



## **PhD Final Report**

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### **Hearing the voices of babies in baby-educator interactions in Early Childhood Settings**

This research project examined how the voices of babies enrolled in early childhood settings are made visible during close dialogic interactions with early childhood educators. An ethnographic study, it is deliberate in its methodological approach to draw out the unseen dialogue that surfaces in a typical baby room in England.

The findings presented are authentic, robust and rigorous, depicting the challenges babies and educators navigate independently and together as voice initiations become visible through baby room encounters.

The completed thesis draws out several significant findings concerning how babies' voice manifests in formal day care environments and several learning points for those working with babies, overseeing baby room provision and those involved in creating early education policy guidance. These implications and subsequent recommendations, framed within the three strands of cultural historical theory (societal/political, institutional/practice, individual), are explored in detail in the final thesis submission, which will be available in Spring 2024.

### **Key findings**

This study's findings contribute to our contemporary application of Froebel's principles in the way it encapsulates the whole child/ren and reiterates the significance of relational experiences with others. This research documented and illustrated in rigorous detail just how much relationships mattered to the babies studied. Babies learn about themselves through 'sustained connection with and linking to learning through and with others and relationship matters of the universe' (Bruce, 2021, p. 33-34) thus, this study gives empirical support to Froebel's profound insight into the significance of relationships for babies and young children's development.

- Voice revealed itself to be a largely silent endeavour, emerging delicately from the inner body, with distinct interplay of movement. Voice materialised

externally in a rapid and coordinated fashion yet emerging just beneath the surface of nursery activity. Five distinct modes of voice were consistently documented to be sequentially organised and delicately threaded together as a 'communication chain' (White, 2016, p.24), categorised as follows,

1. Committed surveillance,
  2. Facial expressions,
  3. Physical movement in direction of eye gaze,
  4. Engagement of external objects as a catalyst for response,
  5. Sporadic vocalisations or crying
- Voice structure is tightly bound to babies' social cultural experiences in their home. The confidence babies entered nursery with was often challenged by the external demands they negotiate as they acclimatise to nursery life. Babies were documented to be motivated and work hard to enact voice strategically in a bid to 'find a sensory proof of their existence' (cited in Lilley, 1967, p.77) and establish themselves as valued contributors to the baby room. Such endeavours were deliberately structured and intentionally directed into adult spaces and appeared closely and deeply entangled in the responsiveness and emotional availability of educators.
  - Babies were frequently left to occupy themselves and received little individualised, sustained interactions from educators who worked very hard to manage a range of professional responsibilities. Subsequently, voice initiations were irregularly acknowledged by hard working, early childhood educators for multiple reasons examined in the study. Typical response patterns did offer some opportunity to establish strong, mutually responsive relationships, but these were limited. The emotional and physical availability of educators appeared deeply intertwined in the institutional traditions and demands that shape the time and spaces of everyday practices, conflicting with Froebel's philosophy that promotes unhurried moments of connection (Clark, 2022) and creating a set of 'opposing forces' for educators to navigate.
  - Amalgamation of organisational responsibility and personal anxiety about the personal involvement and attachment arising from the prospect of prolonged interaction with the babies present a complicated picture of nursery provision for early childhood educators. Findings indicate management cultures and institutionally placed demands did not appear to support continuity or sensitive attention for babies.

Finally, without moments of connectivity, evidence in the study points to some babies being at risk of becoming lost or invisible to educators and their communicative contributions stifled by adult centric practice. Therefore, if the essence of being 'seen' by another and

being 'present' *for* another misaligns, then the threads of connection between baby and adult are weakened resulting in practices where the emotions of babies and educators are not prioritised. Early childhood educators must advocate for the voices of babies to be a pivotal feature of everyday practices. While educators are not, and should not strive to be, a parental figure, they do have a moral and ethical position to act as the 'sun' to draw out the child's voice into nursery environments, to show the child their contributions are valued and cherished. In parallel, those responsible for early education policy must be alert to the realities of everyday happenings in nursery environments for babies and staff. The importance of relationships with others is at the heart of early education guidance (DfE 2021a), yet appreciation of the active role babies play remains notably absent and underrepresented. Recent changes to the Early Years Foundation Stage Guidance (DfE 2021a; DfE 2021b) sought to realign the focus away from an outcome-based narrative towards a responsive, relational pedagogy, yet still fails to emphasise the positioning of babies as separate to preschool aged children or the extraordinary value of prioritising relational aspects of care. Findings from this study emphasise how failing to acknowledge babies as independent individuals coupled with a prolonged absence of policy that prioritises relational care, has a trickledown effect on babies' everyday experiences in nursery. It is not that the babies were physically absent, on the contrary, they worked very hard to be noticed and heard. Rather, it appeared that they were considered no different to the older children in the nursery, recipients of transient staff teams and planned purposeful activities where learning appeared prioritised over their social and emotional needs. As a society we need to ask the uncomfortable question; Are we content knowing the strong possibility that some babies receive very little individualised attention when they attend nursery? Given what is known about the strong links between reciprocal interactions in infancy and robust neural connections (Murray 2014; McCrory, 2023) a sector wide dialogue should consider if the attention babies receive in nursery is sufficient enough to promote the rich language encounters, grounded in Professional Love (Page, 2011) and affection needed to flourish developmentally throughout infancy, childhood and beyond.