, especially myself and my colleague. Like, sometimes, I feel like the girls in the preschool room think that we don't do much in the day because every time they come upstairs, we're just sat on the floor and that is what it looks like but we could just have sat down after a morning of running around doing loads of different routines. And then, like, it is a struggle as well, trying to settle all the children. Like, one day, you might have the best day ever and they come in and they're all settled and you get on really well and you get all your activities done and you get out in the garden and then, the next day,

same group of children and they're all crying and you're like, 'What is going on? Like, what has changed overnight?' And yes, I mean, it is a struggle and it is really hard but it's enjoyable, definitely. (Angelica)

Again, in Angelica's comment there is a tension between how things look and appear to others ('the girls in the preschool room think that we don't do much in the day. . . we're just sat on the floor and i.e. what it looks like') and the difficult reality that there is a lot going on that cannot be understood by those on the outside ('loads of different routines. . . struggle. . . settle all the children. . . get all your activities done. . . out in the garden. . . crying. . . hard but it's enjoyable'). Angelica's description underlines how changeable the work and the environment of the baby room is. One day can feel smooth while the next is rough, and there is little clarity around why this might be the case. So much in the baby room is beyond the control of the baby room educators and their contribution is to respond consistently and unquestioningly with love and care. Offering consistency and staying calm are the work of the baby room educator but this is not visible in the same way as good practice in other early years learning environments. With understanding not forthcoming from other parts of the sector (or the education system more broadly), there is a failure to actually see the baby room educator and their vital contribution.

Questioning pay and conditions in the baby room

Questions around the pay of staff in the baby room was surprisingly only raised by one of the interviewees. Even for the participant that raised the issue of pay, there was reticence around demanding more pay and a lack of clarity as to who was to blame for the low pay of baby room educators:

Baby Room for me is the best and the most important. And I really, really wish there was more funding into childcare, more pay for staff. Obviously, it's a private company I work in, so that's not anybody's fault but I do feel like everyone in the world are striking because of buses strikes and the trains strikes and the hospital strikes, but you don't see nursery workers striking because we love our job and it's important. But I just feel like there needs to be more importance put into early education than secondary schools and universities. I know it's important too, but this is the most important. (Kim)

It is not clear when Kim says 'that's not anybody's fault' whether she is referring to the low pay of staff or that the nursery she works in is a private company. Either way, this reality is of course the 'fault' of individuals and systems. The low pay of staff and the privatisation of nurseries can be attributed to a particular system created by a government with an ideological agenda. What is most interesting in Kim's response is the decision, conscious or unconscious, to withhold blame, which in turn suggests a feeling that this is inevitable and simply 'the way it is'.

In Kim mentioning the strikes of other workers, there is some awareness of how others might agitate for better pay and conditions, but also a sense that this is unavailable to those working in nurseries: 'you don't see nursery workers striking because we love our job and it's important'. The lack of strikes among the early years workforce in England are the result of a lack of organisation and unionisation rather than a love for the work or its importance. When the moderator probes the comments about the strikes further, Kim replies: 'What would we do? Who would look after the children?'. The response calls attention to a lack of understanding among baby room educators around what political action might be possible in order to demand increases in pay; we need to be clear that we are not blaming baby room educators for this lack of understanding but instead pointing a finger at the lack of political organisation that would enable this understanding. It is exactly because a strike of nursery staff would create severe disruption that a strike may be effective in

making demands on government, but in the eyes of Kim this actually seems to make a strike less possible. When we consider that Kim was the only one of the baby room educators to mention the poor pay of baby room educators, this suggests that a major concern in the sector is the lack of political organisation, but more than that, the uncertainty in understanding work through a political lens where organisation, mobilisation and empowerment of the workforce are possible.

While various researchers have conceptualised the poor pay and conditions in early years practice as a feminist issue, there was no suggestion of this among the interviewees in this study. There was recognition that baby rooms were typically staffed by women, but this was attributed to women's innate maternalism, as for example, when Carrie says 'I think it's just . . . being maternal and such. We seem to go towards children, don't we?'.

In summary, questioning around pay in the baby room was severely limited. While other participants had raised concerns around the value of the work in the baby room and the availability of professional learning that target the baby room specifically, just one participant raised explicit concerns about pay. Given the levels of poverty that exist among the English early years workforce according to recent surveys and the poor retention rates (NatCen, 2020), we can assume that the lack of time given to expressing these concerns does not mean that all is fine in the sector. Instead, the findings point towards a lack of political understanding and organisation among the early years workforce, which is particularly acute in the baby room.

Discussion

The baby room leaders in this study voiced the need to re-frame care as a fundamental part of the education system and for their contributions to be better recognised and valued. It was clear that baby room educators' professionalism was entangled with the perception of care – how others saw the care in the baby room and how they themselves made sense of it. This relates to wider debates around the place of care in our society (Johnson Harbach, 2015) and the need to reconceptualise that care as a public good rather than women's work carried out in the family (Langford et al., 2017). On the other hand, the poor pay of those working in the baby room did not appear to be a facet of experience that most of the baby room leaders felt comfortable articulating. There was a heavy silence around the issue and only one of our participants, Kim, raised this topic. We need to ask questions about why baby room educators and leaders feel silenced in discussing their pay and conditions, while able to articulate dissensus regarding how their work is seen by others.

Our findings have implications for thinking about the organisation and mobilisation of baby room leaders in the early years workforce. First, they suggest that asking questions about 'care' and the perception of care among others is a fertile starting point for dissensus among baby room leaders. Secondly, the findings suggest that there are factors working to silence dissensus regarding pay and conditions among baby room educators. We need further research to determine what these factors are. For example, it might be that there is social stigma around talking about pay or it may be that the maternalism within the sector acts to silence questions around the conditions of the workforce (Ailwood, 2007; Aslanian, 2015). Organising the workforce effectively will depend on enabling members of the workforce to voice their concern and dissensus about pay and conditions. In thinking about the model of activist leadership, the research suggests that we cannot think about dissensus as a wave of feeling that uniformly rises up for activist professionals. Instead, pockets of dissensus can bubble up while other silences remain. Professionals can try out some forms of dissensus while maintaining overall consensus. If we accept this to be the case, activist leadership is not just about engaging in dissensus but also about prompting dissensus by exposing the specific social taboos that work to silence it around particular issues, such as pay.

We offer our research as a starting point for further research and dialogues across the sector. We recognise that our research is limited in its scope and generalisability. Our findings are based on the contributions of 15 baby room leaders. It is of course possible that had we spoken to other baby room leaders, and had we introduced a more explicit focus on pay and conditions when recruiting for the research, we would have seen other manifestations of dissensus.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored dissensus as a foundation for activist leadership among baby room leaders working in English nurseries. Through our research with 15 baby room leaders we encountered threads of dissensus including the desire for baby room educators' contributions to be recognised as more than 'just care' and feelings of resentment at being overlooked by ECEC colleagues outside of the baby room. While one of our interviewees expressed concern about the pay and conditions of baby room educators, there was a noticeable silence looking across our participants regarding this issue. Future research must seek to stay with this silence around pay and conditions and ask what underpins it and what it means. Panning out to consider models of activist leadership for ECEC more generally, we suggest that the threads of dissensus found in our research might be a starting point for advocacy and activism, but that it is also essential to explore silence, silencing and the breaking of silence as part of activist leadership as it is relevant to ECEC and the baby room in particular.

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