

Institution: University of Roehampton
Unit of Assessment: Panel C, UoA 25 Education
Title of case study: The Emotional Dimensions of Nursery Life and Learning
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Research conducted by Peter Elfer has shown the significance of attention to babies and under threes' emotional well-being in nursery if early learning is to be effective. Children who are continually anxious or distressed do not learn well. A sensitive, responsive and consistent relationship with mainly one or two members of nursery staff (now known as the child's 'key-person') has been shown to promote in young children feelings of safety and security. The research has underpinned the development of the key-person role in nurseries, as the means for enabling individual attention to children. This research has had a significant impact in the following areas:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) UK Government curriculum guidance and requirements 2) Training of the early years workforce and continuing professional development 3) The evolution of UK Coalition Government policy and public discourse <p>The reach of the research is extensive, providing the underpinning for attachment practice in English nurseries. The above developments have strengthened the expectation in national standards of greater attention to the emotions of babies and young children in nursery and have provided the detailed guidance on how this can be achieved in practice.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The underpinning research for this case study started in 1995 with a four year study of nursery provision for under-threes, in which Elfer was a Principal Investigator, funded by an Esmee Fairbairn Research Grant (£120K). The work was completed in 1999, after the commencement of Elfer's employment at the University of Roehampton (1999 to date). The research entailed case studies of 15 children in four different kinds of nurseries. One aim of the research was to develop an observation methodology particularly suited to this age group that could generate the fine grained 'rich' data necessary to explore these children's daily interactions (Elfer and Selleck 1999). The observations focussed on moment to moment sequences, as the babies and under threes interacted with practitioners and other children, what they communicated about their experience and their engagement in social interaction and in exploration and discovery. The research has continued and evolved in the period since 1999 in the programme of work detailed below.</p> <p>Many interpretations of this data were possible in the different nursery contexts documented. The research took place at a time when provision for such young children, especially babies, was being driven by the labour market demand for more women workers. The shift in balance away from family care to nursery care caused considerable professional and media anxiety about the consequences for children's long term development. The research showed how new observation methodologies could reveal the value of nursery provision to under threes and the possibility of a wider perspective than just seeing nursery as automatically harmful and full time care at home until the age of three as optimum, regardless of home circumstances. This is a particularly important insight, given a deeply engrained view in the media that full time maternal care is the ideal and all other patterns of care fall short of this.</p> <p>As the potential of nursery care to make a positive contribution to the lives of children and families as well as to the economy became accepted, policy questions inevitably turned to what makes a 'good nursery'. The Esmee Fairbairn funded work was able to address this for babies and children under 30 months. The main factor to emerge was the significance of children's emotional well-being in nursery as a pre-condition of engaged and persistent playful exploration and discovery. The research (Elfer and Selleck 1999) provided the first underpinning for the importance of an emphasis in policy and practice on fostering attachments between very young children and nursery teachers and nursery assistants. It was this research, specifically rooted in nursery organisation and practice, which led to the inclusion in UK Government guidance of the importance for each child of having a named member of staff (the key-person) to work closely with her or him. Two pieces of guidance drawing on the research were included in the Early Years Foundation Stage resources material, attributed to Elfer, and rooted in the research reported in the practice book Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck (2003) referred to in Section 4 below (see also DVD reference in</p>

Section 5).

This application of attachment principles (Bowlby, 1988) in nursery policy has been contested based on fear that the prioritizing of close attachment to practitioners may undermine children's opportunities for peer interaction. More recent research (Elfer 2006, 2007) was able to show how different children need different kinds of attachment experience at different times of the day, according to their levels of tiredness and stress. It thus underpinned and enabled a more differentiated approach to attachment practice so that importance of interactions with the key-person could be balanced with those of peers.

The research has continued to evolve (Elfer and Dearnley 2007; Elfer 2012; Page and Elfer 2013) to explore the subjective impact on practitioners of the expectation to form emotionally close relationships with young children. As the key-person role has become established in policy, so practitioners have expressed their anxieties about forming such close individual relationships, including that parents will be resentful of such close relationships and that nursery attachments may undermine those at home. Facilitating emotional responsiveness to individual children, whilst also maintaining a degree of professional distance, requires work of considerable emotional complexity. Continuing professional development work with nursery heads and practitioners has sought to develop models of training and support that take account of this complexity and can be shown to be effective in enabling practice that is sensitive to children's individual emotional experience. The significance of psychoanalytic conceptions in understanding this complexity is important and has been set out as a complementary strand of work (Elfer 2013). This sets out how the understanding of processes of projection and transference might be deepened amongst nursery practitioners in continuing professional development work.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Elfer, P (2013) Emotional aspects of nursery policy and practice – progress and prospect. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*. DOI: 10.1080/1350293X.2013.798464.

Page, J and Elfer, P (2013) The emotional complexity of attachment interactions in nursery. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*. DOI: 10.1080/1350293X.2013.766032. REF2.

Elfer, P (2012): Emotion in nursery work: Work Discussion as a model of critical professional reflection. *Early Years: An International Research Journal*, 32:2, 129-141. DOI: 10.1080/09575146.2012.697877. REF2

Elfer, P & Dearnley, K (2007) Babies and Young Children in Nursery: Using psychoanalytic ideas to explore tasks and interactions. *Children and Society* 21(2). DOI: 10.1111/j.1099-0860.2006.00034.x

Elfer, P (2006) Exploring children's expressions of attachment in nursery. *European Early Childhood Education Journal*, 14(2). DOI: 10.1080/13502930285209931

Elfer, P & Selleck, D (1999): Children under three in nurseries. Uncertainty as a creative factor in child observations, *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 7:1, 69-82. DOI: 10.1080/13502939985208331

Grants

1. Esmee Fairbairn Charitable Trust (£120K) (1995-1999) The lives of children under three in nursery.
2. Froebel Research Committee: Single grant of £5k (2010-2011): 'An evaluation of the contribution of a Work Discussion group for nursery managers to facilitate close holistic attention to individual children'.
3. South London Health Inequalities and Education Cluster Grant £6.2k (2012-2013).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)***The roots of impact from 1995 to 2007:***

The research on babies and young children in nursery education started with the Esmee Fairbairn funded study 'Every Day Stories – Relationships for Learning' (1995-1999) funded by Esmee Fairbairn). This study was influential in media debate (see for example *Sunday Times*, 4th January 1998). It challenged a popular view of nursery as automatically a negative place for very young children. Further, it documented the importance for each child of an individual relationship with mainly one member of staff in nursery – the 'key person' (see Elfer and Selleck 1999). The research led to Elfer being invited to contribute to the drafting of the first UK Government guidance on working with under threes in nursery, the 'Birth to Three Matters Framework (DfES 2002), which incorporated the 'key-person' role. The research also underpinned a practice guidance book for nursery staff on implementing the key-person role (Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck (2003) *Key Persons in the Nursery*. London: David Fulton, 6000 copies). In turn, the book helped raise awareness of the research and facilitate its translation into practice. Elfer gave evidence as an expert witness to the House of Commons Early Education Select Committee (8th November 2006), and reported on the research for a Channel 4 Dispatches Programme (27th April 2007).

Contributing to and influencing Government curriculum guidance and requirements:

At the end of 2007, the Government replaced the Birth to Three Matters Framework with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), implemented in 2008, and raised the status of the key person role from guidance to statutory requirement. Elfer was asked to draft the guidance on attachment and the 'key-person' role, made available on the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) website (2007). Continuing research on the impact of the role in nurseries (Elfer, 2006) helped underpin this. Elfer was also a contributing author of further Government guidance issued to the early years sector by the DfES (Social and Emotional Aspects of Development (SEAD) Guidance: 2009 HMSO).

In 2010, the new Coalition Government commissioned a review of the EYFS against the backdrop of a commitment to de-regulation. It was feared that the key person requirement would be lost or down-graded back to guidance only. Elfer coordinated and drafted a submission of the evolving evidence on the key-person role to Dame Clare Tickell, who led the review. Her final report recommended retention of the 'key person' duty. This was accepted in the Coalition response and the 'key-person' role remains a statutory duty. As a result, Elfer's research began to focus more on issues relating to the implementation of nursery attachments. It has shown (Elfer 2006; Elfer 2007; Elfer and Dearnley 2007; Elfer 2012) how, following the key-person requirement, making professional but emotionally close relationships with individual children can be stressful. The research has shown the value of reflective support to nursery staff as they engage more closely with children. The Tickell review, as well as recommending retention of the key-person duty, has responded to these findings and a new duty has now been included in the revised EYFS for all early years staff to have regular supervision (professional reflection) time.

Enhancing professional development:

The foundation Esmee Fairbairn study, the *Everyday Stories* of the 15 children researched and the evaluation framework developed by the study, continue to be available on the National Children's Bureau website as an open access resource for professionals.

In addition to establishing the key-person role in government guidance, the programme of research has also evaluated models of supervision (professional reflection). It has underpinned two programmes of continuing professional development (CPD) to support staff implementing the supervision duty. The first is a programme of CPD to help staff stay engaged with and responsive to individual children and to base the details of their interactions on close observations. This programme has resulted in over 16 contracts in English LEAs over a five year period (2007-2012) extending as widely as Kent, Bristol, Birmingham and Wigan. Each contract involves 10-12 senior nursery staff, each responsible for an average of 8 children. The CPD has therefore directly impacted on well over a 1000 young children, but has been shown to have continuing impact (Elfer and Dearnley 2007) so that this number will grow. The programme has generated a combined income of around £200k and joint work with a commercial national nursery chain to examine the

Impact case study (REF3b)

implementation of attachments between practitioners and children within its nurseries.

Elfer has also been commissioned by the South London NHS Health Inequalities and Education Cluster group to use the research for the development of e-learning materials for senior staff to facilitate professional reflection with more junior staff. These materials have now been developed and piloted in one nursery school and children's centre and already commissioned in three others.

The practice book 'Key Persons in the Nursery' continues to be the primary source of guidance being used by practitioners, as evidenced by its prominence on nursery and children's centre websites. The book has been developed as a second edition (2011) and extended for use by teachers in schools as well as nurseries. It has also been translated into Italian (Persone chiave al nido) and Elfer was asked to present the work at its launch in Trento, Italy in October 2010 as key-person practice was taken up in Italy.

Impact on evolving UK government policy

The UK Coalition Government is committed to increasing the quality and reducing the cost of nursery provision. Its initial plans of how to do this were issued in a consultation document 'More Great Childcare' (MGC). MGC sought to reduce costs by increasing child-nursery staff ratios and cutting the role of local authority advisers in providing support to nurseries. The programme of research enabled an intervention in the policy debate around MGC in the form of a 'briefing paper' for politicians and practitioners and two shorter statements of the key research messages for nursery in the form of letters in the national press (*The Guardian*, 16th January 2013; *The Times* 31st January 2013). The briefing paper shows the research evidence for the critical value of maintaining child-nursery ratios as a pre-requisite of consistent, sensitive and responsive interactions with babies and young children in nursery. The briefing has been widely circulated on social media sites, (Twitter, Facebook and MumsNet), and has helped stimulate debate. As the policy debate picked up speed, the prominence of the briefing resulted in Elfer's contribution to a number of high profile activities – including addressing the All Party Parliamentary Group on Children (APPGC) and an individual meeting with Lord Listowel, Deputy Chair of APPGC, who subsequently used the briefing in the Queen's Speech Debate, 4th day, 14th May 2013). The briefing has also been taken up by the Office of the Shadow Secretary for Education as part of the development of their alternative Labour Party policy on nursery provision. Finally, the research has been used to write a briefing by the Minister of Children and Youth Affairs in the Irish Republic, Mrs Frances Fitzgerald, who has written to advise of its use in the Irish Strategy Expert Group as they evolve Irish early years policy on nurseries. The proposal to increase nursery ratios has now been rejected by the UK Coalition Government.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Former Senior Assistant Director, DfES National Strategies Team and now freelance consultant.

Head of Early Years, Bristol City Council.

Consultant and Early Years Adviser, Southwark LEA.

Head, Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Center; Newham LEA.

Lord Francis Listowel, Vice-Chair, All Party Parliamentary Group for Children.

The Early Years Foundation Stage: Setting the Standards for Learning, Development and Care for children from birth to five. Department for Children, Schools and Families. May 2008. DVD.