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Nicola Kemp & Jo Josephidou

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Creating spaces called hope: the critical leadership role of owner/managers in developing outdoor pedagogies for infants and toddlers

Nicola Kemp^a and Jo Josephidou^b

^aFaculty of Arts, Humanities and Education, Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, Kent, UK;

^bFaculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK

ABSTRACT

There is increasing concern about the ways in which neoliberalism is impacting Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), particularly in relation to infants and toddlers. The neoliberal agenda positions the outdoors as risky and a place to be physically active, potentially excluding the youngest children from these spaces. Drawing upon case study data from a larger project exploring outdoor provision for infants and toddlers in England, we demonstrate the critical leadership role owner/managers can play. They do this by creating different kinds of pedagogic spaces (**cultural, physical and reflective**) for practitioners to develop their outdoor practices. We argue that the creation of such spaces requires explicit acts of resistance and disruption to neoliberal understandings about the place of infants and toddlers outdoors. Our research demonstrates the potential for owner/managers to act as critical pedagogues creating spaces called hope.

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Critical pedagogy; infants; toddlers; outdoors; ECEC; neoliberalism

Introduction

There is increasing concern about the ways in which neoliberalism is impacting Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) policy and practice nationally and internationally. As Vandembroeck (2021, 5) argues, '[m]any early childhood experts and practitioners, in diverse continents, are concerned with what is happening to early childhood education'. Neoliberalism is understood here as 'an ideology and movement' centred on the 'economisation of everything' (Moss and Roberts-Holmes 2021, 1–2). In ECEC, the consequent 'tyranny of standardisation, accountability and economic rationality' (Sims et al. 2018, 3) is felt both by practitioners and the young children in their care. New Public Management (NPM) forms of governance emphasise control and limit professional autonomy (Moss and Roberts-Holmes 2021) whilst the 'push-down curriculum' reduces children to 'investments for future economic productivity' (Sims et al. 2017, 1). Underpinning these ECEC policies and practice is a dominant narrative that defines educational purpose in terms of maximising the economic potential of the child. This narrative is at odds with the historic

CONTACT Nicola Kemp  nicola.kemp@canterbury.ac.uk  Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Education, Canterbury Christ Church University, North Holmes Road, Canterbury, Kent CT1 1QU, UK

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foundations of ECEC and the view of the child as 'rich in potential, strong, powerful, [and] competent' (Malaguzzi 1993). This context of strengthening neoliberal forces and their 'systematic assault' on ECEC (Christensen and Aldridge 2012) has formed the basis for diverse research conversations in this journal (Barron, Taylor, and Macrae 2022, Lewis 2021, Hamer and Loveridge 2020) to which this paper contributes.

Although ECEC provision for infants and toddlers has received relatively little research attention, it is now recognised as an important context for understanding, and potentially challenging, pervasive neoliberal forces. There are two, seemingly paradoxical, reasons for focusing on the youngest children that Sims et al. (2018) articulate. The first is that there is a growing body of evidence that the negative impacts of neoliberalism are experienced most acutely by those working with infants and toddlers. This is because neoliberal values have led to a privileging of education over care within ECEC and so working with the youngest children is undervalued and poorly understood. Paradoxically, the second reason is, since work with infants and toddlers is specialised and requires a high level of care, there are specific opportunities to push back against neoliberal assumptions and develop holistic ECEC practices.

Outdoor pedagogy and practice for the youngest children have renewed global significance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Vega-Perona et al. 2022). The specific effects of neoliberalism on outdoor practice are seen in dominant discourses that position the outdoors as risky and a place to be physically active, potentially excluding the youngest children (Kemp and Josephidou 2021). This paper focuses on the context of outdoor provision for infants and toddlers in ECEC in England – a context that is noted for being strongly influenced by neoliberal values. We draw on case study data from ECEC settings in England that self-identify as having well-developed outdoor provision for their infants and toddlers. Our interest is in understanding the strategies they employ to confront and challenge the strongly embedded neoliberal discourse about the place of the youngest children outdoors. Using critical pedagogy to frame our exploration of practice, we argue that despite practical constraints and a lack of policy support, owner/managers can play a vital leadership role in developing outdoor pedagogies for the youngest children. Whilst paying close attention to the local, this research is of international relevance both with respect to the increasingly pervasive effects of neoliberalism and the growing interest in outdoor learning.

Literature review

Our focus integrates three critical contemporary research conversations:

- **Strategies of compliance:** The response of the ECEC sector to neoliberalism.
- **Marginalised voices:** The effects of neoliberalism on those working with infants and toddlers.
- **Narratives of exclusion:** Neoliberal discourses about the youngest children outdoors.

These three themes can be considered as overlapping and nested concerns as illustrated in Figure 1. Below we offer a brief overview of each of the three areas of research and their interconnections.

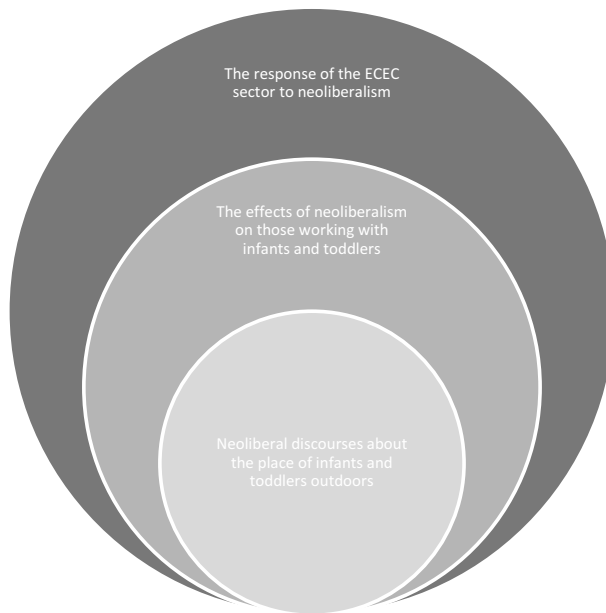


Figure 1. Our nested focus.

Strategies of compliance: the response of the ECEC sector to neoliberalism

Internationally, the policy and practice responses of the ECEC sector to neoliberalism have been varied (Rogers, Dovigoband, and Doan 2020). At a policy level, countries with a strong social democratic foundation such as Finland have adopted what has been termed a hybrid position, adapting to the neoliberal agenda whilst retaining their foundational values (Paananen, Lipponen, and Kumpulainen 2015). Similarly, New Zealand demonstrates an ability to adapt to, rather than fully adopt neoliberalism. In contrast, in the UK, USA and Australia, neoliberal values have permeated much more fully. Archer (2022) notes the lack of attention that has been paid to how these different policy positions are playing out in practice although leadership has been recognised as a significant factor.

Writing from the perspective of Australia, Sims, Waniganayake, and Hadley (2017) highlight the importance of educational leadership. Their study of Early Childhood Educational Leaders (ECEL) found that although the role offers the potential to challenge the status quo, very few ECEs consider themselves advocates for the sector. Rather, they operate as ‘street level bureaucrats’ focusing on monitoring tasks and adopting strategies of compliance with neoliberal policy. Sims and Waniganayake (2015) argue that such compliance extends to early childhood educators more generally and to the children who attend ECEC. Leadership within the ECEC field is recognised as being under-theorised and Henderson et al. (2022) propose the concept of ‘leading identity’ to explore how leadership roles (such as ECEs) could be developed so they are understood as being ‘change agents’ rather than bureaucrats.

Professional identity, both among ECEC leaders and the workforce more generally, is recognised as important to understanding the ECEC response to neoliberalism. In their

study of professional identity in Italy, Canada and Australia, Rogers, Dovigoband, and Doan (2020, 817) demonstrate how neoliberalism is resulting in a 'lack of spontaneity, self-care and self-confidence' and an 'increasing sense of disempowerment' within the sector. However, characteristics such as self-confidence are recognised as being necessary to challenge and resist neoliberal pressures. Elfer and Page's (2015) study of eight English nurseries with provision for babies found that

where a manager's self-confidence was strong (that is they were prepared to embrace uncertainty and had the courage to reflect openly and with key others in their immediate environment) then the nursery appeared strengthened as a thinking, developing organisation'. (1778)

This highlights the complex inter-relationship between professional identity and neoliberalism in ECEC with the influence potentially operating in both directions. If the sector is to 'confront' neoliberalism as Moss and Roberts-Holmes (2021) propose, there is a need to focus on ways of fostering professional characteristics such as self-confidence among the workforce and its leaders.

Marginalised voices: The effects of neoliberalism for those working with infants and toddlers

Although there is very little research focused on ECEC provision for infants and toddlers, the impacts of neoliberalism are recognised as being particularly acute. This is illustrated in the Babyroom Project which involved practitioners from 25 settings who worked with infants and toddlers in daycare settings in England (Powell and Gooch 2012). It highlighted the tensions felt by practitioners due to challenging working practices and lack of professional status. They found 'many worked very long hours with infrequent, short breaks and some worked in near or total isolation from colleagues caring for older children' (115). Consequently, they saw their status as 'the lowest of the low' (120). Similarly, Davis and Dunn's (2019) study of professional identity in infant provision in Australia noted the sense of isolation and marginalisation even though the participants were university-qualified teachers. Whilst these teachers had a strong internal professional identity and were making 'purposeful pedagogical decisions based on knowledge and experience' (248), they commented on their low status and visibility both within and outside the sector. The neoliberal prioritisation of education over care is then driving a 'pervasive undervaluing' of those who work with the youngest children (Davis and Dunn 2019).

While neoliberalism marginalises those working directly with infants and toddlers, it also enables a 'multitude of voices' (Powell and Gooch 2012, 114) to shape practice. These 'voices' include those of families, setting owners and managers, quality regimes (in the English context this is OFSTED), Local Authorities, the mass media and central government. The role of the setting manager is recognised as being critical. Elfer and Page (2015) demonstrate how managers can protect baby room practitioners from neoliberal pressures (including demands from parents, regulatory regimes, and financial viability) enabling them to focus on developing strong attachment-led pedagogy with the babies in their care. Research also highlights the importance of professional development in challenging neoliberal marginalisation. The provision of time and space to reflect,

discuss and question can build professional capacity and confidence (Davis and Dunn 2019, 2022). Significantly, drawing on research from Australia, Bhutan, the Pacific, the UK and Finland, Sims et al. (2018) demonstrate the potential for professional conversations about care to actively challenge neoliberalism.

Narratives of exclusion? Neoliberal discourses about the youngest children outdoors

The effects of neoliberalism on outdoor practice are evident in the international research literature where the dominant discourses position the outdoors as risky and a place to be physically active, potentially excluding the youngest children (Kemp and Josephidou 2021).

Concerns about safety are recognised as being part of the general effect of neoliberalism on ECEC. Writing from the perspective of New Zealand, Stover (2013) argues that safety is a greater priority than exploration and that practice is focused on eliminating risk. This aligns with Powell and Gooch's (2012) finding that child protection concerns were a significant influence on practice in babyrooms in England. This concern is picked up by Kernan and Devine (2010) in the context of outdoor learning in Ireland where they note a prioritisation of risk management in ECEC despite an espoused belief that being outdoors promotes freedom and autonomy. Similarly, writing from the context of Australia, Rouse (2015, 748) notes that the 'sense of the infants not being safe was very strong for all the educators working with the youngest (0–3-year-old) children'. At the setting in question, which adopts a multi-age grouping approach outdoors, practitioners set up smaller fenced-off areas adjacent to their indoor rooms specifically for the youngest children. Morrissey, Scott and Wishart's (2015, 49) study based in the same setting noted occasions when practitioners 'actively discouraged children from engaging with natural elements, outdoors due to safety concerns'. Similarly, in their study of a Portuguese setting, Bento and Costa (2018) found that teachers highlighted safety issues as a possible problem in their engagement with infants and toddlers outdoors.

A second dominant narrative positions the outdoors as a space to be physically active; Bento and Costa (2018), for example, refer to the 'simplistic view of the outdoors as a space restricted to opportunities for movement and energy liberation' (298) within Portuguese practice. Kernan and Devine (2010) identify a belief that "'real' learning is what takes place 'indoors' and is readily amenable to adult regulation and control" (380). It also reflects the prioritisation of academics rather than holistic development which is part of the neoliberal agenda. For the youngest children, this means that less active ways of being outdoors (such as sleeping and sensory engagement) are less likely to be prioritised or valued. We have argued elsewhere (Kemp and Josephidou 2021) that these are narratives of exclusion that can result in infants and toddlers being restricted in their access to outdoor environments and from the holistic benefits that engagement with nature can bring (Adams and Savahl 2017).

A theoretical lens: critical pedagogy

The above analysis suggests that the response of the ECEC sector to neoliberalism can be characterised as generally compliant and accommodating. This is particularly the case for practitioners working with the youngest children who tend to be younger and have less

professional experience and training than the workforce as a whole. The neoliberal agenda positions the outdoors as an environment that is both unsafe and unnecessary for the youngest children. Developing outdoor pedagogy for infants and toddlers in this context is a particularly demanding endeavour.

In this paper, we draw upon critical pedagogy to frame our exploration of practice. Our thinking and understanding of critical pedagogy are underpinned by Freire (1970) as well as the more recent work of Giroux (2010). Critical pedagogy is understood as being particularly applicable to 'places and practices in which social agency has been denied and produced' (Giroux 2010, 3). We argue that both the place of the early years setting (and, in particular, the baby room) and the practice of caring for the youngest children lend themselves to a critical pedagogy lens as the voice of practitioners has been marginalised. Importantly, its ability to 'make the dominant and suppressed beliefs visible' (Kilderry 2004, 35) supports a reflective approach to practice in ECEC. Freire uses the term '*Concientizacao*' (conscientization), or critical consciousness, to describe this process of developing a critical awareness of the social reality through praxis (action and reflection). Literally translated as a 'bringing to consciousness', when applied to ECEC the concept involves aspects of advocacy, in standing up for what is good for children, particularly in relation to the youngest (Christensen and Aldridge 2012). It also involves reflection and reflexivity in terms of assumptions and 'the taken for granted' to gain new awareness of the status quo and its imbalances in knowledge, power, rights, and resources.

Within critical pedagogy, different terms are used to describe possible responses to the new state of awareness. Here, we focus on two dimensions. The first is positional and described by Giroux (1988) as a choice between resistance and accommodation. Resistance is a complex and contested term. It implies a defensive stance and a pushing back against some aspect of the status quo and, as Archer (2022, 433) argues, this 'can be a first response, but perhaps not the only response'. The converse of resistance can be understood as accommodation or compliance suggesting an accepting stance in relation to the status quo. The second dimension is action-oriented and may involve both disruption to and creation of new practices. Disruption is a term used by Foucault (1984) in relation to 'regimes of truth' and associated practices that need to be changed while Grieshaber and Hamm (2021) describe it as a 'dismantling'. hooks (2013, xiv), reminds us that rigorous critique and challenge must always be accompanied by examples of 'positive life-transforming' practices as without these 'we take away hope'. Disruption should therefore be accompanied by a hopeful process of creation. We incorporate the concepts of resistance, disruption, and creation in the theoretical framework we used to review our data in this paper.

Methodology

The data on which this paper is based are part of a larger Froebel Trust funded project exploring outdoor provision for infants and toddlers in England (see also Kemp and Josephidou 2021, Josephidou, Kemp, and Durrant 2021). Here, we focus on data from the third phase of the research which involved case studies of three settings in the Southeast of England. They were chosen from a larger pool of settings that had responded to the second phase (an audit of outdoor provision) and indicated they were willing to participate in further research. The selection was based on geographical

Table 1. Case Study Settings.

Setting	Index of Multiple Deprivation decile (ranked from 10 least deprived to 1 most deprived)	Geographical classification (ONS) classification
1	9	Urban city and town
2	4	Rural town and fringe
3	2	Rural village

classification and socio-economic context to maximise diversity as demonstrated in [Table 1](#).

The settings had self-identified as offering well-developed outdoor provision for their infants and toddlers and therefore shared this in common. Given that this area of practice is acknowledged as underdeveloped (Bilton, Bento, and Dias 2017), our approach was one of appreciative inquiry (Reed 2007). We followed Kraftl's (2015, 16) multi-sited ethnography which depends upon 'ethnographic observation and interviewing techniques during relatively short-term visits to ... different sites'. The half-day visit to each setting started with a 'walk and talk' led by the setting owner/manager. These were audio-recorded and we also took photographs and made sketches of the provision. We also spoke to other staff including deputy managers, babyroom leaders and practitioners during and after the tours, and undertook narrative observations of practice. The research team consisted of two academics – one with a background in early years teaching, the other with a background in outdoor learning – both working within the context of a large university Faculty of Education. We were both involved fully throughout the research process and visited each of the three settings together. All settings and participants have been anonymised to maintain confidentiality and are referred to in the text by a coded reference as detailed in [Table 2](#).

Our aim during the visits was to understand the different dimensions of enacted and espoused pedagogy outdoors through a process of radical enquiry (Clough and Nutbrown 2012). In addition to the ethical approval from the host university, our ethical values as researchers are concerned with respect, sensitivity, inclusivity, authenticity and attention to detail. We both have experience undertaking fieldwork in professional settings which include young children, infants and toddlers, and built in regular opportunities to discuss issues as they arose and to challenge our own attitudes, values and understanding as the research progressed. After each visit, we met for a debrief and

Table 2. Our data.

What we did	Data collected	Reference in text
Walk & Talk of outdoor areas within setting with setting owner/manager	Photos	P (1,2,3)
	Narrative transcript	SM (1,2,3)
	• Setting Manager	DM (1,2,3)
	• Deputy Manager	BL (1,2,3)
	• Babyroom Leader	Pr (1,2,3)
Interviews	• Practitioner	
	Interview transcripts	SM (1,2,3)
	Observations of practice	O (1,2,3)
	Reflective conversation	RC
	Transcript of researcher conversation	
Individual researcher reflections	Individual researcher reflections	RR
	Sketch of outdoor provision	S (1,2,3)

discussion which we audio-recorded and forms part of our dataset in addition to our individual reflections. This generated a rich data set for analysis.

A thematic analysis based on Braun and Clark's framework (2006) using Nvivo 12 was undertaken to identify both semantic (explicit) and latent (implicit) themes. In this paper, we present the findings from this thematic analysis in relation to our theoretical lens, focusing particularly on examples of:

- Resistance to dominant neoliberal assumptions about infants and toddlers outdoors.
- Disruption or dismantling of practices perceived to hinder infants and toddlers from engaging with the outdoors.
- Creation of new practices that are supportive of infant and toddler engagement with the outdoors.

Our Findings

The significance of the owner/manager

It is important to start by stating that we did not set out to focus on the leadership of the owner/manager but that this emerged as being particularly significant in determining the nature and extent of outdoor provision for the youngest children. In our reflective conversation, we made the following comment about the critical role of owner/managers '*as visionary; as risk taker; as nurturer (of staff); as determined; as disrupter; as challenger . . .*'. The voice of the owner/manager was strong, authoritative and research-informed. They all had a degree and continued to engage with research to develop their understanding of how to create the best outdoor provision for very young children. A key aspect of their leadership involved the balancing of all 'voices' with a stake in what outdoor provision for infants and toddlers should look like. These voices included practitioners, central government policy, inspection bodies (OFSTED), other settings and research. They consistently demonstrated that they have the knowledge, confidence and professionalism to advocate for the needs of the children in their setting.

In the following, we offer specific examples of how owner/managers **resist** by challenging dominant narratives about young children outdoors and by rejecting normative interpretations of policy. We also show how they **disrupt** neoliberal management expectations and practices. At the same time, they **create cultural** spaces, **physical** spaces and **reflective** spaces which support practitioners in thinking about and developing their practice 'creating possibilities for analysis and radical inquiry' (Grieshaber and Hamm 2021, 61).

Acts of Resistance

Resisting dominant narratives about very young children outdoors

One of the ways that the owner/managers demonstrated resistance was by challenging the dominant narratives about very young children outdoors. In all three settings, the outdoor environment has been developed to foster diverse sensory experiences and included spaces for sitting, lying down and sleeping as well as being active. They reject

the assumptions that the outdoors is just a place to be active and recognise the holistic benefits of being outdoors for the development of very young children.

For this age group, it's ... the quieter aspect of, being outside, the smells, the textures not just for being active ... they can just go and lay in the willow structures if they want. They don't have to do anything (SM3)

Similarly, the need for the natural environment to be overly managed for health and safety is challenged in the following example:

We had a complaint inspection quite a few years ago, where there was a child who had injured themselves and the grandma had complained ... I felt the inspector was a bit angry and she came in with not liking us to begin with. I think she thought we were gonna be understaffed, poor provision, and she looked round, and she went, 'Oh!' [All Laugh]. She asked to see Forest School, and we had stinging nettles. She said, 'There's stinging nettles'. I said, 'There is'. She said, 'That's dangerous'. I said, 'Oh, it's not. It doesn't cause any long-term injury, and once they've done it once, they won't go back'. You know, you can't remove everything, and we deliberately leave stinging nettles, 'cause then they learn that they hurt, so don't do it. (SM3)

Resisting normative policy interpretations

Because they critically engage with research and practice, these owner/managers felt able to interpret rather than simply comply with policy. Here one is discussing the statutory curriculum framework in England and the confidence she has in her understanding.

This is the whole thing about understanding the Framework and the difference between the word 'must' and 'should' ... 'Should do' are the things that are good practice which you should pay attention to. But you should be confident enough to go, 'Well, I know we should do this, but for my children in my setting, this is how we do it for that'. (SM2)

She goes on to discuss some of the '*old myths going around*' about infants and toddlers being outdoors that she encounters – myths about health and safety, ratios, and care routines – and her professional confidence that supports her resistance to these. Here, she discusses ratios for going out and how this can limit outdoor visits if not interpreted correctly.

There's no ratio for taking them out. It used to be on the old ratio. The old ratio used to be one-to-two, if you took them out. So, lots of people go, 'The ratio's one-to-two'. It's not. It can be no less than the statutory ratio. It can be no less than the ratio that you do here, so we look at who we're taking and where we're going.

Acts of Disruption

Disrupting neoliberal management expectations

Rather than focusing on standardisation and control, all three settings employed distributed models of leadership and actively facilitated practitioner agency. At setting 3, for example, each room runs as a mini-nursery with a team leader, deputy and staff able to act autonomously

they're allowed to make decisions providing it's safe and I can afford it! ... It's important, because then, the staff feel a bit of ownership. ... It just means that everyone follows the ethos

of the nursery, but they do things that suit the characteristics of the people in their room, which is nicer. (SM3)

The staff team are well established and ‘all team leaders have been here a long time’. As a result, the practitioners take a proactive role in responding to the challenges involved in working with very young children outdoors. Here, one practitioner articulated her feeling of agency in relation to outdoor pedagogy.

But, I think, it’s just putting your heads together and finding ways to solve those problems. A lot of the barriers can sort of be diminished. ‘Cause, obviously, we have to follow routines and do nappy changes stuff, but we do that outdoors, as well. So, we just take the stuff with us and do it wherever we are. I think, often, barriers are about having ways to do things. Yeah, you really just have to put your heads together and think of ways to sort of work around . . . A lot of it’s possible, you know, at first sort of sight, you may not think it, but really, there are ways around things. (Pr3)

At each setting, there was a strong emphasis on continuing professional development and all staff are encouraged to extend their knowledge and understanding and to be involved in decision-making. This includes ‘organic conversations’ about the ethos and practices through to externally provided training (such as Forest School). Examples were given where practitioners had made suggestions that had enhanced outdoor practice (such as requesting blanket consent from parents for infants and toddlers to be taken outside).

Perhaps most importantly, each member of staff was valued for their unique strengths. One owner/manager discussed the assumption that all practitioners should be comfortable being outside and skilled in outdoor practice and went on to articulate how she disrupts this in her leadership approach:

If they’re a really good practitioner indoors, why make them go out? Why do they have to take their turn in the garden, if actually, their strengths are inside?..we treat our children as unique, but sometimes, we forget to treat our staff as unique. (SM2)

Acts of Creation

Creating cultural spaces

All three settings had established a strong outdoor culture and ethos – as one said ‘*it’s our ethos, we’re not going to keep them in . . .*’ In each case, the owner/managers saw themselves as pedagogical leaders with the outdoors being integral to their professional identity: this was referred to by one participant as part of ‘being pedagogically proud’.

right from the start, from day 1, the grounds were important to us, being outside . . . I find it really natural for children to be outside. (SM3)

We wanted to create more home-from-home . . . It was almost taking it back, revisiting our own . . . you can all remember making a mud pie, and it’s always a happy memory . . . do you remember making rose petal perfume?” (SM2)

Creating physical spaces

Each of the settings offered diverse stimulating outdoor environments for infants and toddlers. This was expressed in terms of the benefits of being outdoors to *'meet the needs of the children'*. (SM1).

We had an enormous log, that was just amazing, even this age group would climb on it, it was a dinosaur, it was a pirate ship (SM3)

As well as physical spaces on site, opportunities to access diverse outdoor learning environments were also emphasised. At setting 1, trips within the local community are an important part of their 'beyond the gates' approach and are 'spontaneous, a bit like you would at home'. Setting 1 has a large wooded outdoor learning site adjacent to the main nursery that all children access at least once a week. This includes a Forest School area as well as some wooden climbing structures, a small mound, some swings attached to trees. A small stream runs through the site and there are animals roaming including two goats, two llamas and a horse. There is careful consideration given to the sensory opportunities afforded by this environment for the youngest children, *'The noises that they make ... the wind ... and everything like that ...'*

Creating reflective spaces

In all the settings, there was a sense of continuous innovation and evolution of outdoor provision to meet the needs of the children, their parents and the staffing team. This is underpinned by a culture of reflective practice led by the owner/managers.

The owner/managers all participate in wider professional networks and share their outdoor practice with others:

it's nice that people are interested in coming and seeing what we do. 'Cause, it's a big bit of our practice, isn't it, the outdoors ... (SM3)

Outdoor practice beyond their setting provides inspiration and social media initiatives provide vital professional networks for sharing practice nationally and internationally.

The sharing of ideas from practice and research with practitioners support reflective practice among the whole staff team as the babyroom leader at setting 3 reflected: *'we're constantly finding ways to improve, not a stagnant thing, constantly evolving'*. Here, staff are given a monthly reading for discussion.

last month was on the importance of quiet ... every member of staff has to read it and then is asked questions on it ... we do training regularly ... they got paid for that ...

This learning is shared with families through parent packs and a variety of informal communication channels.

Discussion

Owner/Managers as critical pedagogues

Our findings demonstrate that within the context of England, the owner/manager can play a crucial role in leading outdoor pedagogy for infants and toddlers by acting as critical pedagogues. Their role as leaders requires them to balance multiple competing 'voices' or

influences about the place of infants and toddlers outdoors. It is important to note the way in which they positioned themselves at the interface between the internal stakeholders of the setting (infants and toddlers, practitioners) and external influences (policy, research, practice at other settings). In this way, they acted as a 'buffer' or filter in relation to dominant neoliberal values very much like the managers in Elfer and Page's (2015) study. We show how they engage in a process of **resisting** and **disrupting** dominant neoliberal assumptions and practices whilst **creating** cultural, physical and reflective spaces which support very young children's engagement with the outdoors. We argue that these behaviours align with Freire's concept of *Conscientizacao* (conscientization) and by acting in this way owner/managers can themselves be understood as critical pedagogues as well as facilitators of this stance in their practitioners. Christensen and Aldridge (2012, 7) suggest that conscientization 'arises when teachers acknowledge and stand up for what they know is good for children'. We show some of the ways in which owner/managers not only advocate for children to engage with outdoor pedagogies (putting the needs of the infant at the centre) but also awaken a critical consciousness in the practitioners they work with to want to develop this (empowering them to meet the needs of the infant).

Strategies of resistance, disruption and creation

In contrast to the strategies of compliance documented in the literature, these owner/managers demonstrated resistance to neoliberal forces by adopting a continual critical stance and were 'discerning and attentive' (Giroux 2010, 3) to thinking that marginalises infants and toddlers and silences the voices of practitioners. By pushing back against dominant narratives and policies that position the outdoors as risky and dangerous for infants and toddlers, they introduced a 'counterhegemonic narrative' that offers 'alternative knowledge' (Kilderry 2004). This alternative knowledge is one that asserts that the holistic development of the youngest children requires regular engagement with the natural environment.

Additionally, the owner-managers were able to disrupt by 'dismantling' (Grieshaber and Hamm 2021) neo-liberal management expectations and establishing alternative practices. Their distributed leadership allowed practitioners to contribute critically to pedagogy and practices and become knowledge-makers with a powerful voice. This is quite different from the disempowerment and isolation expressed by those working with infants and toddlers in previous studies (Powell and Gooch 2012, Davis and Dunn 2019). By doing this, they transform thinking about what should happen in the outdoor space of the setting and who should be there. They are thus challengers of 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 1984) and can recount a 'disruptor's tale' (Archer 2022) of how they have created new practices and stood up to those who would in turn challenge these new practices. As such they arguably offer examples of 'leading identity' (Henderson et al. 2022) and insights about the practices that could be associated with this.

The act of creating **cultural** spaces in which the outdoors is prioritised within infant and toddler pedagogy, stimulating **physical** outdoor spaces and **reflective** spaces for practitioners to develop their outdoor practice is the final stage of the critical pedagogy processes. As well as being significant within the individual settings where they are created, such spaces could be considered as a response to Christensen and Aldridge's (2012, 3) call to the early childhood sector 'to remain in that space called hope in which human beings maintain that visionary activism towards a more humanizing reality';

spaces ‘where neoliberal assumptions can potentially be challenged’ and alternative assumptions about the relationship between very young children and the outdoors developed (Sims et al. 2018, 3).

The significance of continuous reflective professional development

The role of the critical pedagogue, as demonstrated by these owner/managers, is underpinned by active engagement with research, policy, and practice which in turn supports the development of their professional identities and those of their practitioners and of the sector more widely. Like the leaders in Sims, Waniganayake and Hadley’s (2017) study, all the owner/managers had studied to at least a degree level and continued to engage with research to develop their professional knowledge and understanding. However, they differed in their sense of responsibility to the development of the sector and saw advocacy as central to their role perhaps because of the high level of personal and professional investment as owner/managers. Their knowledge and understanding of policy, and the lack of strong curriculum guidance relating to outdoor practice for the youngest children, meant that these owner/managers were willing and able to position themselves as both educational and organisational leaders. Whilst the relative policy vacuum puts the onus and responsibility on the owner/manager, it also creates a unique space in which they can foster a distinctive outdoor pedagogy. In all three cases, their engagement with extended professional networks solidified their sense of professional identity and their reputation as leaders of inspirational outdoor settings. As Sims, Waniganayake and Hadley (2017) conclude, such leadership ‘voices’ are vital to the future of the sector.

Conclusions

The ideology of neoliberalism has impacted greatly on ECEC policy and practice in England and beyond, particularly in relation to infants and toddlers. Yet, our research demonstrates how some owner/managers are adopting a transformational position and creating ‘spaces called hope’ within this challenging contemporary context. Focusing specifically on outdoor provision, we illustrate how they create spaces for very young children (birth to two) to be outside and engage with nature despite practical constraints and a lack of policy support. We argue that the creation of such spaces involves what Freire (1970) terms ‘*conscientization*’ and can be seen in practice through explicit acts of resistance and disruption. Considered in the light of Christensen and Aldridge’s (2012) claim that early childhood educators have been ‘overlooked’ as critical pedagogues, our findings suggest that Freire’s visionary activism persists and is a useful lens to use to consider ways of facilitating continuous professional reflection in work with infants and toddlers.

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ORCID

Nicola Kemp  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0244-9851>

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