

Impact case study (REF3)

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| Institution: Canterbury Christ Church University | | |
| Unit of Assessment: Education 23 | | |
| Title of case study: ICS23.01 Improving policy and practice within early childhood, education and care (birth to two), through raising the status of the early years profession, improving specialist training and increasing investment. | | |
| Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010-2017 | | |
| Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit: | | |
| Name(s): | Role(s) (e.g. job title): | Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: |
| Sacha Powell Kathleen Gouch | Professor Professor | 2003 - May 2019 1992 – December 2017 |
| Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2013-2020 | | |
| Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No | | |
| <p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Research undertaken by Powell and Gouch resulted in significant and sustained impact on the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) for babies aged birth to two in the UK. Impact focused primarily on 'baby rooms' (which are designated spaces, often located within nurseries, which provide care for babies aged birth to two).</p> <p>Specifically, research resulted in:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Increased recognition of the importance of the ECEC profession (birth to two) resulting in local authority policy changes in East Sussex and Durham. 2) New, specialist training opportunities for baby room professionals. 3) Enhanced status for baby room professionals and the creation of communities of practice. 4) Changes in practice within ECEC settings, including improved communication with babies, and greater understanding of the complexities of working with babies. | | |
| <p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>This body of work was developed by six collaborative early childhood, education and care (ECEC) research studies, led by Professor Powell and Professor Gouch between 2009-2017. The studies emerged from a concern that 'baby room' professionals were isolated and undervalued (compared with other early years professionals) and had very limited access to specialist training for working with babies aged birth to two. The research highlighted a significant disparity between the low status and limited training opportunities for the ECEC profession (birth to two), despite the vital service they provide in the care and education of babies, and the complexities of their work.</p> <p>The studies consisted of self-reflective, enquiry-led research with baby care professionals, in private, voluntary and independent settings. Co-constructed with practitioners, projects provided unique opportunities for early years practitioners, managers, local authority (LA) officers and advisors to engage in critical reflection on the needs, skills and talents of babies.</p> <p>Findings included:</p> <p>Need for greater recognition of the valuable role played by the ECEC profession (birth to two)</p> <p>Gouch and Powell's Baby Room Projects were established in at least 13 LAs. Baby Room Projects were unique to each LA and practitioners were supported by Gouch and Powell to collect and analyse their own case study data in their individual practices. The research projects found the baby care profession had been significantly undervalued; with practitioners feeling 'invisible'; isolated from the rest of the nursery; and with a perception that their main role was to simply provide functional care, rather than nurturing, education, or development. Research findings also highlighted the importance of the role played by these practitioners, and the vital contribution they make to supporting very early development. Projects emphasised the need to elevate the status of this previously marginalised group and formally recognise them as educators and professionals (3.1., 3.2., 3.3.).</p> | | |

The imperative of provision of specialist training and support for the birth to two ECEC profession

Baby Room Projects found that baby care professionals were often the youngest (mostly aged 18-25 years), lowest paid, and least educated of the nursery staff, with limited or no access to professional development opportunities for working with babies (most of the training was designed for working with older children) (3.1.). This insight was also reflected in Goouch's 'Improving Provision for two-year-olds in three Counties' (3.5.), a collaborative research project with LA advisors from Hampshire, Surrey and West Sussex. This research, conducted with 41 LA advisors, found settings tended to focus on tasks and outcomes, to the detriment of interactions with babies. Similarly, the international 'Mentoring Systems and Practices in ECEC' project (3.4.) compared mentoring arrangements for ECEC providers in seven European countries. It found support and training for ECEC practitioners included notions of 'professionalism' and focused on delivering uniform, quantifiable outcome measures. The research found an urgent need for training which placed more emphasis on the importance of personalised interactions, and provided practitioners with the knowledge and skills needed to appreciate the complexities of working with babies aged birth to two.

Importance of singing and non-verbal language in promoting emotional connectedness

Research funded by The Froebel Trust (3.6; R.2) and The Ragdoll Foundation (R.5) examined singing as a pedagogical tool and its importance in promoting intimacy and encouraging emotional connectedness between professionals and babies. Research found limited attention being given to what was sung and very little discussion between practitioners and families about the value of singing. When singing was used, there was a tendency for practitioners to use upbeat songs for very practical purposes such as managing behaviour, rather than lullabies for soothing or intimacy. Research highlighted the need for changes in practice that placed a greater focus on personalised interactions with babies and greater recognition of the importance of attachments between babies and their carers.

3. References to the research

- 3.1. Powell, S and Goouch, K (2012) Whose hand rocks the cradle? Parallel discourses in the baby room. *Early Years: An International Journal of Research and Development*, 32 (2) 113-127, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2012.687865>. [Journal article]
- 3.2. Goouch, K. and Powell, S (2013) Orchestrating professional development for baby room practitioners: raising the stakes in new dialogic encounters. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 11(1) 78-92 <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1476718X12448374>. [Journal article]
- 3.3. Goouch, K and Powell, S (2013) *The Baby Room, Principles, Policy and Practice*, Maidenhead: Open University Press. [Authored book] Available on request.
- 3.4. Hammond, S, Powell, S & Smith, K (2015) Towards mentoring as feminist praxis in early childhood education and care in England, *Early Years*, 35 (2), 139-153 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2015.1025370>. [Journal article]
- 3.5. Goouch, K. (2014) *Two-Year-Old Children in Three Counties: Improving provision through research-led development*. [Research Report] Available on request.
- 3.6. Powell, S. and Goouch, K. (2018) Mother's Songs in Daycare for Babies in Bruce, T., Powell, S. and Elfer, P. (eds.) *Routledge International Handbook of Froebel and Early Childhood Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315562421> ISBN: 9781138672628. [Book chapter] Available on request.

Quality

3.1., 3.2. and 3.4. were published in journals with established peer review processes. 3.1. and 3.3. were submitted to REF2014. 3.3. and 3.6. are published in books with established peer review standards.

Details of research grants linked to publications

- R.1. Baby Room (2009-2012), funded by Esmee Fairbairn Foundation, GBP120,600.
- R.2. Principled Encounters in Daycare for Babies (2013-2015), funded by The Froebel Trust, GBP19,000.
- R.3. Mother's Songs (2013-2014), funded by The Froebel Trust GBP16,500.

R.4. Improving provision for two-year-olds in three English counties (2014), funded by West Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire County Council GBP21,000.

R.5. Babysong Project (2015-2017), funded by The Ragdoll Foundation GBP78,000.

4. Details of the impact

Research by Powell and Gooch, focusing on the care and education of babies, has resulted in impacts for LAs, training, ECEC settings and individual practitioners. A key route to delivering impact for the research were the annual Baby Room conferences held between 2013 and 2018. Attended by over 400 students, practitioners, ECEC managers and representatives from over 25 LAs (as well as colleagues from Australia, China, Japan, USA, and the Netherlands), they played a key role in engaging practitioners, and acted as a catalyst for the establishment of practitioner-led Baby Room Projects across the UK, including East Sussex, Surrey, West Sussex, Derby and Cornwall. (5.5.)

Raising awareness of the key importance of ECEC (birth to two) and changing policy and practice within LAs

After hearing about Baby Room Projects at the 2017 Baby Room Conference, East Sussex County Council was 'galvanised' to establish a project within their own LA (5.9.). The subsequent Baby Room Project in East Sussex in 2017-2019, (involving 146 practitioners and 600 children and families) resulted in 'acknowledgement of the importance of the under-two's provision' (5.9.). East Sussex County Council states there is now an increased awareness of the complexities of baby room work and the need for specialist professional development (5.1., 5.9.). Before the project, the 'East Sussex Education Improvement Strategy: Excellence for All', only referenced children aged 2 years and over, but now recognises 'children's learning from birth' (5.9.). As a result of engaging in a Baby Room Project, East Sussex was also awarded an Outstanding Children's Services Award from Children's Services specifically 'acknowledging the work of the project' (5.1.) and its role in 'putting baby rooms practice firmly on the map' (5.9).

Similarly, Baby Room research (2016-2019) in Durham, initially involving over 20 nurseries and over 200 babies a day (before being extended across the county), 'raised the profile and status of Baby Room work within the Education Directorate'. It resulted in Durham's Early Years Education working with other parts of the Children and Families Agenda across the county, and with Gooch and Powell's enquiry-led approach being used by health visitors and speech and language practitioners across Durham. It also resulted in collaborative working with public health practitioners on the County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust, 'Better Start Health Programme' (5.8.). Durham County Council's Childcare Improvement Advisor credits the project with influencing her approach to engaging practitioners. She writes how the project did not just provide 'new knowledge' but gave her 'confidence to implement new techniques'. 'We didn't just learn how to 'do', instead the 'what' and 'why' became much clearer' (5.8.).

New specialist and enquiry led training opportunities for baby care professionals

There is now new and enhanced training that specifically focuses on promoting greater attachments and personalised interactions between babies and their carers for Baby Room practitioners across Durham; Bristol; (5.5.); Cornwall (5.10.), and East Sussex (5.1.). The significance of this training is that Baby Room practitioners have tended to be amongst the lowest paid and least educated, and their professional development has tended to either focus on working with older children, or on very practical issues and developmental goals. This new, enquiry led training, which uses engaged pedagogy, was developed from Powell and Gooch's research findings (R1-R5). It fills a significant gap, and new training now considers the impact of the whole environment on babies, including the importance of sights, smells, regular eye contact, physical contact, and singing.

In Bristol, in 2017, Specialist Leaders of Education with the Bristol Early Years Teaching School Consortium stated that since the Baby Room research, the early years community has adopted the enquiry-led, action research principles of the Baby Room (5.5.). Similarly, in Cornwall, a programme of training sessions is currently delivered to baby room practitioners 'based upon the training model of the Baby Room Project' (5.10.). In Durham, the Childcare Improvement Advisor

stated that since the 2016 Baby Room Project, training has been delivered more collaboratively with practitioners (5.8.). The ongoing specialist training in Derby is also reflected in a 2020 video outlining the significant impact the training and Baby Room Project has on improving interactions between babies and parents (5.2.). Finally, in East Sussex, this new training for early years practitioners was implemented 'across the county', and in 2020, they were commissioned to extend the training to Brighton and Hove providers, including Health Visitors and Community Nursery Nurses (5.9.).

Similarly, the 'Mother's Songs' research (2013-14) underpins a core module of the British Association for Early Childhood Education CPD programme 'Froebel Travelling Trainers', which has already been completed by 125 early years practitioners. This research has been embedded 'into the fabric of the content, structure and delivery' of the course. As a consequence of this training, 16 nurseries in London, Guildford and Hampshire have implemented new policies and practice in singing to babies in nursery settings and with families. Additionally, the research has strongly influenced the Froebel Trust's grant making policy and is 'probably the most important and impactful research commissioned with funding from The Froebel Trust' (5.7.).

Increasing confidence, creating communities of practice and raising the profile of baby care professionals

Recognition of the importance of the research is evident in the wide coverage given to Baby Room projects by Nursery World, the leading trade magazine. Since 2013, there have been 16 separate articles, features and interviews on the research findings and achievements.

Involvement in Baby Rooms projects has created communities of practice, promoted a sense of empowerment and, according to Nursery World: given practitioners 'a voice' (5.4.). In Durham, the research 'raised the profile of pedagogy with babies' within the Education Directorate, with the Durham Council Early Years Advisor stating: 'They were the forgotten workforce, but now they feel like a group of professionals because they've had these opportunities.' (5.5.). In 2017 practitioners reflected on the impact of involvement in the Durham Baby Rooms Project in Nursery World, stating: 'Meeting up with other baby room practitioners has made me go back to basics and I've rethought the importance of attachment', and 'Since starting the project, my confidence has increased' and 'the project has made me feel more empowered and given me more respect for myself as a baby room practitioner' (5.5.). In East Sussex, baby rooms practitioners also reported increased recognition for their work and the specialist skills they hold (5.9.) and they now feel less isolated (5.3.). Research created newly constructed communities of learners, resulting in enhanced professional status and the creation of various local communities of practice, with 'strong, mutually supportive relationships' (5.9.) - particularly in Durham, East Sussex and Bristol, but also in Kent, Medway (5.5.) Rotherham and Northamptonshire (5.11.). Practitioners in East Sussex commented: 'It's really brought us together as a team for the benefit of staff, children and families (5.3.). The project focused attention on the importance of what happens in baby rooms, highlighting that 'practitioners do not just 'play' with babies all day; it is a highly complex role' (5.4.).

Changes in practice within ECEC settings

This sustained focus on birth to two provision, has substantially enhanced professional practice and ethos amongst practitioners and resulted in a more reflexive and baby focused approach to interactions with parents and babies. The 2020 East Sussex County Council report states that as a result of the Baby Room Project, there is now a significant increase in 'respectful and individualised interactions' [with babies] and partnerships with parents', and pre and post project interactions with over 600 babies has improved from a mean of 68.5% to 92.3%. Three years after the project, 90.9% had continued with the changes and practitioners self-reported a 39% increase in their communication skills with babies (5.1.). The same report states '...the changes we've made to our practice have hugely impacted the moods of both the babies and practitioners' and 'the babies have become less anxious and stressed during daily routines and overall seem a lot happier, especially during nappy changing' (5.1.). As a result, the East Sussex Baby Room Project subsequently won the 2019 Nursery World Award for early years provision displaying exemplary practice (5.6.) with the Early Years Support and Intervention Office stating: 'The whole ethos of many baby rooms appears to have changed' (5.9.). Similarly, East Sussex Early Years

Improvement Team claim that being involved in the project resulted in 'improved parent partnerships', leading to 'children being quicker to pick up language, interactions becoming more meaningful and staff identifying developmental challenges faster' (5.3.). Significantly, Baby Room research also resulted in the enquiry-led practice being implemented with practitioners working with older children in 85% of settings (5.7.), and following the project, in 2019, each nursery received a GBP500 grant from East Sussex County Council to spend on resources to support communication and interactions.

Similarly, in Rotherham, practitioners gained funding from Rotherham's Metropolitan Borough Council to establish their own Baby Room Project, involving 36 early years settings. The project ran between 2010 and 2013 and by 2015 the proportion of Rotherham early years settings receiving an Ofsted 'good' or 'outstanding' award, increased from 55% to 85%. The Council's Early Years Quality and Curriculum Advisor stated that in part this 'can be directly attributed to the impact of the [Baby Room] Project' (5.11.). An example of improved interaction with babies is given by Rotherham recognising the value of nappy changing time. They stopped changing nappies using the "conveyor belt" system and only allow the key person to change their key children's nappies, resulting in improving 'interaction during nappy changing, with practitioners making this time special for the babies' (5.11.). In Durham, the Baby Room Project (2016-19) resulted in practitioners changing the way they interacted with parents and babies, including ensuring nursery drop-off transition focused on the whole family, and explaining to parents how their interactions can support early development at home (5.8.). In Bristol they introduced a specialised Baby Room induction for staff, highlighting the importance of respect and interaction while changing nappies, the importance of making feeding times special, and the need for quiet times where babies are held lovingly and eye contact is maintained (5.6). In Derby (finalist in the 2019 Nursery World Awards 5.4.), practitioners now focus much more on the baby's whole environment and 'As a result, parents say they now feel more confident understanding their children and happier leaving them at nursery' (5.6., 5.2.). Finally, in Medway, practitioners commented: 'I've become more reflective – questioning whether I am talking in an appropriate way for a child's developmental age and if an activity is pitched correctly', and changes 'have led to a much calmer and stimulating environment' (5.5.).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- 5.1. East Sussex (2020) East Sussex County Council (ESCC) Collaborative Research Project 'Interacting with babies under 18 months' Research Report, <https://czone.eastsussex.gov.uk/early-years/info-for-preschools/>
- 5.2. The Old Forge Day Nursery, Findern, Derby 'The Baby Project' video (2020) <https://www.facebook.com/TheOldForgeDayNursery/videos/298880521544098>
- 5.3. Nursery World (2019) 'Up Close' 04/02/2019, <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/features/article/baby-rooms-up-close>
- 5.4. Nursery World (2019) 'Nursery World Awards 2019: Initiatives - Working with Babies and Toddlers', 02/09/2019 <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/other/article/nursery-world-awards-2019-initiatives-working-with-babies-and-toddlers>
- 5.5. Nursery World (2017) EYFS Best Practice: All about... Baby Room Projects, 10/07/2017, <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/features/article/eyfs-best-practice-all-about-baby-room-projects>
- 5.6. Nursery World (2021) Nursery World Awards 2019: Initiatives - Working with Babies and Toddlers, 05/02/2021 <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/other/article/nursery-world-awards-2020-working-with-babies-and-toddlers>
- 5.7. Testimonial: Early Years Consultant, and Development Officer and Lead trainer for the Froebel Trust short courses, The Froebel Trust.
- 5.8. Testimonial: Childcare Improvement Adviser, Durham County Council.
- 5.9. Testimonial: Early Years Support and Intervention Officer, East Sussex County Council.
- 5.10. Overview of Cornwall Baby Hubs Training (2021) Cornwall Council, Course Catalogue for Early Years Foundation Stage.
- 5.11. Nursery World (2015) 'Baby rooms - Still room for improvement?' 29/06/2015, <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/features/article/baby-rooms-still-room-for-improvement>