


**Please cite the Published Version**

Wilson-Thomas, Juliette  and Brooks, Ruby Juanita (2024) Investigating Ofsted's inclusion of cultural capital in early years inspections. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. pp. 1-21. ISSN 0142-5692

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2024.2325542>

**Publisher:** Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

**Version:** Published Version

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**Additional Information:** This is an open access article which originally appeared in *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, published by Taylor and Francis

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To cite this article: Juliette Wilson-Thomas & Ruby Juanita Brooks (10 Apr 2024): Investigating Ofsted's inclusion of cultural capital in early years inspections, British Journal of Sociology of Education, DOI: [10.1080/01425692.2024.2325542](https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2024.2325542)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2024.2325542>



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Published online: 10 Apr 2024.



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# Investigating Ofsted's inclusion of cultural capital in early years inspections

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## ABSTRACT

In 2019 Ofsted introduced cultural capital (CC) into the Early Years Inspection Handbook and defined it as 'essential knowledge' related to 'educated citizenship'. This paper investigates Ofsted's use of CC to critically examine the potential implications for early years work. Due to the feminised nature of early years work, a critical feminist approach is engaged to explore the potential impact of introducing CC into the regulation of the sector. This paper examines the differences between Ofsted's use of CC, CC's theoretical origins, and analyses sector responses. Our contention is that *how* Ofsted have employed CC may represent 'symbolic violence' against the working-class women working in the early years, by further devaluing their habitus and sustaining the stratification of society through forms of capital. This paper is the first to interrogate CC in Ofsted's early years documentation, and will have an international impact for any countries following UK education practices.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 May 2023

Accepted 26 February 2024

## KEYWORDS


Cultural capital; early years workers; critical; feminist; Bourdieu; Ofsted

## Introduction

Ofsted is a non-ministerial body in the United Kingdom (U.K) responsible for inspecting and regulating education providers (HM Government n.d.). Due to recent criticism, Ofsted have investigated their own practice and have instigated initial reforms, such as enabling headteachers of schools to pause inspections if they believe it will be detrimental to staff or student wellbeing (HM Government 2024). However, most of the reforms, including the latter, do not apply to the early years and early years organisations have voiced their dissatisfaction (Early Years Alliance n.d.; Nursery World 2023). The Chief Executive of The Early Years Alliance, Neil Leitch, articulated the contention here that Ofsted neglect the early years workforce:

It's clear that Ofsted has completely underestimated the negative impact of inspections on the early years workforce (Early Years Alliance n.d.)

Ofsted often fail to recognise the specific context of the early years, and act accordingly, which is demonstrated by its neglect in the reforms, and was a cause for concern in the

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See [Appendix A](#) for a timeline of key early years documents

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House of Commons Education Committee (2011) report on the ‘role and performance of Ofsted’. This is further evidenced by the finding that Ofsted inspectors often have ‘insufficient expertise to make judgements’ in the early years (Perry et al. 2023). Due to this context, this paper investigates Ofsted’s new inclusion of CC in their Early Years Inspection Handbook, to critically understand the impact of such regulatory changes on the early years sector and early years workers specifically.

Former Chief Inspector of Education, Amanda Spielman, said that Ofsted implemented CC as a direct result of it being included in education policy:

In our EIF handbook, what we say about cultural capital is taken from the national curriculum, the government’s policy instrument (HM Government 2020)

It is not, however, included in the early years curriculum, the EYFS (Department for Education 2021a), and the indiscriminate application of this to both schooling and early years further demonstrates the lack of specificity applied to each context. In the first inclusion of CC in the early years Ofsted documentation they define it as:

[...] the essential knowledge that children need to be educated citizens (Ofsted 2019a: 31).

This defines CC as a category of legitimate or core knowledge, and problematically connects it to a value judgement on citizenship. The Ofsted School Inspection Framework adds more detail to the definition:

[...] introducing them to the best that has been thought and said, and helping to engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement. (Ofsted 2019b: 10)

This definition cites the nineteenth-century poet and school inspector Matthew Arnold (1865), who argued that culture is a means to fix the problems of society because it can free us from our ‘stock notions and habits’; a redemptive notion of culture. We argue that Ofsted’s definitions of CC, and indeed culture, are part of a meritocracy orthodoxy in educational policy concerned with social mobility rather than tackling structures of inequality (See Stirrup, Evans, and Davies 2017). The belief in meritocracy, which is the rationale for social mobility agendas, continues to be pervasive in education, despite increasing evidence to that it does not exist (See Bradbury 2021). The inclusion of CC therefore positions early years workers as role models of valued British culture, responsible for knowing and relaying ‘the best that has been thought and said’; to offer redemption to children, through the potential to achieve *within* the status quo, within a ‘myth of meritocracy.’

This idea of culture as a means to redeem is related to elitism, and is at odds with alternative conceptions of culture, and indeed the current Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum (EYFS). For example, Raymond Williams theorized culture as that of the ‘ordinary’, and therefore as a means to contest powerful structures (See Menter 2022). The tension between these positions is articulated here by Young and Muller (2007, 2):

[...] the fundamental pedagogic issue – overcoming the discontinuity (sometimes expressed as a conflict) between the formal, codified, theoretical and, at least potentially, universalizing knowledge of the curriculum that students seek to acquire and teachers to transmit, and the informal, local, experiential and everyday knowledge that pupils (or students) bring to school.

Ofsted’s new inclusion of CC aligns with privileging valued knowledge/culture, and diminishes the ordinary. Arguably this instigation of CC links to a neoconservative and

neo-nationalist ideology of education, and the idea of a 'knowledge-rich curriculum' which is critiqued as vague (Dinh 2019). As Jarmy (2021) argues:

To know requires a knower. The picture of knowledge given by advocates of the 'knowledge-rich' curriculum is therefore shown to be pre-philosophical, lacking clarity between what is knowledge, what is a state of affairs, and what is a proposition that describes a state of affairs. Indeed, 'body-of-knowledge' talk, when considered as an epistemological position, is no position at all.

Thus the neoconservative concept of a knowledge-rich curriculum is the education policy basis which underlies Ofsted's practice. In turn Ofsted regulates curriculum and practice through judgement, yet the concept of a knowledge-rich curriculum has poor parameters within schooling, and even more so for the early years context rooted in care and development. The Ofsted definition is also very different from Bourdieu's original definition, Bourdieu did not theorise CC as essential knowledge, but rather, as the valued knowledge and demeanors passed to the next generation to maintain powerful positions. Ofsted's definition ignores the discriminatory hierarchical nature of CC, and infers that there is one form of CC, 'essential knowledge', needed in order to be an 'educated citizen'. The EYFS curriculum, and older Ofsted frameworks however, emphasised developing an exploration of children's own and others' cultures. Removing the language of diversity, and replacing it with developing CC, defined as 'essential knowledge', is neo-nationalist and neoconservative because it represents a move to limit legitimate knowledge to that of privileged British culture; for example, in the secondary English curriculum (See Mansworth 2016). This introduction of CC then, indicates a homogenised notion of 'essential' and 'best' culture, and links it to a value proposition about citizenship, which is both neoconservative and neo-nationalist.

Our concern is that Ofsted's inclusion of CC in their regulation of the early years, represents a neoconservative and neo-nationalist move in educational policy which has particular implications for working-class women in the sector. Whereas, Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) original theorisation of CC as a tool to categorise different forms of value, in order to analyse how societal groups maintain and create social hierarchies, has the potential to disrupt educational practice for a more egalitarian society. Indeed, the inclusion of this social theory within regulatory documents *could* provide a tool to dismantle the powerful hierarchies which exist within the British education system from early on. Considering Fraser's (2008) 'participatory parity' regarding the need to remove obstacles to women's equality, and Levitas' (2013) 'Utopia as method' using research to explore a more equitable future, this paper uses a critical feminist lens to investigate how Ofsted's inclusion of CC potentially impacts early years workers. This is done through a critical examination of the early years curriculum and inspection documents, as well as an analysis of sector responses in online publications.

### **Theoretical context of cultural capital**

Bourdieu proposed a framework of capitals for analysing the complexity of ways, beyond economic capital, that social hierarchies and power are maintained:

The primary differences, those which distinguish the major classes of conditions of existence, derive from the overall volume of capital, understood as the set of actually usable resources

and powers- economic capital, cultural capital and also social capital. The distribution of the different classes (and class fractions) thus runs from those who are best provided with both respects. (Bourdieu 1984: 114).

Bourdieu expresses the ways that forms of capital stratify society, and how those wealthy in all forms maintain higher social positions. In terms of CC, high status individuals inherit and/or develop cultural tastes which maintain their status by creating groups of people ‘like them,’ affording them social capital that is easily converted into economic capital. In *Distinction* (1984) Bourdieu theorised that CC is a long-term investment acquired over time, and that *where* it is acquired (i.e. at home or in institutions) is also part of the hierarchy determining how it can be translated into money and power (home being more legitimate). Bourdieu (1984: 70–71) wrote:

The embodied CC of the previous generations functions as a sort of advance (both a head-start and a credit) which, by providing from the outset the example of culture incarnated in familiar models, enables the newcomer to start acquiring the basic elements of the legitimate culture, from the beginning, that is, in the most unconscious and impalpable way [...]

What is accepted as legitimate and valued culture is passed onto the next generation in order to signify their rightful positioning in spaces of power, these are arbitrary, yet function to maintain the power of certain societal groups. Bourdieu (1984) further delineated the concept of CC into 3 forms; embodied, objectified and institutionalised. ‘Embodied’ is cultural knowledge mostly developed during socialisation which is evident through tastes and dispositions. ‘Objectified’ refers to objects such as works of art, and ‘institutionalised’ is qualifications and honoraries. Habitus is part of the way in which the capitals a person has become socially apparent (Bourdieu 2002), and can be detected in dispositions and tastes. Ofsted’s references to CC infer both embodied and objectified, but in the reference to Arnold’s (1865) work signifies a focus on embodied because he develops a notion of culture as a set of values. This makes sense in an early years context, which to some extent takes the place of familial socialisation. The Bourdieusian concept of CC was developed as a means to identify and analyse the ways in which high status groups protect their advantaged position through attributing special status to certain arts, accents, educational achievements etc. Ofsted’s definitions align with promoting valued embodied CC, and therefore maintaining the current social hierarchy.

In analysing social class structures in the UK, Savage (2015: 95) refers the continued significance of Bourdieu’s theory for identifying structures of advantage:

However, for Bourdieu, and for us, the key issue here is whether one’s tastes and interests are seen to be legitimate – socially approved – and seen as respectable and worthy. For, while there may be limitless types of cultural activity, ranging from gardening through to visiting the British Museum, watching Big Brother, or playing computer games, not all are valued equally. Some forms carry a cachet that is cultivated and reinforced by influential people and institutions. And, where such forms are legitimate, they can generate resources and advantages.

No forms of culture are objectively better, but society places higher value on certain forms of culture, hence culture becomes a capital. We therefore argue that introducing CC into the Ofsted regulation of the early years sector, links into a social mobility agenda which functions to maintain the social hierarchy by only offering better outcomes to those who

can develop valued embodied CC. More problematically, early years workers are being made responsible for this in ways which are symbolically violent. Curl (2013: 15) defines symbolic violence as

[...] an explanatory tool through which to better understand the ways in which classed individuals experience and live class domination through culture.

Further, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977: 5) argued that, 'All pedagogic action is symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power.' Yet in earlier texts Bourdieu and Passeron (1964) argued that disadvantaged students could and should be educated in 'learned culture'. As Robbins (2020:153) explains:

Bourdieu did not want a form of reverse discrimination which would make the curriculum preferentially amenable to the working class. He discarded this 'populist' solution.

Watkins (2018: 12) also argues that aiming to develop valued CC is not an imposition, rather it is an important step in developing a learner's self-reliance. However, this paper is not focussed on the impositions of the pedagogy *on the learners*, but rather *on the early years workers* who develop the context of care and education. Nursery provision is an embodied care and education field where the workers, working-class women, bring their habitus into the work. Tasking low paid working-class women with developing valued CC for children is symbolically violent to those workers because it signifies that their socialisation and habitus is not valued. It imposes embodied labour of habitus mimicry so that they do not socialise the children 'like them,' but focus on middle-class cultural practices and embodiment. Further, it is a 'schoolification' and 'educationalisation' of early years work which researchers have argued moves towards a masculine regulatory framework, and away from the current embodied feminised nature of care and education (Brooks 2023). Lareau and Calarco (2012: 63) argue: 'a dissonance between the cultural standards of the workplace and the cultural practices of the worker creates stress for those employees.' Thus Ofsted's implementation of CC could be 'othering' and 'symbolically violent' as the workers' culture and identities as working-class women are unlikely to be valued. Arguably this is why CC has been brought in, because predominantly male middle-class policy makers are concerned that increasing numbers of young children are being socialised by working-class women. Ultimately, it is more socially acceptable to attempt to regulate CC in early years work, than to propose that middle-class parents care for, and educate their children at home themselves, or that we create a more equitable and inclusive society.

### **The social mobility agenda in education policy**

The way in which CC has been brought into the early years inspection regulation is part of a trend to employ a 'knowledge-rich curriculum' (based on traditional/core/scientific knowledge) increasingly earlier in childrens' lives, in order to improve economic outcomes. The social mobility agenda, which conceptualises children as economic assets, and education as a tool to realise those assets (Sims 2017) is also part of this policy trend. As the 2010–2014 Education Secretary Michael Gove stated:

The accumulation of cultural capital – the acquisition of knowledge – is the key to social mobility. (The Guardian 2013).

The introduction of CC into the early years field represents a widening of the social mobility agenda, which is concerning because, as Ingram and Gamsu (2022: 202) have argued, '[...] the social mobility agenda is the enemy of equality.' The implementation of CC into the EIF represents a political shift to the right congruent with a neoliberal, neo-conservative and neo-nationalist ideological positioning. That is to say, the way that CC has been introduced is both focussed on market and traditional values (Apple 2006), representing the meritocracy orthodoxy (Stirrup, Evans, and Davies 2017) which focuses on social mobility rather than addressing structures of inequality. It is also neo-nationalist as it is concerned with restoring the sovereignty of nation states through educational policy (Douglass 2021) by moving away from celebrating cultural diversity, towards privileging valued CC. This (mis)use of Bourdieu's capitals terminology in UK social policy has precedent; in the early 2000s 'social capital' was used to focus on social mobility rather than social inequality in UK public services as part of an ideological political agenda to divert attention from material inequality and redistributive policies (see Fine 2002; Wilson-Thomas 2016). In a Foucauldian (1976) sense, Bourdieusian capitals terminology may be becoming a discourse in educational fields, with which to maintain powerful positions and to obscure the causes of inequality. It is therefore important to critically theorise CC's new inclusion in directives relating to the earliest stages of education.

### **The feminised and classed context of early years workers**

The formal early years sector is much younger than the formal education sector, but it is gaining in significance and is receiving increasing policy attention (Akhal 2019; European Commission 2018; Hobbs and Mutebi 2021; Melhuish and Gardiner 2020). Arguably, as the early years sector gains importance it may follow the policy trajectory of education, with policy regarding practice increasing, and autonomy of practitioners and providers decreasing (Ball 2021); this has been a continuing strain on the education workforce, which has not positively affected the education experiences of children. As Sims argues:

Under neoliberalism, education has changed and now the capacity of teachers to shape children's critical thinking is strictly limited; what is valued has increasingly become compliant employees who have the skills and knowledge to perform the job required without asking questions (Sims 2017: 1).

Thus the policy direction in education is towards uncritical and homogenized practice of educators. Early years provision in the UK is delivered in 4 ways: private day nurseries, registered childminders, maintained nurseries (in a school with children aged 3–4) and special education schools. The majority of very young children are cared for, and educated in, private day nurseries, which account for 11,000 of the 14,000 early years settings in the UK (Livesy 2023). Whilst staff in maintained nurseries are often qualified teachers (degree educated and better paid), the workforce in private day nurseries are mostly working-class women (Bonetti 2019). There is no specific data on the class identification of early years workers, but using educational qualifications and wages as a proxy, the majority of the workforce are working-class; only 16% of nursery workers hold a degree as their highest qualification (Social Mobility Commission 2020). Early years work is one of the lowest paid and lowly valued jobs in the UK (Low Pay Commission 2018; Saunders 2017) which



represents class and gender discrimination. Using a critical feminist analysis of work, Weeks (2011) argues that the current economic system reinforces gender by the organisation of work to create subjects of capitalism; in short, the economic structure is exploitative of women. Further, Skeggs (1997) argues that working-class women are marked out as lacking in valued CC, in ways which affect their work and value (See also Osgood 2012). The social norms therefore, structured by a neoliberal patriarchal ideology, exert power to diminish the value and esteem of the labour of working-class women.

In considering participatory parity, an equitable society should *actively* seek to remove obstacles to equality *and* the disempowering institutionalised social patterns (Fraser 2008). Arguably, the inclusion of CC as a regulatory requirement for early years workers is an obstacle to equality, and functions as part of disempowering institutionalised forces on working-class women. CC's inclusion risks demeaning their embodied identities in ways which are symbolically violent, and a critical feminist analysis is required in order to articulate the way in which this inequity is being imposed. Due to the embodied nature of early years education and childcare, judging CC in practice may potentially mean that workers need to minimise their working-class habitus at work. For example, accents and vocabulary are classed markers of culture, and using working-class accents and vocabulary could be judged as not delivering the 'essential knowledge needed to be educated citizens' as it is not the valued language of our society. Yet this value judgement functions to impose power, rather than necessarily concerning communication (See Cushing 2021). Research shows that a large proportion of nursery workers found Ofsted inspections made them anxious and nervous, with a number being extremely anxious and commenting that it had impacted their mental health (Nursery World 2023). Without actively considering the positionality of such workers within a neoliberal patriarchal society, it is unlikely that the full implications of policy changes can be conceived of. As Pascall (2001: 51) argues:

Low pay is one measure of women's subjection in the labour market. But power is also wielded more directly through hierarchies, decision making, control over the content and processes of work and over resources and promotions.

The structural constraints of gendered privilege persist in the UK (Gosling 2008; Skeggs 2004), thus top-down changes to early years practice must be considered from a critical feminist perspective if we aim to reduce inequalities.

### **A critical feminist framework for analysis**

Moeller (2016) argues that education researchers should frame their investigations within a keen awareness of historical inequalities. This research is therefore founded in a critical feminist tradition in examining changes to the regulation of the early years sector. The majority of policy makers are men (UK Parliament 2022) and senior staff in even feminised fields are disproportionately male (Department for Education 2018), resulting in a regulatory context where social policy is 'done to' women (see Pascall 2001). This top-down policy context is present in the early years sector where the workers have little power; 98.2% are women, the majority of whom are working-class, and very few are trade union members (see Wilson-Thomas 2020). Pascall (2001: 10) argues that in practice all mainstream approaches to social policy marginalize women's work, and that *feminist* social policy analysis is about redressing that inequity:

Feminist analysis is about putting women into a picture that has largely been drawn by men. But it is also about rethinking and, in the end, about drawing a new picture that includes women and men.

Of course, feminism is a complex and contested term, but as hooks (1981: 195) powerfully stated:

I [...] focus on the fact that to be 'feminist' in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination, and oppression.

Whilst feminism is diverse, it is still a vital position in challenging inequality, because women as a *whole group* are broadly discriminated against. In this paper we employ Fraser's (2008) feminist ethos of participatory parity in analysing documents relating to Ofsted inspections, the curriculum, and early sector responses, with a view to identifying obstacles to equality in early years work. The Bourdieusian framework facilitates a critical analysis of the documents referring to CC, in considering how capitals are functioning to maintain social hierarchies of power. Further, we use Levitas (2013) 'Utopia as method' as a means to move beyond critique, and to consider how the inclusion of CC in early years regulation could provide a means to make inequitable structures visible, and provide a tool to dismantle them. From a critical feminist perspective, it is important to monitor and critically evaluate regulatory changes in the early years sector in order to challenge further potential discrimination of workers which will ultimately sustain inequitable social structures.

### Cultural capital in early years research

Radulović, Radulović, and Stančić (2022) contend that the links between acquiring valued CC and educational achievement are 'common knowledge' amongst educational sociologists. However, in educational policy there is a misunderstanding of the relationship between CC and educational success; CC *correlates with*, rather than *causes*, educational success. Bourdieu recognised the issue of CC in the educational field by showing that middle-class teachers often misguidedly perceive valued CC as 'academic brilliance' (Grenfell 2014; Jæger and Møllegaard 2017), which can lead to educational success through positive teacher regard and attention. For example, Stopforth and Gayle (2022: 13) found no positive impact of CC on GCSE attainment, and Bourdieu found it to be a means for teachers to privilege middle-class children. As Reay (2004: 76) argues, CC is actually '[...] mobilized to *perpetuate* educational inequality' through providing a way to gain preferential treatment within formal education by presenting social status as educational aptitude and effort. Within early years research on CC, the focus is on the role early years settings play in addressing inequality through early socialisation (Brooker 2002, 2015; O'Connor et al. 2011). In asking the question, 'Cultural capital in the preschool years; can the state 'compensate' for the family?', Brooker (2015) finds that developing valued CC requires long-term development in the family, which is difficult to equalise through formal early years education and care. Thus research shows that a focus on CC can perpetuate inequality in schooling, and that early years settings are unlikely to be able to develop valued CC, yet educational policies continue to utilise Bourdieusian theory as part of a flawed social mobility agenda. What is missing from the research and policy context is the potential of CC as a tool for understanding and dismantling discriminatory social hierarchies (Lareau and Weininger 2003).

Another focus of research on CC in the early years sector is the impact of the workforce lacking valued CC (Osgood 2012; Reay 2004; Skeggs 2001). As Osgood argues, a lack of valued CC is detrimental in their work because:

[...] nursery workers do not have access to the same ‘hot knowledge’ or the necessary social and cultural capital to make visible their marginalisation and subjugation (Osgood 2012: 17).

Thus the inclusion of CC in early years regulation, has significant implications for these workers, because they often do not possess valued CC, and further emphasis on it is symbolically violent and regressive to their equality at work. Research on the workforce is dominated by discussions of qualifications, pay, gender and race, but little emphasis is placed upon the classed nature of it. For example, in large-scale reviews of the early years workforce there is no reference to worker social class whatsoever (Bonetti 2019; Pascal, Bertam, and Cole-Alback 2020; Social Mobility Commission 2020). This indicates the taboo and hidden nature of class in the workforce, yet there are clear links between this and directives regarding CC. Osgood (2009) however, does recognise these workforce demographics, and the tensions between class, social policy and early years work:

[.] childcare is only deemed ‘good quality’ if it can be assessed and measured against a middle-class norm.

Further, some researchers have also raised the issue of the ways the class differential between workers and parents affects their relationships (Osgood 2012; Vincent and Ball 2006; Vincent, Braun, and Ball 2008). Therefore, introducing a requirement to deliver valued CC to children in the early years work is educationally unfounded, unlikely to progress societal equality, and signifies symbolic violence against workers as their habitus present in their embodied labour is stigmatised.

## Analysing cultural capital in early years regulatory documents

(See [Appendix A](#) for Timeline of Documents)

CC first appeared in early years regulatory documentation in the 2019 Ofsted inspection handbook, it did not feature any previous inspection documents (Ofsted 2015). Despite Ofsted’s chief inspector stating that the inclusion of CC was a direct result of government policy, due to its occurrence in the National Curriculum (HM Government 2020), it does not appear anywhere in the early years curriculum (Department for Education 2021a). This is another example of Ofsted not differentiating between the educational context of formal schooling, and early years education and care. CC is only cited once in the Ofsted education inspection framework (Ofsted 2019a), however, it is a key term they use to define the quality of the educational provision that they judge:

Inspectors will make a judgement on the quality of education by evaluating the extent to which [...] leaders take on or construct a curriculum that is ambitious and designed to give all learners, particularly the most disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) or high needs, the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life (Ofsted 2019a)

CC is central to this narrative regarding what early years settings should be doing for the children they are educating. Further, knowledge is separate to cultural capital which

indicates that it is not about learning content, but rather something else, the embodied habitus of valued culture. The Early Years Inspection Handbook (Ofsted 2022) refers to CC 5 times; in 3 instances they define and conceptualise it, and in 2 they refer to the performance management of staff. Here Ofsted (2022) define CC in the Early Years Inspection Handbook:

Cultural capital is the essential knowledge that children need to be educated citizens.

It is important to note that CC and ‘essential knowledge’ is introduced as a regulatory practice, but it is vaguely defined with no examples given. This poorly defined introduction of CC as an inspection criteria is even more problematic when it is not in the curriculum. Later in the Early Years Inspection Handbook Ofsted (2022) offer further detail:

Cultural capital is the essential knowledge that children need to prepare them for their future success. It is about giving children the best possible start to their early education. As part of making a judgement about the quality of education, inspectors will consider how well leaders use the curriculum to enhance the experience and opportunities available to children, particularly the most disadvantaged.

This directly links back to Gove’s neoliberal assertion about CC and social mobility which views young children as economic assets (The Guardian 2013), but again gives no specific guidance on what this practice should involve. To be judged as a ‘good’ setting the Early Years Inspection Framework states:

Leaders adopt or construct a curriculum that is ambitious and designed to give children, particularly the most disadvantaged, the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life.

These entries highlight the fact that CC aimed in particular at ‘disadvantaged children’, which links to a deficit perspective of working-class communities. In a later government document researching *The Best Start in Life* (HM Government, 2022) there is acknowledgement of the sociological origins of CC, and the following explanation is offered:

From a sociological point of view, the term ‘cultural capital’ is associated with Bourdieu. It means the kind of cultural knowledge that serves as ‘currency’ within society, for example ability in language (including vocabulary); familiarity with the ways of behaving in different social situations; and knowledge of the ‘canon’ of literary and artistic works.

These definitions are concerning, because they connect cultural practices, and indeed general comportment and behaviour, with some form of judgement on education and knowledge, and concerningly, they pose this as a means to determine citizen legitimacy. CC is therefore a central judgement criteria in the Ofsted inspection documents, but it lacks a clear definition and is connected to a flawed social mobility agenda and a deficit perspective of ‘disadvantaged’ children.

In relation to ‘performance management and professional development’ the Ofsted Early Years Inspection Handbook (Ofsted 2022) states:

Inspectors should consider how effectively senior leaders use performance management and their assessment of strengths and areas for improvement within the setting to provide a focus for professional development activities, particularly in relation to increasing children’s vocabulary and cultural capital.

It is significant that vocabulary and CC are referred to together, because the idea of working-class children having a ‘restricted code’, as Bernstein defined it, which limits their educational success (See Ivinson 2018; Jones 2013), is the same flawed deficit perspective which disadvantages those children in relation to CC through misinterpreting their habitus as a lack of intelligence. Indeed, Bourdieu (1991) critiqued Bernstein’s theory for overlooking the symbolic and cultural power that contextualises language use. The inclusion of CC places early years workers in the role of embodying and policing cultural tastes and habits aligned with valued culture, similar to Cushing’s (2021) argument regarding school policies and standard English:

Teachers are constructed as language role models and regulators of their students’ language, granted power to police classroom discourse in ways which potentially marginalises and stigmatises speakers of non-standardised forms.

Ultimately the valued culture in the UK is that of the white middle and upper classes, and this inclusion of CC further serves to homogenise culture in ways which perpetuate many forms of inequality. The above excerpt also directs inspectors to judge senior staff on their performance management of early years workers in relation to how they work to increase valued vocabulary and CC. As Nightingale cautioned in relation to schools:

First, the remodelling of Bourdieu’s concept, designed to explain class privilege, means that the cultural capital is now a mechanism for disciplining schools and teachers who fail to deliver the required curriculum (Nightingale 2020: 233).

This is a punitive part of the guidance, which may exert symbolic violence onto the workforce, and relays a deficit perspective in relation to workers *and* children.

The previous Ofsted Inspection Framework (2015) made no reference to CC, but did state that they would inspect that, ‘equality of opportunity and recognition of diversity are promoted through teaching and learning’ (Ofsted 2015: 13). Whilst ‘recognition’ in relation to diversity, and ‘promoting’ equality of opportunity are rather conservative, they are more egalitarian notions than developing CC as the ‘essential knowledge’ needed to succeed and be an ‘educated citizen’. The promotion of ‘equality of opportunity’ no longer appears in the inspection framework, and this may indicate a right-leaning political shift from more diverse values-led education to a more essentialist and conservative focus. Further, whilst CC does not appear in the EYFS (2021), it refers to ‘cultural knowledge’ in this way:

The development of children’s artistic and cultural awareness supports their imagination and creativity.

Promoting equality of opportunity, recognising diversity and developing cultural awareness through imagination and creativity, are far more intrinsically valuable, and less discriminatory, than the ways Ofsted have introduced CC. The intentions behind this shift appear to relate to either elitism, or a misunderstanding of the problem of inequality. As Reay (The Guardian 2019) asserts:

This new requirement is a crude, reductionist model of learning, both authoritarian and elitist. The key elements of cultural capital are entwined with privileged lifestyles rather than qualities you can separate off and then teach the poor and working classes.

Therefore, the ways that CC are being introduced into early years regulation *via* Ofsted are problematic at best, as they follow a global trend towards a right-wing policy context

of neoconservatism and neo-nationalism, and are a regressive move away from the more constructive and egalitarian ethos currently in the EYFS (2021). Here, Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman tried to distance Ofsted from criticisms of elitism:

The Bourdieu legacy tends to lead some people to think that cultural capital is therefore bad. In fact, he recognised its value, but he was pessimistic in thinking that education can't make a difference. Where we depart from Bourdieu today is that we believe education is transformative and contributes to pupils' ability to flourish in society and to be socially mobile: what's wrong with believing in the power of education? (HM Government 2020)

Spielman tries to distance Ofsted from the language of its documents here, but also confirms the links to the flawed social mobility agenda. The flawed social mobility agenda only offers marginal inclusion to those who can embody the valued culture, whereas, a truly meritocratic system would enable all the opportunity to succeed, or an egalitarian system would offer all to be valued for their contributions to society equally. The concern is that workers will be expected to enforce/comply with these directives which are very much open to an elitist and deficit interpretation which is symbolically violent for the workers whose working-class habitus is further devalued. Consequently, the focus is not on practitioners meeting the needs of the children, but rather meeting ideological positions (Sims 2017). The specific problem for the early years sector of this inclusion of CC, is that it is yet another regulatory imposition which fails to deliver participatory parity or develop the sector in a progressive way.

### **The difference in significance of cultural capital between teachers and early years workers**

At the same time as appearing in the Early Years Inspection Handbook, CC arose for the first time in the school inspection frameworks (Ofsted 2019b). In the Education Inspection Framework the deficit interpretation of CC is clearer. For example, the first reference states:

So many disadvantaged pupils may not have access to cultural capital, both in the home and then in their school (Ofsted 2019b: 8).

This indicates that there is a particular culture they want pupils to have access to, and negates the interpretation of it as valuing every child's home culture and what they bring. Additionally, the document goes on to define CC using the same phrasing as the Early Years Inspection Handbook, but extending the elitist neo-nationalist narrative:

It is the essential knowledge that pupils need to be educated citizens, *introducing them to the best that has been thought and said*, and helping to engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement (Ofsted 2019b: 10).

Again, 'essential knowledge' is somewhat problematic, but 'the best that has been thought and said', extends the issue, and as previously discussed, links to Arnold's conception of people as needing redemption. Whilst there has been a similar confusion over definition, usage and meaning for schools, arguably the underlying classism is less problematic for the school teacher workforce because most teachers are middle-class (a university qualification is required) and white British (95.7% White British [HM Government 2021]). In contrast to the predominantly working-class early years workers, whilst teachers *may* face a mismatch

between their CC and that of the children they teach, valued CC is more likely to be aligned with their embodied CC (*habitus*). Most early years workers' CC is not valued, and thus Ofsted imposes symbolic violence on an already discriminated against, and undervalued workforce.

### Early years sector interpretations of cultural capital

Due to the vague and differing definitions of CC, the way that practitioners interpret this new Ofsted criteria is significant in analysing the potential impact. It is true to say that there are conflicting understandings and feelings within the sector, and much has been written in advisory documents and online articles, but there is as yet no academic research. There are two non-statutory advisory documents influential in the sector, *Development Matters* (Department for Education 2021b) and *Birth to 5 Matters* (Early Years Coalition 2021), the former makes no reference to CC but the latter does. *Birth to 5 Matters* is a guidance document written by the sector, for the sector, and makes these references:

Cultural capital: what children bring with them, and develop from their experiences and opportunities. (Early Years Coalition 2021: 119)

Each child and family is unique and this needs to be respected and celebrated, as each brings aspects of their own personal and cultural knowledge and values which enrich the whole setting. (Early Years Coalition 2021: 28)

They relate CC to positive relationships, the value of individual children, and anti-discriminatory practice. The British Association for Early Childhood Education (2019) offer similar sentiments:

Rather than thinking of cultural capital as a thing that must be 'given' or 'taught', it might be more helpful to think first and foremost about the cultures, languages and traditions that children and their families bring, and how we might value and celebrate this.

These sector conceptions are more in line with the previous criteria of the 2015 Ofsted inspection framework regarding diversity and equality of opportunity. Further, to some extent this aligns with what Ofsted representatives *say* about cultural capital. However, there is always the underlying neoliberal implication that this valuing or experiencing culture should be productive; should 'pay off'. Consider for example what the deputy director of Ofsted, Gill Jones, stated to Nursery World Magazine (2019a):

We will want to see if young children – particularly the disadvantaged – are thinking and talking about a wide range of experiences that prepare them for what comes next.

This again frames CC around a deficit model, focussing on the abilities of 'disadvantaged children', rather than considering that what might disadvantage them is external and structural. A neoliberal ideological positionality regarding children as economic assets and education as a means to realise those assets (see Sims 2017). It is presented as egalitarian in line with the social mobility agenda, yet, as highlighted by Ingram and Gamsu (2022), this agenda is flawed, and does not adequately address inequality. Whilst much of the advisory commentary on the inclusion of CC seems to reframe it back in line with previous language regarding diversity and equality, a critical reading is that the focus of CC in Ofsted inspection frameworks is on 'disadvantaged' children and how they can experience valued culture.

Further sector responses to the inclusion of CC range from ignoring it, to identifying it as an elitist nationalist agenda. Stakeholders, such as Early Years Alliance (2019), recognise the controversy regarding CC, but actively seek to quash it:

Some providers are concerned that Ofsted has introduced a term that, as a sociological concept, is about power and how groups of people maintain and enhance their positions in society at the expense of others. [...] Rather than looking for hidden meaning in the phrase, practitioners should continue to focus on giving each child the best start in life and the support that enables them to fulfil their full potential.

The Early Years Alliance (2019) also likened the inclusion of CC to concerns over 'Fundamental British Values' (FBV), and argue that it is not an issue because such things are covered by what settings do every day as common practice.

We may not have been sure of what the term meant when it was first introduced, but we soon came to realise that if we were supporting children's personal, social and emotional development then we were in effect promoting British values.

However, the critical issue with the inclusion of FBV, as with CC, is that it implies that there are distinct and better values, distinct and better culture; 'essential knowledge to become educated citizens' (Ofsted 2019a). In *Nursery World Magazine* (2019b), Moylett clearly sees an issue with its inclusion, and asks, amongst other pertinent questions:

Do we want everyone to be middle-class – is that the mission of education or do we want to make settings and schools more inclusive?

Moylett's (2019) concern astutely understands the inclusion of CC as a means to inculcate working-class children to the valued middle-class culture. Beadle (2020) goes further, and critiques the inclusion of CC into the education inspection framework here:

Alternatively, you might, if you were so inclined, want to teach the children about what is valuable in their own cultures. But that is not what cultural capital on the curriculum is about. What they are seeking here is to link children to the idea that traditional British white culture is the superior form and that children should be taught this.

Whilst there is some concern from sector commentators on the elitism, neo-nationalism and conservatism in CC privileging British middle-class values, generally the sector favours a definition of CC which differs from both Bourdieusian theory, and the Ofsted inspection documents; a definition of CC related to diversity and valuing many cultural practices. However, it is unlikely, due to the working-class feminised demographics of the sector, that practitioner interpretations of CC would be accepted in the context of Ofsted judging a setting on their practice of delivering 'essential knowledge'. The concern is that it will become a more prescribed, central part of the curriculum, which serves to further devalue the culture, demeanors and experiences of some already structurally disadvantaged children, whilst also demeaning the identities of the working-class women in the workforce through regulatory judgement.

## **Conclusions: potential for disruptions through cultural capital**

This is the first paper to critically consider the inclusion of CC in the early years Ofsted Inspection Handbook, and we call for further research into the implications for workers and practice. A critical feminist analysis of the early years sector demonstrates it to be



devalued, and regulated in a top-down manner, because it is a sector of predominantly working-class women. Further, it is clear that Ofsted, as the body responsible for regulating the sector, lacks attention to the specificities of early years as an area of work which is distinct from primary and secondary education. The way in which CC has been included in the regulatory framework, as a response to changes in the school curriculum, rather than the EYFS, demonstrates this. Further, as a sector which most closely replicates the early socialisation of the home environment CC is particularly pertinent. When Bourdieu defined CC he articulated it as developed within the family, and considered schools unable to replicate it. Ofsted, in imposing regulation onto the early years sector on their ability to develop and deliver an elitist version of CC, of valued CC, pose symbolic violence to the working-class women whose embodied labour and habitus are devalued. In analysing the documentation relating to CC this paper demonstrates that in spite of the rhetoric of spokespeople, the language of the regulation relates to neoconservative and neo-national notions of culture which imposes a further strain on a sector of low paid workers. Further, the dangerous linking of subjectivities regarding culture to conceptions of 'educated citizens' must be resisted if we are to be an inclusive and equal society. The underlying ethos of the instigation of CC in education policy is the social mobility agenda however, the social mobility agenda itself is flawed if the aim of the policy is a more equal society. The early years workforce of working-class women has already borne too much injustice by being placed at the lower end of the value hierarchy, and by policy being 'done to', rather than 'done for' or 'done with' them. These workers are under-unionised, and lack the power to challenge chronic low pay, let alone directives imposed upon their work which are symbolically violent. In considering utopia as a method, for greater equality, a more effective approach would be to return to a Bourdieusian theorisation of CC as a tool to understand the ways in which the social hierarchy is sustained. To resist such policies Cushing (2021: 333) argues that educators and settings:

[...] develop critical language awareness if they are to engage in policy making and pedagogies which resist some of the hegemonic language discourses found to be present in the policies [...]

If early years workers are equipped with an understanding of CC then they could continue to practice in the way the sector has responded to the changes online, by valuing diversity and multiculturalism and demonstrating that all culture is capital. This could form some sort of participatory parity in removing the obstacles to inequitable policies and regulations by practicing equality of value. To do so, however, poses a danger to these disempowered workers, who may be marked down by Ofsted inspectors for such an interpretation. Further research on the implementation and experiences of CC, specifically within the early years sector, is required to provide evidence on how CC functioning within the early years sector, and to empower resistance to regulation which poses symbolic violence to those whose CC is devalued. We argue that when there is a critical feminist interpretation of Ofsted's inclusion of cultural capital it *could* represent a means to disrupt elitist hierarchies through revaluing other forms of culture. As Reay (2004: 84) argues:

There is a desperate need to rehabilitate other, more re-distributory ways of mobilizing cultural capital other than 'getting the best for your own child'; to harness both cultural and economic capital to the revitalization of 'the common good.'

For Bourdieu (1984: 120), ‘[...] the struggle for the hierarchy is always at stake [...]’, but as Reay argues *we* can control *it*, rather than *it* controlling us. Ofsted’s underlying ideology to the inclusion of cultural capital in early years regulation regards the maintenance of the social hierarchy through symbolic violence, and individualised opportunities for those who embody valued CC, it is therefore important that early years workers are empowered to identify this and to resist. We hope that this article offers early years workers the language and knowledge to resist such policies which may attack their habitus and culture for no evidence-based reason, and which impose extra labour due to an ideology which adheres to an arbitrary a hierarchy of social value that devalues working-class women in the early years sector.

## Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful for the support from the Developing Research Excellence scheme implemented at Manchester Metropolitan University by Dr Claire Fox and Prof. Nicola Ingram in enabling us to write this paper. We would also like to thank Professor Nicola Ingram for her belief in the value of this work and her constructive feedback on initial drafts. We also thank the anonymous reviewers for the time taken to offer both critical and supportive comments on the manuscript.

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Manchester, UK

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

None.

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## Appendix A. Key early years guidance & policy documents

- 2021: Birth to 5 Matters Guidance for the Sector by the Sector published. Cultural capital is referenced
- 2020, September: Development Matters; Non-statutory curriculum guidance for the early years foundation stage first published by The Department for Education. No reference to cultural capital.
- 2019, May: New Ofsted Early Years Inspection Handbook published including reference to cultural capital
- 2019, May: New Education Inspection Framework introduced including reference to cultural capital
- 2019, January: New Ofsted Inspection Framework introduced including reference to cultural capital
- 2015, August: Earlier Ofsted Early Years Inspection Handbook published. No reference to cultural capital.
- 2014, May: Early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework. No reference to cultural capital.
- 2014, March: Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework published. No reference to cultural capital.