



Exploring Reciprocity with Babies

Part of a series of short blogs focused on cultural capital and inclusion.

About the AUTHOR

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...practice that tunes into young children's views and experiences can draw attention to the difficult to measure and bring other kinds of knowledge into focus

— Clark, 2020:137

Young children possess a strong awareness of their own unique identity and are acutely sensitive to their surroundings. Consequently, they enter early years settings rich in cultural knowledge gained from home and the wider community. It might be helpful to think about children's 'funds of knowledge' (Moll *et al*, 1992) as the languages, cultural traditions, values & beliefs, and accepted perceptions shared in social relationships. This knowledge also sometimes termed as 'cultural capital' is learned through observation and interactions with adults, peers and in friendships (Colilles, 2020).

Cultural capital is not new concept, its origins can be seen in studies by French sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). However, with a revised approach that curriculums and teaching reflect on and enhance experiences for children, Ofsted School and Early Years

Inspection Handbooks (2019) reframed cultural capital as *'the essential knowledge that children need to be educated citizens'* (Ofsted EY Inspection Handbook, 2019:31).

Plausibly, the term has prompted considerable discussion about its implications for practice.



“A Sense of Belonging is the Heartbeat of Inclusion”



Communication

Babies first come to understand themselves through their bodies in their early relationships with parents and caregivers, actively choosing a range of nonverbal communication methods in their desire to connect with those around them.

Communication through touch and physical interactions is internalised influencing a baby's developing sense of how much they are loved and valued. It is via these connections that babies can be observed to use their nonverbal cues and movement to express their needs. Effective provision therefore requires time for considered reflection on the practices in the baby room.



It means paying attention to ensuring that there is a balance between physical caregiving routines (feeding, sleeping, washing and changing), play and learning. Guard, (2023) offers that careful observation can reveal the communication patterns babies are beginning to use, so for the key person and practitioners working with babies it will mean carefully tuning into how they:

- ★ closely observe adults, often in silence;
- ★ seek eye contact to draw adults into a connection;
- ★ use facial expression and body movement;
- ★ may offer a gesture or a resource;
- ★ speak through coos, babbles and laughter;
- ★ and cry.



Relationships with parents and carers is of paramount importance when gathering information about babies established communication patterns, *Elfer et al* argue '**all the details that [caregivers] know can make a difference to the ways their children relate to a new setting**' (2018). If communication preferences chosen in the home are mirrored in provision, there will be deeper understanding about how babies express their needs and preferences.



Inclusive Practice

When thinking about whether practice is inclusive for 'all' reflection on pedagogical approaches may highlight differences between the cultural norms of the setting and those practiced in the home e.g. food, sleep, care (Colilles, 2020). It is therefore essential to reflect on and question everyday routines and practices.

Heuristic experiences that draw on cultural materials seen in the home offer opportunities for young children to be curious, explore, and try familial and new things.



Similarly, sharing stories through song and rhyme can be particularly helpful because when used as a relational and communication tool they not only support babies to build upon and interpret ideas about themselves and others storying also supports connectedness and belonging between the home, setting and wider community. Young *et al*, (2013) also suggest that for the practitioner singing enhances the wellbeing of practitioners during their working day.

Conclusion



Advocacy work requires the educators to think about their civic duty for the youngest citizens. Underpinning rights-based pedagogies start from a position of self-reflection to question whether practice is responsive and barriers to participation are broken down. UNCRC (1989) Article 12 supports everyone to review and create communities of inclusion where the needs and preferences of babies are heard and taken seriously.

More recently sustainable development goal 4 encourages inclusive and equitable quality education so that inequalities in education are addressed. This blog addresses participatory approaches for what 'cultural capital might look like in the baby room'. It's about how we make babies and their families feel. It could be:

- ★ making eye contact,
- ★ sharing a smile, or
- ★ using cues and resources that mirror babies' preferences.

It's in these small gestures that the seeds of belonging are sown, and babies' cultural capital is acknowledged.



Key Takeaways:

- Respectful caregiving requires respectful interactions – ensure care experiences support babies to feel competent, recognised and valued (*EYC, 2021:13*).
- Babies actively try to initiate connections with all around them, so it important to take time to notice and respond to their cues and preferences.
- A slow and unhurried approach (*Clark, 2023*) creates space to notice the small cues and gestures that babies exhibit in their attempt to make meaning of the 'world', so organise routines to be flexibly responsive.
- Reflect on routines for care, feeding, sleep etc. so that they are consistent with babies' experiences in the home environment.

Reflective Question:

Whose knowledge (cultural capital) prevails and are linked to routines practiced in the baby room?



Feedback:

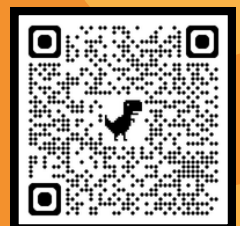


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References and Resources:

- Clark, A. (2023) Slow Knowledge and the unhurried child: *Time for slow pedagogies in Early Childhood Education*. London: Routledge.
- Clark, A. (2017) *Listening to young children: a guide to understanding and using the mosaic approach*. Expanded third edition forwarded by Peter Moss. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
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- Guard, C. (2023) *Hearing the voices of babies in baby-educator interactions in Early Childhood Settings*, PhD, University of Roehampton. available at [GUARD-Final-submission-Awarded-2023-tosend.pdf](https://www.roehampton.ac.uk/media/10000/2023-tosend.pdf).
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- Young V, Goouch K, Powell S. *Babysong revisited: communication with babies through song*. *British Journal of Music Education*. 2022; 39(3):273-285. [Https://doi:10.1017/S0265051722000298](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051722000298)

Useful Resources

All articles accessed July 2026.

- Early Years Coalition (2021) *Birth to Five Matters: Guidance by the sector, for the sector*. www.birthto5matters.org.uk.
 - [Education Inspection Framework 2019](#).
 - Elfer, P., Greenfield, S., Robson, S., Wilson, D., Zachariou, A. (2018) *Love, satisfaction and exhaustion in the nursery: methodological issues in evaluating the impact of Work Discussion groups in the nursery*, *Early Child Development and Care*, early online 16 Mar 2018. DOI: 10.1080/03004430.2018.1446431.
- Ofsted Early Years Inspection Handbook Sept 2019.
- Ofsted Education Inspection Framework [Webinar](#) (June 2019).
- [Thinking about babies](#) A Froebelian approach.