



PEARL

'Each child must be assigned a key person': context and interpretation of a statutory requirement in English Early Childhood Education and Care settings

Hohmann, Ulrike

Published in:
Children & Society

DOI:
[10.1111/chso.12887](https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12887)

Publication date:
2024

Document version:
Version created as part of publication process; publisher's layout; not normally made publicly available

Link:
[Link to publication in PEARL](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Hohmann, U. (2024). 'Each child must be assigned a key person': context and interpretation of a statutory requirement in English Early Childhood Education and Care settings. *Children & Society*, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12887>

All content in PEARL is protected by copyright law. Author manuscripts are made available in accordance with publisher policies. Wherever possible please cite the published version using the details provided on the item record or document. In the absence of an open licence (e.g. Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher or author.

‘Each child must be assigned a key person’: context and interpretation of a statutory requirement in English Early Childhood Education and Care settings

Abstract

This article explores whether the statutory key person policy can mediate children’s experience of fragmentation due to a variety of transitions in the English Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector. I explore the policy enactment in the context of another statutory requirement, the staff:child ratio, and against the backdrop of a fragmented and neoliberal ECEC system. Data are from interviews with staff in three ECEC settings and publicly available Ofsted reports. I conclude that the contemporary understanding and practice of the key person policy is less likely to address all challenges of fragmentation experienced by children. The interplay of various patterns of attendance, complex staff rotas, and the requirement to stay in ratio impacts on the ability to offer continuity of care. I suggest ways to reduce the fragmentation experienced within the existing policy framework.

Key words: Early Childhood Education and Care, Key Person, Attachment Theory

Young children’s experience in contemporary England is marked by several transitions. These include major vertical transitions over time, from home to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings, and to school. Many children encounter daily horizontal transitions between home, various ECEC settings, and/or informal care (Neuman, 2002). The transition to school receives research attention, but daily movements are under-researched and even less is known about the vertical transitions within ECEC settings, like progressing through age related groups or rooms (see, O’Farrelly and Hennessy, 2014). These details require more attention and clearer definitions to appreciate the current condition of ECEC services and implications for children, parents, and staff and to contribute to the evaluation of ECEC frameworks as family-, childhood-, or child-orientated welfare policy (Daly, 2020). Here I present analysis of data on the practices and rationales of settings’ specific key person policy enactments, as intended policy is translated to text and to policy in use (Ball and Bowe, 1992). I use statistics on registered places and enrolments indicating fragmentation to contemplate the role of key persons in children’s experience.

This article explores the structural conditions of the contemporary ECEC landscape in England which, I argue, promote frequent transitions, creating a fragmented experience for young children and their families. I then examine, through an empirical enquiry policy, initiatives that aim to counter the most negative effects of these fragmented experiences. By examining the historical dimensions underpinning the characteristics of ECEC I focus on two important statutory, and surprisingly detailed, requirements of the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (DfE 2021). These are: first, the well-established organising principle of staff:child ratios required at any one time, and second, the relatively new obligation to name a key person for every child. Together, they enforce conditions to meet threshold criteria of good quality and are best understood against the backdrop of the neoliberal, mostly private-for-profit ECEC landscape in England.

As I will show, these requirements generate considerable fragmentation in children's ECEC experiences by creating transitions both between and within settings. Such transitions are processes of change and children require time to adjust to the environment, the people, and existing rules and expectations. Change connected to children's development constitutes opportunities for growth, but extensive or abrupt discontinuities are linked to negative effects (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002). Smooth transitions help children to settle and develop a sense of wellbeing and belonging, which are essential conditions for successful learning (Street, 2021). ECEC settings can act as places in which children and adults develop a sense of belonging promoted by everyday routines, shared meaning-making, and the ability to actively participate in developing place-based routines and rules (Weckström *et al.*, 2021). The ease with which children can develop a sense of belonging is influenced by structural conditions and organising principles in settings and their impact on vertical and horizontal transitions.

The fragmented landscape of ECEC in England

The historical split between care for 'needy' children and providing education (Penn, 2009), though with varying foci and changing reasoning, advanced the fragmented landscape of ECEC provision in England. Bruner (1980) describes a shift from removing children from under the feet of their mothers for a while (ECEC services as benefit to women) to an emphasis on getting mothers off the backs of their children (with psycho-social benefits for children), but also the mainly unmet childcare needs of working mothers. More recently, educational aspects of ECEC and school readiness have gained gravitas. Childcare places are available in group care established by private, voluntary, and other providers (the PVI sector), offered by schools as nursery provision (state maintained), in nursery schools, play centres, playgroups and childminders, as well as with nannies and *au pairs*. The private, for-profit market provides most places in ECEC in England (DfE 2019; Lloyd and Penn, 2013).

Contemporary ECEC developed from scarce provision for children in need after war time nurseries closed in 1945, some part-time provision in nursery schools, and the heyday of play groups in the voluntary sector in the 1960s.

New Labour (in government 1997-2010) was committed to eventually abolishing child poverty by encouraging both parents to be in paid employment or self-employment and by educating children to prevent poverty in the future (Lister, 2006). Meanwhile the National Childcare Strategy (DfEE 1998) promoted an accelerated expansion of ECEC services intending to ready children for school and to support the development of a well-educated, skilled workforce. In 2003 group care in day centres replaced childminders as the main childcare provision suitable for working parents (OfSTED 2003). Under the mantle of 'choice for parents' neoliberal principles gained a strong foothold in the ECEC sector, including a narrative of quality and high returns (Moss, 2014).

New Labour introduced more regulatory policies, including promoting recommended staff:child ratios to statutory requirements to improve quality (Lewis and West, 2017). Since 2008 all ECEC services for children under five operate under the EYFS umbrella with the most recent revision in 2023 (DfCSF, 2008; DfE, 2023). ECEC services have developed into an institution of assessing children (Bradbury, 2019). The non-statutory curriculum guidance for the EYFS, *Development Matters* (DfE, 2020), highlights the duty to notice when children are at risk of 'falling behind' and set up appropriate support.

Despite the convergence in forms of expected learning outcomes and overarching principles of working with young children there is little sign of reduction in the inherent fragmentation of services, as established in the state maintained and the PVI sector. Service specific opening times and locations, high costs to parents, and accessibility constraints are the reason for many horizontal transitions, resulting in a complicated patchwork of ECEC take-up by individual children (ONS 2019; Chen and Bradbury, 2020). A policy response to the possible effects of this kind of patchwork has included the two specific requirements mentioned above – minimum staff:child ratios and the use of a key person to maintain continuity. I now explore each of these in turn, considering their effectiveness and the implications for practice.

Staff:Child ratios, organisational structures and financial matters

Any ECEC setting must comply with the EYFS, especially the statutory staff:child ratios as a basic quality requirement. Staff:child ratios set out the minimum number of staff working with children at any one time, states which qualification these members of staff must hold, and demands that "Children must usually be within sight and hearing of staff and always within sight or hearing. Whilst eating, children must be within sight and hearing of a member of staff" (DfE, 2023, 3.36.). Until

September 2023 the staff:child ratios were one adult per three children for children under-two years of age, one adult per four children for two-year-old children, and one adult per eight children for three- to five-year-olds unless the adult is a qualified teacher or holds the Early Years Professional Status, in which case it becomes 1:13 (DfE 2017). From September 2023 the staff:child ratio for two-year-olds has changed to 1:5 (DfE 2023) as a means to make childcare more affordable (Gov.uk, 2023).

Children are allocated to a particular room in the setting according to age, normally with a group of staff working with them. Children 'progress' from baby room to pre-school room following a pattern of internal vertical transitions. The workforce profile can complicate the drawing up of staff rotas meeting the statutory staff:child ratios and qualification requirements. Just 55% of practitioners are employed full-time and are generally paid poorly (Bonetti, 2019) which results in high staff turnover rates (Social Mobility Commission, 2020). To meet staff:child ratios practitioners may be required to work across the setting.

Parents can book morning, afternoon, or all-day sessions and these can vary across the week.

Settings are registered for a certain number of places (maximum number of children permitted to be present at any one time) and each of the registered places can be shared by a number of children on the setting's roll, attending at different times. Managers, especially those operating for-profit settings, are keen to fill their places without falling foul of staff:child ratio requirements or having to pay staff who, according to the EYFS staff:child ratio requirement, are not necessary. One child not attending, or one parent asking for a last-minute place for a session may upset the ratio. One child exceeding the number of children per adults in a room according to the statutory staff:child ratios requires an additional practitioner. This in turn generates spare capacity. The consequences of the staff:child ratios in this respect are reflected in providers of full-time group care reporting both spare capacity of 20% of their places per day on average (DfE 2019) and their struggle to generate necessary income (Speight *et al.*, 2020).

One reason for part-time attendance is the high costs of childcare in England. In 2020, just before the Covid-19 pandemic began, the price for full-time care per week for a child under two was £258 for a nursery place (Coleman, Dali-Chaouch and Harding, 2020). All three- to four-year-old children are eligible for 15 hours free childcare during 38 weeks of the year. If their parents work this entitlement increases to 30 hours per week. Parents of disadvantaged two-year-old children may be eligible for 15 hours for 38 weeks. It follows that 29% of parents of children under five therefore end up relying on a patchwork of two different forms of childcare and another 10% use three or more different forms of childcare, trying to fit this around their working hours, patterns of care and education of

other children in the family, proximity to home and/or workplace, ability to pay, and preferences for relationships (ONS 2019; Chen and Bradbury, 2020).

This article continues to explore the role of the key person in addressing the potential fragmentation arising from frequent horizontal and vertical transitions built into the English ECEC landscape experienced by children.

The key person

The statutory instrument regulating ECEC services, the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE 2021) defines a key person as followsⁱ.

1.16. Each child must be assigned a key person ... Providers must inform parents and/or carers of the name of the key person, and explain their role, when a child starts attending a setting. The key person must help ensure that every child's learning and care is tailored to meet their individual needs. The key person must seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home. They should also help families engage with more specialist support if appropriate.

3.27. [The key person's] role is to help ensure that every child's care is tailored to meet their individual needs ..., to help the child become familiar with the setting, offer a settled relationship for the child and build a relationship with their parents (DfE 2023).

Key person: why history matters

Concerns about the impersonal, indiscriminate care young children received moved Goldschmied and Jackson (1994) to introduce the concept of a key person, with reference to John Bowlby's attachment theory, in their proposal for a new approach to group daycare for children under the age of three. They envisioned daycare as enabling a close bond between a child, their parents, and one member of staff (the key person), in contrast to the established structures and practices in day nurseries resulting in care by ever changing adults. Goldschmied and Jackson wrote that in times of female economic activity, employment rates increased sharpest for women with dependent children four years of age or younger (Tworney, 2001), alongside an expansion of childcare services (Moss, 2006), and concerns about quality (Mooney and Munton, 1998).

The framework of good practice, *Birth to three matters* (DfES 2002), adopted the key person approach and the key person found entry into the *National Standards of Under Eight's Day Care and Childminding* (DfEE 2001), as part of Standard 2, Organisation, yet with little description or explanation. Seven years later, the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (for children from birth to five) included the mandatory allocation of a key person, describing

responsibilities as bonding with children, respecting parents, and helping children to settle in the setting and sensitively meeting their needs (DfCSF 2008). The revised EYFS (DfE 2017)ⁱⁱ increased the emphasis on educational aspects, including the task to support parents in guiding their child's development at home.

The influence of attachment theory

To understand the policy requirements outlined above it is also important to understand the role of attachment theory in their development. ECEC literature links the key person approach to Bowlby's attachment theory, though without much description or discussion (Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck, 2003; 2012; Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994; Palaiologou, 2013). Bowlby's (1953; 1979; 1969) ethological perspective views attachment as a device to protect the human species. The immature young seek the proximity of the mature who are programmed to ensure their survival. Staying physically close to an adult protects infants from predators. During the sensitive phase (six month to three years of age) the bond between the child and the primary carer develops and children build up a mental model of the world and the relationship between themselves and others. Ideally, the relationship between child and primary caregiver develops into a secure base from which the world can be explored.

Bowlby's attachment theory has been criticised for its too narrow focus on the dyadic relationship between mother and child (Rogoff, 2003), as White, middle-class centric (Singer, 1998), and for the lack of recognition of other children's importance (Dunn, 2004). Nevertheless, attachment theory as an element of development theory continues to be seen as relevant to understanding children and to developing services of all kinds (Evangelou *et al.*, 2009), and has a firm place in understanding families.

How then can attachment theory, including its criticism, enlighten practice in ECEC settings? Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck (2012) discuss some commonalities and differences between a personal parental role and that of a practitioner and emphasise that practitioners must maintain professional boundaries as they are not taking on a mother's role. Page (2014) coined the term Professional Love to allow an exploration of practitioners' emotional involvement with children and parents. By declaring both the practitioner and the mother to be primary carers, Page (2018) relegates Bowlby's (1969) attachment figure hierarchies and the sensitive phase of development to the background (Bowlby, 1979); coincidentally these are the issues most likely to lead to tensions and anxieties. Practitioners are encouraged to move closer to the utopian abstraction of the normative ideal of the Triangle of Love, with attitudes and practices attuned to Noddings' (1993) dyadic ethic of care. The loving, responsive and caring key person, given time and commitment, will develop an enduring and

affectionate bond with children and parents. Yet, Page and Elfer (2013) cite literature reporting a lack of adoption of the key person approach before it became mandatory, despite its popular reception. Reasons include practitioners' wish to share responsibility for children with colleagues, anxiety about physical contact with children, the worry to 'take away' the child's love of their parents, and a child becoming too closely attached to a member of staff. A mandatory key person system requires that these concerns are addressed by practitioners.

I have sketched the complex patterns of ECEC provision and potential uptake by parents as they developed over time in tandem with policy initiatives aiming to establish and maintain quality, particularly staff:child ratios and the key person statutory requirements. In the light of the preceding analysis of these two specific policy changes, and my analysis of their historical and political roots, I now report how a sample of practitioners made sense of them in their practices.

Methods

To explore the ways in which these policy requirements play out in practice for ECEC providers, this paper draws on semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews with 14 practitioners in three daycare centres in the Southwest of England, reflecting existing breadth of size of setting and levels of deprivation of this area; and on documentary analysis of inspection reports for settings more widely. The interview settings ranged from a small centre (Setting A) with 13 members of staff, 39 places, and 55 children on roll in a deprived area, to a large centre (Setting B) with 47 members of staff, 108 places, and 220 children on roll, in a less deprived area. The medium sized setting (Setting C) had 25 members of staff, was registered for 83 places, and there were 125 children on roll. It catered for parents in a large workplace. All settings were open more than nine hours every weekday, all year round.

The Interviews focussed on ECEC policy and implementation in their daily work with children and families. In each setting the manager/Head and all the room leaders participated and additionally one Deputy Head and in one setting the Special Educational Needs Coordinator participated. All participants were female and White. Their age ranged from the early 20s to over 60. All but two interviewees had been working in their setting for more than six but less than 12 years. Two practitioners had been in Early Years for over 20 years. I have used publicly available information, for example, number of registered places, to inform my research. The research was approved by the Faculty Education Research Ethics Sub-Committee of the University of Plymouth (ref. 12/13-129). Interviews were transcribed and analysed with the software NVivo 11, developing an iterative coding tree from literature and data, exploring themes like interpretation, implementation, and opinions

about policies prescribed by the EYFS enacted by practitioners as they 'translate' policy text into practice (Ball and Bowe, 1992).

Data on registered places (the maximum number of children permitted being present at any one time) and children on roll (children for whom there is a contractual arrangement) were retrieved from inspection reports by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), the national inspection agency, available at the public website <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/>. I have accessed all 40 Ofsted reports on ECEC settings offering full-time care for children before compulsory school age in the region in which the qualitative research took place in 2019, the first 50 Ofsted reports for the same kind of settings in London in 2019, as well as all 65 reports on this kind of setting on inspections conducted in February 2023 in England.

Insights

Registered places and children on roll

Analysing official statistics on the difference between children on roll and registered places follows the question of whether settings offering full-time care present the potential for fragmented experiences by children as observed in the three settings. The differences reflect the English situation. The 40 Ofsted inspection reports in the region where the fieldwork took place published in 2019 showed that in 82% of settings the number of children on roll exceeds the number of places. This compares with 52% of London settings in 2019, as stated in inspection reports and 63% of all English settings inspected in February 2023. Of those settings the highest ratio of roll children to places was one place for about four children (in the research region). On average, there was one place for two children on roll.

Settings with the same or more places than children on roll can cater flexibly for parents, though the data does not tell us whether parents book full-time or part-time attendance. Providers with many more children on roll than places will be less flexible in meeting parents' demands, and, at the same time, may find it difficult to fill all places in all sessions. Interviews in the large setting B highlighted that some children attended just one session a week. The flexibility of booking sessions, the necessary movement of members of staff within the setting to stay in ratio and the patch-work pattern of childcare choices by parents can result in confusing situations. Children may not be able to predict which adults are going to look after them, when staff enter or leave their room, and which of their peers attend on a given day.

The Ofsted data does not allow any further insights. There is no information on how many children take up part-time places, which sessions they cover, and spare capacity. The reports do not set out details about the full-time, part-time, or zero-hour contracts of staff working directly with children. However, the available information raises questions about the fragmented experience of children in ECEC settings and sets the context for the empirical evaluation regarding whether the key person is the answer to the problem, which now follows.

Interpretations of the key person requirement

Interview data illuminated the different key person systems in each of the three settings and practitioners experience of and opinions about implementation. In constructing specific discourses relating to the key person approach and addressing what works in the best interests of the children, both relational and organisational dimensions were apparent in the three settings. Modelling the key person's role on that of a mother implies naturalness of the relationship, which one might then expect to transform into accepting that individual children are drawn to particular adults and *vice versa*, as starting point for developing stable bonds. Some practitioners felt that this should inform the allocation of key persons.

I make the practitioners aware of who is coming. ... I'll say, 'who is best suited for this child'? ... they [children] often make their own choices. You say, 'oh, this is Claire, this is going to be your key person'. And then, after two weeks Claire will go, 'this isn't working. She doesn't like me' [laughs]. So, they will, whoever the child chooses, they will say, 'it is probably best suited, if you take them.' Because they naturally have been drawn to you. So, it is a little bit flexibility at the beginning. (Manager Setting A)

Practitioners in setting A emphasised the bond between practitioner and children. The practitioners in setting B shared these sentiments, but practical requirements of this large setting override approaches concentrating on natural emerging bonds.

We had a time where the staff felt, children should come and then find a person they, you know, in a way self-select. And that should all organically happen, that the child and the adult would choose each other. ... On the other hand, when a child arrives it is nicer if there is somebody waiting to welcome you and that person needs to be also making that crucial relationship with the parents. ... We are a big setting. We also need to allocate children. You know, you could end up with everybody loving one particular person and going to them. You know, and they are all in on a Wednesday. It is not practical; it is not manageable. ... If one person has got 15 or 16 and one has only got 2 then you – it's got to be fair, fairish. (Manager Setting B)

The different interpretations of the statutory policy requirement result in setting specific key person systems and is informed by and influences the policy in use. The enactment by practitioners is driven

by their conceptualisation of children and childhood and a specific interpretation of what kind of relationships in ECEC settings are in the best interest of young children, and by the practical question of who is available.

The accounts of practitioners in setting C draw attention to another practical implication of allocated key persons not present. Setting C has a buddy system for key persons in which two colleagues work closely together and take over key person responsibilities when the originally allocated colleague is not available. Children benefit from knowing the adults in the setting.

When, at an Ofsted inspection questioned about the key person set-up, the Head of the setting said, 'I don't agree with the key person [policy]. I think, every child should be able to relate to every member of staff.' ... So, I think our key person system works better. They still have that relationship with the key person. But if they like a different member of staff they can go to the other member of staff. It also means, if a key person is off sick, the child isn't suddenly, 'Oh, my goodness! What am I gonna do today.' (Practitioner Setting C)

Keeping the child in focus

At the centre of any ECEC work is the child. The key person is responsible for ensuring that children feel settled, comfortable, and therefore are ready to learn.

They [children] know that there is their special person who will hold them in mind and, you know, be concerned about when they weren't here. And who would be welcoming in the morning and look forward to them coming. And be focussed on what they need at any given time during the day. (Practitioner Setting B)

One of the practitioners drew attention to their responsibility to act as advocate for key children. Detailed information about a key child and their family's situation allows them to offer explanations which may alter interpretations by other colleagues.

I think children do need a secure person. They do need that adult to be there and understand them, because I think that adult sticks up for them. Obviously when ... practitioners were sitting round that table and they go, oh, his behaviour this week has been atrocious! That the key person then [can say], 'Do you know why his behaviour has been atrocious this week?' You know, 'it's been atrocious because of this, this, this. And he is only 2 ½. (Practitioner Setting A)

Managers and practitioners perceive the ability to develop a good relationship with a child as depending on parents' openness and begins before children start to attend. The information sought may include intimate details about their family life. Information sharing of this kind requires trust and it is the key person's responsibility to build rapport.

Mum has had input from social care. They come and see us as professionals, and they don't want to be judged. Or they don't want us to know what is going on in

their family life. They want to keep that bit guarded. So, they come in and go, 'here is my child. Yes, he is fine.' And just push him through the door. When in fact at home, probably the teenager didn't come in until four o'clock and mum had had a blazing row [laughs]. That is what I would think. But as the time goes on, slowly they open up a little bit and you have snippets of their life. And you learn bit by bit what is actually happening. (Practitioner Setting A)

The ability to work in this way depends on staff's commitment to handling the practicalities of parents revealing personal situations. There must be space and staff coverage to allow the key person and the parents to leave the room and have a confidential conversation.

Information sharing and documentation.

Providers have to maintain records, obtain, and share information with parents and carers, and other professionals and services, and enable the two-way flow of information, as well as incorporating parents' or carers' comments into the child's record (DfE, 2023, para. 3.69). The documentation has the purpose of supporting the information flow between involved adults to encourage a seamless experience for children between setting(s) and home (horizontal transitions), but also feeds into the EYFS's statutory requirement for formative assessment. Key persons are responsible for much of the documentation.

The decision on the kind of information to relay to parents can develop into walking a tightrope. On the one hand parents ought to be assured that their child is known well, supported, and cared for. On the other hand, there are milestones of 'firsts' in a child's life that are important to be witnessed by parents, like the first tooth cutting through, the first step, the first word and so on. Being the first to notice is an affirmation of being the primary carer.

We feed back every day to the parents about what they have done during the day. Which will link in, one way or the other, to what they are doing. So, we have a lot of conversations with them. The learning journeys help, so you can see – we always tell them if they have done something amazing for the first time. Apart from walking. We never tell them that they've walked. That is a parent's job to do that. [laughs] We never see that. (Practitioner Setting C)

Established practices in respect of the kind and form of information for parents can clarify expectations and communicate the task of the ECEC setting. Caring for babies evolves around physical needs.

Some of the parents would like a daily diary. We do it in the baby room. We write in the diary, so they can take it home. Especially if it's not mum who is picking up the baby. And so they've got a record of what has been said, their nappy changes, bottle feeds, what they have done during the day, how much they have eaten, all the information like that. (Practitioner Setting B)

The work with toddlers emphasises areas of learning and development and early learning goals as set out in the EYFS (DfE 2017).ⁱⁱⁱ Documentation for what the EYFS calls formative assessment, i.e.,

information about children in order to plan further work with them, does not have to be neat, nor should it be time consuming, taking practitioners away from their work with children (DfE 2017 para 2.1 - 2.2), but should reflect daily observations and possibly contributions from parents. In all the three settings practitioners compiled learning journeys, which develop from quick notes, photos, artefacts, and learning stories collected to address the EYFS early learning goals. Many practitioners spend much of their time creating beautiful, neat documents.

In addition to the day-to-day documentation, the key person is responsible for writing a report for the vertical transition to school for each of their children.

We worked really hard together to get everything done. But we had nearly 60 children in our room, and we all did their transfer documents, done before leaving for school and their books up to date. It's been quite a hard task. So, yes, I have been taking work home. (Practitioner Setting B)

The ability to meet paperwork requirements and the interpretation of the extent of the compulsory and voluntary documents influences the key person system established in each of the settings.

Discussion: Are key persons the answer to children's experience of fragmentation?

The English ECEC system results in a broad continuity / discontinuity spectrum experienced by individual children. A child taking up a full-time place every day of the week, with peers also enrolled full-time, in a setting with a large proportion of full-time employees will be a member of a smaller circle of people. A child attending part-time with several other part-time children enrolled with different attendance patterns in a setting with staff on part-time or zero-hour contracts is confronted with considerable fragmentation and unpredictability. Less confident and socially competent children will find it difficult to form relationships and are in danger of invisibility (Kalliala, 2014). A high number of required internal vertical transitions due to age exacerbates discontinuity.

Key person systems endeavour to alleviate uncertainty. Staff rotas allowing children to spend as much time as possible in the care of one member of staff aim for the key person to become an anchor point, creating stability and facilitating good relationships between children, parents, and staff. The key person, as defined by the statutory instrument the EYFS, ensures a communication line for essential information.

The concern about children's fragmented experience emerges from a discourse of child development in debt to a loose interpretation of attachment theory. The necessity of a close bond between primary carer and children, especially in the first three years of a child's life, is firmly embedded in

the English conceptualisation of childhood. The primary carer ought to be available to the child, in principle around the clock and the close relationship is not only important to the child, but also the parent, usually the mother. Yet, the demands arising from this understanding of the human condition, allowing parents time to care for their young children, jars with neoliberal ideas of the parent as earner and getting children into a particular kind of education early. From the perspective of the child, extending affectionate relationships to early years practitioners and other children may be beneficial and enjoyable, but rubs against the prominence of adults seeing these caring relationships as dyadic.

The link of the key person approach to Bowlby's attachment theory is somewhat unfortunate, because of the theory's hierarchy of primary and secondary attachment figures and its potential for competition between parents and ECEC staff, especially when it is uncertain what kind of relationships lead to identification as a primary or secondary attachment figure. A rhetorical response is to call both the parents and the key person primary carers. Page (2011) shows how parents grapple with the wish that their children are loved by ECEC staff, but 'not too much', as well as how staff are concerned about coming too close to children.

Modelling the key person approach on families invites the inclusion of longer periods in which relationships can flourish. Yet, the task of the key person "building individual relationships with children before helping them to move on when it is time to leave" (Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck, 2012, p. 38) is determined by the structures of settings, reflecting English ECEC pedagogy, strategies to stay in ratio, and financial considerations. The internal vertical transition to another room in a setting entails a change of key person, too. Goldschmied and Jackson (1994, repeated in Jackson and Forbes, 2015) discuss the difficulties of 'moving on when it is time to leave', as moderated by children's perception of time.

Aiming to give continuity of relationship to a child and his parent(s) can sometimes seem difficult to achieve with the inevitable staff changes and times when it is necessary for a child to change from one group to another. We have to remind ourselves of the differences between child and adult time scales. Six months, which may seem a short time to us, is a considerable slice of a young child's life, so a special relationship is always valuable even if it can only last for a relatively brief period in our terms (Jackson and Forbes, 2015, p. 31).

Considering how much time and energy many settings and parents spend on preparing for and supporting children during transitions from home to a setting and from an ECEC setting to school, it is surprising to find such a nonchalant attitude towards transitions within a setting. It reflects the widely held belief in benefits of teaching and care for children in narrowly age-graded groups (Rogoff, 2003) and the focus on individual children achieving a set of developmental goals. There are some

practical arguments, like different needs of children in respect to sleep, food, and toileting, and practitioners may perceive themselves as specialists for a particular age group. Moss (2014) views frequent transitions within ECEC settings as an indicator of the downwards pressure of structures and ideas of compulsory schooling in ECEC settings.

‘When it is time to move on’ has an air of inevitability, seemingly arising from demands exerted by absolute facts, though these are rarely described or discussed. Yet, apparent social facts are actually figurations, made up of all kinds of relationships based in dispositions and inclinations of human beings (Elias, 1978). The introduction of the key person as a statutory requirement addresses the increasingly complex figurations within which children in England are raised. ‘Good’ parents are in paid work or self-employment, although they may find themselves in precarious work and housing conditions. Children are supposed to be educated outside the home from an early age, with the aim of raising educational standards and preventing them from ‘falling behind’. Institutions providing early education and care are subjected to market forces with strict state regulations impinging on their ability to compete. Despite the low pay of the Early Years workforce, the cost of childcare to parents is high and therefore using as little paid childcare as possible benefits the family budget.

It is possible to introduce more predictability for children. By restricting the choice of attendance pattern, children meet the same group of children when attending the setting. An example is a part-time place that permits attendance every weekday in the morning for a set fee. When these places are filled the financial health of the setting stabilises. However, if parents expect more flexibility, they may choose another provider and the setting is left with extensive spare capacity (Speight *et al.*, 2020). Internal transitions can be reduced by establishing age-mixed family groups, children staying with their key person throughout their time in the setting. Family groups work best in combination with a fixed attendance pattern, which in turn take the sting out of complex staff rota requirements due to staff:child ratios. The success of structures like these depends on whether parents view it as beneficial for their children and can afford the costs, and whether their childcare needs are covered, as well as whether staff are willing to develop a mixed-age pedagogy. The EYFS would, however, permit these kinds of structures.

Conclusion

Exploring how English ECEC providers implement statutory requirements highlights the potential of fragmented experiences for babies and young children which may negatively impact on their need for continuity. The mandatory key person for every child in ECEC settings (DfE 2023) emerged in 2008 as mothers, fathers, the state, and the market were navigating shifting responsibilities for the provision of education and care in a competitive private, for-profit landscape, with parents paying

high fees for childcare. The statutory requirement of a named key person creates the impression of a government addressing the problem of fragmentation experienced by children and families without disrupting the competitive forces of the childcare market. Enactment is left to the settings, and it is here where a solution has to be found without falling foul of another statutory requirement, maintaining the prescribed staff:child ratios.

In general, the conditions that result in the fragmentation of young children's experience in the first place are hardly questioned or perceived to be changeable. Discourses of parents' needs and rights to choose sessions, of ECEC as best delivered in homogeneous age groups, and the focus on one-to-one relationships to achieve best outcomes for individual children are strong. The data in this study have shown that practitioners are clearly committed to children and families and embrace frameworks that allow them to build good relationships fulfilling their tasks as educators and carers of children and supporters of parents. At times, practitioners show some resistance to structures promoting too close dyadic relationships between individual children and a key person. Practitioners expressed empathy for children's bewilderment and confusion when they have grown dependent on a key person and this person was absent. Some practitioners refer to a kind of adaptation of hierarchical attachment theory by enacting a buddy key person policy. Others contemplate a wider circle of relationships within the ECEC settings. Approaches like rotating key persons or family groups that could abolish internal transitions and change of staff responsible for individual children deserve more discussion and contain the potential to move away from the individualistic interpretation of ECEC tasks towards an acknowledgement of a more community focussed approach. However, changing practices in this way – as this study has shown – is likely to require a considerable reframing of the current discourses in ECEC settings, discourses which are, themselves, deeply rooted in social conceptions of childhood, attachment, schooling, and the political marketisation of the education system. By bringing these, often hidden, interconnected elements of the system to light this paper offers a contribution to beginning this process.

References

- Ball, S. J., & Bowe, R. (1992). Subject departments and the 'implementation' of National Curriculum policy: an overview of the issue. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 24(2), 97-115.
- Bonetti, S. (2019). *The Early Years Workforce in England: A comparative analysis using the Labour Force Survey*. Retrieved from London:
- Bowlby, J. (1953). *Childcare and the Growth of Love*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss Volume 1: Attachment*. London: Pimlico.
- Bowlby, J. (1979). *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*. London: Tavistock.

- Bradbury, A. (2019). Datafied at four: the role of data in the 'schoolification' of early childhood education in England. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 44(1), 7-21. doi:10.1080/17439884.2018.1511577
- Bruner, J. (1980). *Under Five in Britain*. London: Grant McIntyre.
- Chen, H., & Bradbury, A. (2020). Parental choice of childcare in England: Choosing in phases and the split market. *British Educational Research Journal*, 46(2), 281-300. doi:10.1002/berj.3564
- Coleman, L., Dali-Chaouch, M., & Harding, C. (2020). *Childcare Survey 2020*. Retrieved from London: https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/sites/default/files/Resource%20Library/Coram%20Childcare%20Survey%202020_240220.pdf
- Daly, M. (2020). Children and their Rights and Entitlements in EU Welfare States. *Journal of Social Policy*, 49(2), 343-360. doi:10.1017/S0047279419000370
- Department for Children Schools and Families. (2008). *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage: Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five*. London: Department for Children, Schools and Families.
- Department for Education. (2017). *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage: Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five*. London: Department for Education.
- Department for Education. (2019). *Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents in England, 2019*. London: DfE.
- Department for Education. (2020). *Development Matters: Non-statutory curriculum guidance for the early years foundation stage*. London: DfE.
- Department for Education. (2021). *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage: Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five*. In. London: Department for Education.
- Department for Education. (2023). *Early years foundation stage statutory framework: For group and school-based providers*. Retrieved from London:
- Department for Education and Employment. (1998). *Meeting the Childcare Challenge: A Framework and Consultation Document*. London: Department for Education and Employment.
- Department for Education and Employment. (2001). *National Standards for Under Eights Day Care and Childminding*. London: Department for Education and Employment.
- Department for Education and Skills. (2002). *Birth to three matters*. London: DfES.
- Dunn, J. (2004). *Children's friendships: the beginnings of intimacy*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Elfer, P., Goldschmied, E., & Selleck, D. (2003). *Key Persons in the Nursery: Building Relationships for Quality Provision*. London: David Fulton.
- Elfer, P., Goldschmied, E., & Selleck, D. Y. (2012). *Key Persons in the Early Years: Building relationships for quality provision in early years settings and primary schools* (2nd ed.). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Elias, N. (1978). *What is Sociology* (S. Mennell & G. Morrissey, Trans.). Columbia: Columbia University Press.
- Evangelou, M., Sylva, K., Kyriacou, M., Wild, M., & Glenny, G. (2009). *Early Years Learning and Development Literature Review (DCSF RR176)*. Retrieved from Oxford:
- Fabian, H., & Dunlop, A.-W. (Eds.). (2002). *Transitions in the Early Years: Debating continuity and progression for children in early education*. London: Routledge-Falmer.
- Goldschmied, E., & Jackson, S. (1994). *People Under Three: Young Children in Daycare*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Gov.uk. (2023). Budget 2023: Everything you need to know about childcare support. Retrieved from <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2023/03/16/budget-2023-everything-you-need-to-know-about-childcare-support/>
- Jackson, S., & Forbes, R. (2015). *People Under Three: Play, work and learning in a childcare setting* (3rd ed.). Abingdon: Routledge.

- Kalliala, M. (2014). Toddlers as both more and less competent social actors in Finnish day care centres. *Early Years*, 34(1), 4-17. doi:10.1080/09575146.2013.854320
- Lewis, J., & West, A. (2017). Early Childhood Education and Care in England under Austerity: Continuity or Change in Political Ideas, Policy Goals, Availability, Affordability and Quality in a Childcare Market? *Journal of Social Policy*, 46(2), 331-348. doi:10.1017/S0047279416000647
- Lister, R. (2006). Children (but not women) first: New Labour, child welfare and gender. *Critical Social Policy*, 26(2), 315-335. doi:10.1177/0261018306062588
- Lloyd, E., & Penn, H. (Eds.). (2013). *Childcare markets: Can they deliver an equitable service?* Bristol: Policy Press
- Mooney, A., & Munton, A. G. (1998). Quality in Early Childhood Services: Parent, Provider and Policy Perspectives. *Children & Society*, 12(2tra), 101-112.
- Moss, P. (2006). Farewell to Childcare? *National Institute Economic Review*, 195(1), 70-83. doi:10.1177/0027950106064040
- Moss, P. (2014). *Transformative Change and Real Utopias in Early Childhood Education: A story of democracy, experimentation and potentiality*. Abington: Routledge.
- Neumann, M. J. (2002). The wider context: an international overview of transition issues. In H. Fabian & A.-W. Dunlop (Eds.), *Transitions in the Early Years: Debating continuity and progression for children in early education* (pp. 8-22). London: Routledge-Falmer.
- Noddings, N. (1993). Caring: A Feminist Perspective. In K. A. Strike & P. L. Ternasky (Eds.), *Ethics for Professionals in Education: Perspectives for Preparation and Practice*. New York and London: Teachers College Press Columbia University.
- O'Farrelly, C., & Hennessy, E. (2014). Watching transitions unfold: a mixed-method study of transitions within early childhood care and education settings. *Early Years: An International Research Journal, online*, 1-20. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2014.968838>
- Office for National Statistics. (2019). Data tables: childcare and early years survey of parents 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-and-early-years-survey-of-parents-2019#history>
- Office for Standards in Education. (2003). Registered Childcare Providers and Places in England, 30 June 2003. Retrieved from <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/docs/3310.pdf>
- Page, J. (2011). Do mothers want professional carers to love their babies? *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 9(3), 310-323. doi:10.1177/1476718x11407980
- Page, J. (2014). Developing professional love in early childhood settings. In L. Harrison & J. Sumsion (Eds.), *Lived spaces of infant-toddler education and care: Exploring diverse perspectives on theory, research and practice*. (pp. 119-130). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Page, J. (2018). Characterising the principles of Professional Love in early childhood care and education. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 26(2), 125-141. doi:10.1080/09669760.2018.1459508
- Page, J., & Elfer, P. (2013). The emotional complexity of attachment interactions in nursery. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 21(4), 553-567. doi:10.1080/1350293X.2013.766032
- Palaiologou, I. (Ed.) (2013). *The Early Years Foundation Stage: Theory and Practice*. London: SAGE.
- Penn, H. (2009). Public and Private: the History of Early Education and Care Institutions in the United Kingdom. In K. Scheiwe & H. Willekens (Eds.), *Child Care and Preschool Development in Europe: Institutional Perspectives*. Basingstoke: palgrave macmillan.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Singer, E. (1998). Shared care for children. In M. Woodhead, D. Faulkner, & K. Littleton (Eds.), *The Cultural Worlds of Early Childhood* (pp. 64-83). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Social Mobility Commission. (2020). *The stability of the early years workforce in England: An examination of national, regional and organisational barriers*. Retrieved from London:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/906906/The_stability_of_the_early_years_workforce_in_England.pdf

- Speight, S., Scandone, B., Iyer, P., Burridge, H., & Read, H. (2020). *Occupancy and staff ratios at early years providers*. London: Department for Education.
- Street, M. (2021). Society's readiness: How relational approaches to well-being could support young children's educational achievement in high-poverty contexts. *Children & Society*, 35(5), 736-751. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12445>
- Tworney, B. (2001). Women in the Labour Market: Results from the Spring 2000 LFS. *Labour Market Trends*, 109(3), 93–106.
- Weckström, E., Karlsson, L., Pöllänen, S., & Lastikka, A.-L. (2021). Creating a culture of participation: Early childhood education and care educators in the face of change. *Children & Society*, 35(4), 503-518. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12414>

ⁱ The wording has not changed in the revised editions of the EYFS (DfE 2021, 2023)

ⁱⁱ The DfE (2021) revised the Early Learning Goals again but maintained them in the 2023 edition. The statutory requirements for key persons and their tasks have not changed.

ⁱⁱⁱ The EYFS (DfE 2017) was the regulatory framework when the research was undertaken.