Everyday Advocacy Work of the Baby Room Leader

Abstract

There is a growing body of literature on leadership and leadership development across the early years (EY) sector. EY leadership research so far has tended to focus on positional leadership demonstrated by setting managers or preschool room leaders. There is a notable gap in our understanding of the role of the Baby Room Leader (BRL), leading practice for birth to two year olds, and how leadership can be developed in this specific context. Drawing on a design workshop with BRLs and nursery managers, as well as five follow-up semi-structured interviews with BRLs, this article offers an insight into the role of the BRL with a particular focus on everyday advocacy. The article presents four advocacy themes in baby room leadership. These are 1) highlighting and understanding the impact of baby room practice, 2) sharing passion for working with babies, 3) advocating professional development specific to the baby room and 4) challenging discourses and stereotypes surrounding those who work in the baby room. These themes represent both current realities in baby room leadership and opportunities for future development and mobilisation.

Introduction

Research demonstrates that leadership matters for children's outcomes in early childhood education and care (ECEC; Douglass, 2019). There has been a growing field of literature that considers the nature of leadership specific to ECEC, recognising the need to move away from generic models of leadership and towards those that work with the complexities and social justice imperative of the sector (Nicholson et al., 2020). Within this intention though, empirical studies of leadership in ECEC have tended to focus more on those working with older children rather than prioritising the perspectives and experiences of those who work with the babies. This is part of a wider imbalance in research on the sector which has focused less on the experiences of those working with the 0-2 year olds. This article stems from a research focus that aims to bring baby room leadership to the front and centre of our thinking about leadership in the sector. The research aims to show what leadership means and looks like from the perspective of BRLs, and elucidate how it might be similar or different to other forms of leadership within the ECEC sector. This article focuses particularly on one aspect of baby room leadership: advocacy, which is understood in its broadest sense to mean communication that intends to impact policy and practice. Advocacy can extend from campaigns to influence public debate around a specific policy issue (e.g. child-adult ratios) to day-to-day communicative work that shapes the perspectives and experiences of others (e.g. articulating the importance of the first two years of life to a parent at pick-up time). In line with a view of pedagogical leadership as critical reflective practice that engages with the complexities of work with young

children day to day (Coughlin & Baird, 2013), it is the latter – everyday enactments of advocacy – that are a particular focus in this article.

The Baby Room

There is a lack of professional recognition for those working in the baby room of early years settings. Davies & Dunn (2019) gathered reflections among professionals who work with 0-2 year olds in Australian settings, which demonstrated the lack of recognition felt by those in the role as well as feelings of professional isolation. Baby room professionals felt that they needed to convince not only parents of their contribution, but other ECEC educators. This is expressed most succinctly in a quote from a baby room practitioner interviewed by Powell and Goouch (2012) who says: 'In education, early years is at the bottom isn't it? And in early years, we're the lowest of the low aren't we…' (p. 120).

While a strong evidence base exists around the impact of interactions for the very youngest children, McDowall Clark & Baylis (2012) found that social attitudes, including among parents, typically show a lack of understanding around the importance of development and learning among babies. As a result, professionals who work with babies are seen as 'just' caring for children – 'just' changing nappies or 'just' feeding, rather than making full use of professional and pedagogical praxis to provide the best learning environment for babies. Langford et al. (2017) stress the need to reconceptualise care, as part of ECEC, as a public good, rather than positioning it as 'just' a prerequisite for education.

The lack of recognition of professionalism among those who work with babies is also a lack of understanding about the professional skills and knowledge that are required to work effectively with babies. Research by Powell and Goouch (2012) focused on the reflections of 25 baby room practitioners, which highlight how wider competing discourses penetrate practice in the baby room and impinge upon a sense of professionalism in the room. Professionals in this role felt at the mercy of competing agendas and contradictory pressures. For example, policies around sleep or physical affection seemed to grow more out of parents' anxieties than their own professional judgment. As a result, the professionals' sense of themselves and their judgment was drowned out in 'the cacophony that had come to characterise their baby room rules of practice' (p. 121).

While there is a wider lack of understanding about the professional skills and knowledge of those who work in the baby room, a growing body of research looks at and documents the specific nature of this professionalism. Indeed, Davies and Dunn (2019) argue that professionals show a careful and nuanced understanding that needs to be appreciated more fully. Recchia and Shin (2010) refer to this professionalism as the 'infant practicum', arguing that experiences of working with 0-2 year olds are important for shaping professional knowledge among all ECEC educators. They suggest that the youngest children have ways of being and learning that challenge

adult educators to think differently about childhood and learning. Similarly, research by Salamon & Harrison (2015) on the 'infant practicum' emphasises the need for close, careful and attentive observation in the baby room and in their study of Portuguese baby room practitioners, Tadeu and Lopes (2021) found that what was seen to be most special about the baby room was the priority given to individualised care and relationships. This opens up new pedagogical spaces, such as Shin's (2015) 'pedagogy of care' where caring is seen as both emotional and intellectual and acts of caring (such as changing a nappy or feeding) are simultaneously learning experiences, so that learning and caring cannot be disentangled (Cuttler, 2022). Counter-discourses around care – such as the idea of the 'pedagogy of care' – are centrally important in changing the value and status placed on ECEC more broadly and particularly work with babies (Langford et al., 2017).

Leadership in ECEC and the Element of Advocacy

Leaders in ECEC have much less of a profile in comparison to other parts of the educational landscape (Coleman et al., 2016). How people come to lead in the sector is diverse, with many 'falling into' leadership roles: what Coleman et al. refer to as 'accidental leadership'. Despite growing international attention on the role of leadership in securing quality early years provision (Douglass, 2019), there is a severe lack of leadership development opportunities across the UK for early years professionals. A significant majority of professionals in the English sector are qualified at Level 3 (equivalent to pre-degree qualification) and this is the case for those in formal leadership roles as well, such as managers (Ceeda, 2019). Sector surveys suggest that there is typically no budget available in settings specifically for leadership development, which compounds the 'accidental' nature of leadership in the sector (Education and Training Foundation, 2018; PACEY, 2018; Ceeda, 2019). Despite some new leadership qualifications in England, such as the National Professional Qualification in Early Years Leadership (NPQEYL), previous higher-level qualifications have not typically translated into greater remuneration or even status for the ECEC workforce in England (Bonetti, 2020).

Predating the NPQEYL, the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) and Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS), focused largely on pedagogical leadership. EYPS and EYTS were designed as graduate level professional training for the ECEC workforce in the UK, with two routes of entry: upskilling for those already in practice or as a direct-entry graduate route into the profession. There has been no regulatory requirement for settings to recruit an EYP or EYT onto their team at any level of leadership, and since the abolition of the Graduate Leader Fund in 2011, there has been no financial incentive to do so. The disjointed landscape of qualifications and training in relation to the realities of those recruited to work in settings means that those qualifying with EYPS and EYTS have often found themselves working in roles that have no formal leadership status and no line management responsibilities. As a positive, this has led to a dynamic understanding of distributed pedagogical leadership (e.g. Campbell-Barr

& Leeson, 2015; Murray & McDowall Clark, 2013), in dialogue with a global body of literature celebrating the potentials of distributed leadership as a means to develop ECEC provision (e.g. Heikka et al., 2019; Bøe & Hognestad, 2017). On the other hand, the emphasis on distributed pedagogical leadership within the English qualifications landscape is the springboard for an unhelpful disconnect between pedagogical and organisational leadership. Those leading the settings or rooms within settings (including the baby room) are not necessarily the same people to receive dedicated and expansive leadership development. Indeed, in the evaluation of EYPS and the Graduate Leader Fund, it was noted that relatively few individuals gaining such qualifications were based in the baby room, suggesting that there is even more of a disconnect between baby room leadership and sector-wide leadership development (NatCen, 2011).

In previous research, Professor Julie Nicholson, along with others, has explored alternative forms of leadership development that proactively respond to the state of the sector, combining pedagogical and organisational facets of leadership with a focus on social justice. This is a vision of ECEC leadership that puts advocacy at its heart, so that leadership development takes on the aim of changing the sector rather than existing within the status quo (Woodrow and Busch, 2008). in line with this approach, Nicholson and Kroll (2015) document the use of structured oral inquiry as a means for developing reflexive leadership that can then 'speak out' to and for the sector. Intersectionality, equity and advocacy are vital dimensions of leadership development (Nicholson and Maniates, 2016). This relates to research outside of ECEC, which highlights the role of explicit dialogues about equity and inclusion as an embedded part of teacher training programmes, so that a diverse workforce can speak for itself and find a sense of belonging, which in turn impacts positively on retention (Bhopal & Rhamie, 2014; Rogers-Ard et al., 2019).

Advocacy is not just about 'speaking out' of course. What we choose to speak out about depends on embedding critical reflection in our practice. Clark (2019) discusses, for example, the need for an ECEC sector to listen more deeply to itself and, in doing so, to push back against a dominant culture in which the workforce simply implements a set of techniques that have been decided for them. Appreciating the potentials of advocacy within everyday ECEC leadership depends on a view of the workforce as critically reflective individuals and communities who can listen deeply to one another, as well as children and families. This is key to the critical collaborative community envisaged by Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2015) in which pedagogy is conceptualised as a 'complicated conversation' (p. xii). This viewpoint doubles as an invitation to position critical reflection at the centre of practice along with an ethos of community that can transform critical reflection into advocacy messages. In dialogue with these perspectives, this article positions baby room leaders as 'everyday advocates' who actively shape the landscape of the baby room and ECEC leadership through their day to day conversations and actions. The research seeks to uncover, through dialogues with BRLs, how this everyday advocacy manifests and how it may be built upon. Through the creation of a community of practice, the research is intertwined with

an intention to advance advocacy across the sector, particularly in relation to the baby room.

Researching with Baby Room Leaders

The research presented here was framed by a commitment to interpretivism (Creswell et al., 2006), with an emphasis on subjective experiences and perspectives of baby room leadership and conceptualisations of leadership that emerge through collaborative dialogue and critical reflection. There is no attempt in this study to objectively capture or measure baby room leadership or state a formula for good practice in this context. Alongside interpretivism, the research is framed by the commitments of pragmatism (Hammond, 2013), that is, to usefully shape practice where the term 'useful' is defined by those participating in the research – in this case, BRLs along with the wider ECEC research-practice base.

As such, the research was situated in the context of an ongoing project, funded by the British Education Leadership Management and Administration Society (BELMAS), to work with the sector to develop professional development for BRLs in the UK given the gaps outlined in the previous background sections. The aim of the funded project was to create a community of practice, including BRLs, nursery managers and researchers, to design open access leadership development training for BRLs. The community of practice was primarily established through a series of five online workshops that occurred over a six-month period, as well as more relaxed correspondence and engagement in between sessions.

Positioning myself in relation to this activity, I saw myself as a facilitator rather than a participant or expert. While I have worked, volunteered and researched in ECEC settings, I have no experience as a baby room educator. My contribution was to practically facilitate the process, to honour and enrich the dialogues that emerged and, in the longer-term, find ways to transform these dialogues into a leadership development programme for other BRLs to benefit from. Cultivating dialogues depends on the deep listening suggested by Clark (2019) but also question-posing and de-familiarisation strategies, as celebrated by Vintimilla (2018) in her work as a pedagogista. Vintimilla describes how important the pedagogista as 'stranger' (p.22) can be in bringing to light and questioning what might have 'come static or routinized' for those doing the work day to day (p. 23). In the case of the BRLs, my separation – my 'strangeness' – was helpful in drawing out elements of baby room leadership that went unnoticed day-to-day, and this included everyday advocacy work. As Vintimilla expresses: 'our encounters were less about recovering something missing than about uncovering what was already there' (p. 25).

The findings presented in this article emerge from two forms of dialogue: 1) dialogue between BRLs, nursery managers, sector leaders and researchers as part of the first 90 minute workshop in the Baby Rooms – Inspiring Leaders (BRIL) project and 2) five follow-up interviews with four BRLs and one nursery manager. The workshop was

intended as an opportunity to explore the possibilities of developing an open access course specifically for baby room leaders. While this was the stated aim, discussions were wide and related broadly to a) conceptualisations of baby room leadership, b) enactments of baby room leadership and c) hopes for the future of baby room leadership. Follow-up interviews were more specifically focused on personal experiences of baby room leadership or, in the case of the nursery manager, perceptions of the baby room and baby room leadership. Interviews lasted between 25 and 60 minutes and were organised around four prompts for discussion:

- Personal journeys to the baby room
- Vision and values for baby room practice
- Reflective practice and action planning
- Working with others – coaching, mentoring and motivating others

Including myself, there were 17 participants in the workshop. Participants included eight baby room leaders (i.e. individuals responsible for practice relating to 0-2 year olds in the context of a single setting), four nursery managers (i.e. those responsible for day to day management within a single setting) or senior leaders within nursery groups (i.e. those responsible for strategic leadership across a nursery group), three in support roles working closely with baby room leaders to develop practice in baby rooms (e.g. trainers within the local authority, focused on baby room practice) and two researchers and lecturers in early childhood (including myself). Workshop participants were recruited through an open call on social media and attendance was supported by a small grant that would enable settings to make the necessary cover arrangements.

Follow-up interviews were conducted with five workshop participants – four BRLs and one nursery manager. Interviews were arranged on the basis of wanting to hear more directly from BRLs. We therefore followed up directly with all participants, with a focus on the eight BRLs who had participated in the workshop. Four BRLs agreed to participate in a one-to-one interview along with a nursery manager who had a particular interest in baby room practice.

As explained briefly above, the workshops were not intended in the first instance as research and so I sought and obtained institutional ethical approval to work further with dialogues as research data. Approval was granted on the basis that further consent would be sought from individual participants in order to share anonymised quotes within presentations and publications; such consent was obtained from all participants and additional consent was obtained from those participating in the follow-up interviews.

The workshop and interviews were transcribed. Following this, I conducted a reflexive inductive thematic analysis following the suggested steps outlined in Clarke and Braun (2019). In these steps, keywords are identified, then converted into codes which can be applied throughout the transcript, with codes then grouped into themes and sub-themes. Reflexive inductive thematic analysis is based on a recognition that while the process follows a series of predetermined steps, subjective interpretation applies to

each step in the process. Were someone else to carry out the analysis, an alternative thematic map would most likely emerge. This fits within the interpretivist framing of this research. Thus, the analysis presented here, which focuses on the theme of advocacy, should not be seen as a static model to be tested or proved, but rather as a starting point for dialogues in which the leadership work of BRLs is brought more clearly into the light, in the tradition of the 'pedagogista' (Vintimilla, 2018).

Findings

The theme of advocacy comprised four sub-themes, which are used below as headings to organise the findings. The themes are:

1) Highlighting and understanding impact in the baby room
2) Sharing passion for working with babies
3) Advocating professional development specific to the baby room
4) Challenging discourses and stereotypes of the baby room practitioner

Each theme is described, explained and exemplified through anonymised quotes taken from the workshop and interviews. Links to existing literature in the field are drawn out in the discussion, along with the implications of the findings.

Highlighting and understanding impact in the baby room

Participants were adamant that despite a general lack of attention on baby room practice in the context of ECEC, experiences in the baby room are fundamental in shaping a child's future:

> The attachment they have to you as adults and what you can give them, it just means so much to me… It's the most important thing in their world, and you have the responsibility, not only to care for their everyday needs, make sure they're fed, watered and nappies are changed, but teaching them about the world and teaching them about the way the world works and how they will fit into it. (Dean, BRL, workshop)

P3 goes on to describe how some of the children in the baby room are present for up to 50 hours over the course of the week in the nursery; as such, they are sharing in and contributing to a community of care, attention and love with adults that are not their parents or carers in a home context. Other participants similarly described the baby room as the 'most important' aspect of provision in the nursery (P1), despite the common tendency to overlook the baby room and its importance in shaping children's experiences:

> I think a lot of the investment of time and effort goes into the pre-school room. I do think that baby rooms very often get overlooked… they are 'just' babies… (Lauren, BRL, workshop)

Participants shared a frustration with the limiting discourses that surround the baby room currently and the narrative that babies 'just' need care. BRLs had proactively countered this narrative through their own research and learning. Two participants had spent their own time and money on courses about the neuroscience of the first two years of life. They spoke with passion about development in the first two years of life and the factors that impact on the learning that can happen in this sensitive period of life:

> My real interest with the babies was really in learning about how babies develop themselves, how their brains develop, how they work, how they learn from us as adults, and the impact that we can have on children as adults in their learning. (Cristina, BRL, workshop)

It is interesting that Cristina does not mention, in the context of her learning, the term 'care' but instead shifts the focus to 'learning' and 'development'. This highlights an area for further consideration in terms of how the importance and impact of the first two years of life are conceptualised and how care is positioned in relation to this. As Langford et al. (2017) emphasise, we may not need to replace discourses of care with other discourses (e.g. learning, development) but instead position a care discourse at the centre of the politics and practice of ECEC.

BRLs understood their responsibilities as deepening the understanding that we have around learning that occurs in the first two years of life and the social factors that shape this. Armed with this knowledge, which was typically the consequence of self-teaching in the context of a supportive nursery rather than professional formal training, they were able to celebrate with others the distinctive impact of the baby room on children's learning and development. A follow-up question is to consider whether, in sharing this message, BRLs felt compelled to move away from discourses of care rather than emphasising the importance of care as an interconnected element with learning, development, neuroscience and so on.

Sharing passion for working with babies

BRLs discussed the joy and fascination they experienced in working with babies. Sharing this joy was part of their day to day work and leadership in the baby room. Alongside a common fascination with milestones, BRLs also described a more pervasive joy in being with babies in the here and now:

> I just love seeing their little personalities grow. I love them coming in and just being that baby and just how they develop into a little human that they're going to be. Their personality, the characteristics, everything. I just love being part of their firsts. First words, first steps, just the little things. (Colleen, BRL, interview)

Colleen's comments highlight an important duality in baby room practice: the joy of the 'firsts' and the achievement of so many milestones in the first two years of life, alongside a less time-framed joy of being with babies: 'I love them coming in and just

being that baby'. The same duality is present in Melissa's comments as she articulates what she loves about working and leading in the baby room:

> I mean, obviously you have brilliant days where a child might take their first steps or drink from a cup rather than a bottle. There are always days like that but I think there are little things in every day that we get together at the end of the day and we're like, 'Aw, so-and-so did this today,' and share it with colleagues. You actually realise that there are amazing things every day. (Melissa, BRL, interview)

The comments highlight how normative models of childhood development do feature heavily within the thinking of BRLs – as we would expect given the dominance of the developmentalist paradigm within ECEC training and practice (Author, 2019), but that the language of milestones and 'firsts' runs alongside a much more expansive vision of being with children in which emotions, attunement and connectedness come to the fore.

Many of the BRLs were enhancing the passion and joy others found in the work of the baby room simply by sharing their own fascination and love. Within the workshop, listening to each other talking about the 'magic' of the baby room, the shared passion was palpable and powerful. It mirrors how the BRLs talked about the atmosphere among their own baby room teams:

> That's what I love about having a team. We're all on the same page. So, we'll all have that enthusiasm in the moment… we're all excited to see it. Which is great, because that's just a great atmosphere for the babies, because if all of us are cheering on their achievements, then it's great. (Colleen, BRL, interview)

Colleen's comment suggests that shared joy and passion among a team was part of an effective baby room pedagogy, since it created a 'great atmosphere for the babies'. It follows that BRLs need to have an expansive passion for the work themselves and be prepared to share and grow this passion among others.

Advocating professional development specific to the baby room

Baby room leaders are aware of the lack of professional development relevant to practice in the baby room. All participants in the workshop and interviews were passionate about developing opportunities to build knowledge, understanding and experience in the workforce relevant to the baby room.

Participants felt that it was important to develop baby room specific professional development because they perceived something special in the work of the baby room. For Geraldine, a nursery manager, the atmosphere of the baby room was completely different to other parts of the nursery with a focus on calmness and a 'home from home' quality:

> You open the door to the baby room and you walk through and it's just such a serene atmosphere. It's just a completely different atmosphere. (Geraldine, Nursery Manager, workshop)

Understanding the baby room as 'completely different provision' suggests that many early years professional development opportunities that are designed with preschool children in mind, would not feel relevant or applicable to the practice in the baby room. Participants experienced frustration at the lack of opportunities for professional development tin the baby room:

> I think the lack of training opportunities and opportunities for further development within the baby room can be quite a challenge… (Geraldine, Nursery Manager, interview)

BRLs described their own challenges in finding the appropriate training to work in the baby room. Dean explained that his own initial training in early years education involved just a 6-week stint in a baby room:

> So it wasn't really in depth, it was really quite quick, I managed to do it in 6 weeks and that was me qualified to look after babies in 6 weeks, so it really wasn't in depth. (Dean, BRL, interview)

Participants saw this as a persistent gap:

> People that are doing college and degrees on teaching or early years practitioners, there is just a sweep-through of the under-threes mainly, and then the main focus on all assignments and the teaching and everything you need to know is the older age groups… There is a big gap. (Toni, BRL, workshop)

As well as recognising the gap from the perspective of baby room professionals, it is also important to attend to the potential knock-on effects that these training limitations have on the experience of baby room leadership. In order to support practice in the baby room, BRLs may need to fill in gaps in professionals' knowledge, understanding and critical reflection as it relates to practice with babies. There are extra demands on their coaching and mentoring as a result of lacking initial professional learning relating to the baby room. This means that professional learning, particularly leadership development, for BRLs, becomes even more essential.

Challenging discourses and stereotypes surrounding those who work in the baby room

In a context of limited professional development opportunities, some participants fell back on a discourse of baby room practice which emphasised the instinctive nature of working with babies – which was available to some people, but not all:

> It takes a special kind of person to want to work with babies, as well, which is not always everybody's forte. (Melissa, BRL, interview)

> It's not for everybody. (Meg, BRL, workshop)

The emphasis on a 'special kind of person' can be interpreted as a way to cope with the lack of professional development around baby room practice. If the resources to develop people are scarce, there is a need to rely on individuals who just 'have the knack' and

instinctively nurture babies. There are a number of issues of buying into this discourse. Firstly, it reinforces the view that more expansive professional development for the baby room is unnecessary. Secondly, it positions a nurturing instinct as the most vital aspect of baby room practice, which in turn can limit pedagogical conversations about the baby room, where diverse values and practices can be considered, explored and critically reflected upon. Finally, it associates baby room practice with a particular kind of person and this is filtered through a social lens, in which some people (e.g. older women with children of their own, or young women who 'love' babies) are seen as valid actors while others (e.g. men or women who do not immediately present as 'maternal') are deemed unsuitable. This stands in the way of diversity not just in personnel but also in the range of visions of baby room pedagogy which can emerge. It also reinforces the vision that care is a gendered domain of concern and responsibility rather than a public good (Langford et al., 2017).

Counter-narratives were present though. One such counter-narrative was of the BRL who had never imagined they would work in the baby room (Cristina) but developed a passion through a self-guided journey of research and learning. Rather than an instinctive disposition, the work of the BRL here is presented as encouraging a much more open-minded mindset among practitioners where questioning and complexity have a seat at the table (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015; Vintimilla, 2018). This is not to say that love, care and nurturing are removed from the equation, but rather that the emphasis on 'instinct' is challenged.

Participants also felt it was important to challenge the gender stereotypes that pervade ECEC, which may be particularly pertinent in the baby room. Dean, a male BRL, highlighted both the difficulties he encountered in the position – particularly when working with parents – but also the importance he attached to the work he was doing as a male BRL:

> Some parents find it hard, I've had it very recently where a parent has asked me not to be changing nappies because I'm a man, and you have to work through that…. [In] early years there's not very many of us…It's important that children know that men can be caring, men can be loving… (Dean, BRL, interview)

BRLs therefore have a fundamental role to play in challenging stereotypes and discourses around baby room practice and who is suitable to work with babies, as well as who in society must take responsibility for babies and care more broadly. They can challenge such stereotypes as a result of who they themselves are, but also through sharing more nuanced elements in their journey to baby room leadership. Downplaying instinct and instead focusing on critical reflection and counter-narratives can help to open up baby room practice and leadership beyond stereotypical associations.

Discussion

The findings presented here demonstrate that the everyday leadership of BRLs involves advocacy. The findings resonate with existing literature in the field in a number of ways.

They feed into our understanding of the 'infant practicum' as envisioned by various researchers and particularly in the work of Shin (2015) and highlight the persistent need to better understand and share the nature of this practice. The findings also echo the concerns of Tadeu and Lopes (2021) when pathways to the baby room are restricted to those with personal experience with babies and an 'instinct' for nurturing. The findings presented here show how this view of baby room practice, fostered through the severe limitations in the professional learning landscape, can in turn block diversity in the baby room workforce, exacerbate a skewed vision of care as a private and gendered issue (Langford et al., 2017) and prevent more open-ended and critically reflective exploration of baby room pedagogies.

The advocacy themes presented in this article represent levers around which baby room professionals and leaders can come together in sector-led initiatives. Some of these improvements are tangible and measurable shifts in provision, for example, in expanding professional learning opportunities that are specific to the baby room. We need to proactively ensure that emerging professional learning opportunities in England, such as the NPQEYL, speak to baby room leaders as much as to preschool room leaders. We also need to ensure that such development pathways enable genuine space for critical reflection rather than conceptualising baby room practice as a set of techniques to be implemented. It is through professional learning that we can cultivate a deeply listening ECEC sector in the UK and further afield (Clark, 2019) and it is through critical collaborative communities that we can position sector-wide dialogues at the heart of leadership, and in doing so, change the face of ECEC (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015).

Other avenues for advocacy are less tangible but just as important. Personal stories shared by baby room leaders, perhaps via social media, can challenge discourses and stereotypes associated with the baby room. The findings suggest that disrupting an emphasis on 'instinct' is likely to support diversity in the baby room, both in terms of the composition of the workforce but also manifestations and explorations of baby room pedagogies. As a sector, we need to create forums that genuinely allow for pedagogy to be a 'complicated conversation' (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015, p. xii) where BRLs can ask questions about what it means to work with babies and what pedagogy means in this space. Most importantly, we need spaces in which we can ask questions without the need for resolution (Vintimilla, 2018); where the aim is not a set of instructions, but a set of pedagogical leadership dispositions as suggested by Coughlin and Baird (2013, p. 1): 'curiosity, openness, resiliency and purposefulness'. Part of the contribution made by this paper is a turning towards professional encounters in which such demeanours are brought to the fore. The dialogues presented here are the start of an intensive journey with BRLs in the UK, under the project 'Baby Rooms – Inspiring Leaders'. Through the project, we aim to shine a light on baby room leadership but simultaneously hold a space for personal and professional reflection and challenge among BRLs.

Of course, the themes developed and shared in this article are based on a limited set of dialogues: one workshop and five interviews. The findings are not intended to be

comprehensive or generalisable to all BRLs. It is likely that research in other contexts, with other BRLs, will highlight alternative understandings of everyday advocacy work involved in baby room leadership. Such work would be a welcome addition to the field. The findings here are presented as a modest invitation to extend dialogues in this field and to provoke discussion around particular questions. Future research is needed in order to deepen our understanding of baby room practice, including baby room leadership, further. This might involve not only further interview studies, but also more participatory ethnographies based in the baby room and additional communities of practice that make use of creative and narrative methods in order to foster deeper insights.

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