

Time to Say Goodbye: Just a Graduation, or Evidence of Impactful Pedagogy?



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It's that time of year again—when many of us in early years settings find ourselves saying goodbye to children who are moving on to school. It's a bittersweet moment. We see proud smiles, a few tears, and hear words like "ready" and "excited" floating around. But as we wave them off, it raises a deeper question: How do we really know our pedagogy has been effective in preparing each unique child for the next step in their learning journey?

A Tale of Two Graduations

Today, I attended graduation ceremonies at both of our nurseries—two very different settings. One serves a more socio-economically advantaged community; the other supports a higher number of children eligible for two-year funding and pupil premium.



Despite these demographic differences, what struck me was the absence of difference in the children's development. Regardless of background, each child displayed the same core capabilities: confidence, resilience, independence, and curiosity.

Graduation may be a rehearsed event designed for families, but to these children, it meant so much more. Each child stood up to share what they wanted to be when they grow up—dreams ranging from farmers and doctors to butterflies and superheroes. These aspirations were shaped by their experiences both at home and at The Barn.

Watching them speak boldly into a microphone, in front of a large and unfamiliar audience, was a proud moment for us as educators. It reflected the depth of their growth—and ours.

This Didn't Happen by Magic



This level of personal, social, and emotional development (PSED) didn't just happen. For many, the idea of standing up in front of a crowd was unimaginable when they first arrived. Their journeys have been individual, and deeply meaningful.

This progress is the result of intentional pedagogy—an interactive process between children, practitioners, and the environment. It's shaped by positive relationships and enabling spaces that support engagement and recognise strengths, as described in Birth to Five Matters.

The Education Endowment Foundation's Early Years Pedagogical Curriculum puts it clearly:

"An educator's role is to ensure they apply effective approaches to positively influence as many of the different forms of interactions as possible."

Real Stories, Real Impact

We saw this in the child who was an elective mute for over a year. A calm, inclusive environment, combined with sensitive and consistent support, gave her the space and trust she needed to find her voice.

Then there was the child who said they wanted to be an archaeologist. This curiosity required explicit teaching: new vocabulary, new concepts, and real-world connections to make sense of wanting to "dig up dinosaur bones."

A Memorable Moment

After the ceremony, a parent approached me and said,

"I can't believe that one little girl said she wants to be herself when she grows up."

That one comment stopped me in my tracks. Because that's the goal, isn't it? For a child to be so secure in who they are, that they choose to be themselves. That is the true impact of quality early years pedagogy.

In Reflection

Graduation is more than caps, songs, and photo opportunities. It's a mirror—reflecting the powerful, often unseen work we do every day. It reminds us that effective early years practice isn't measured by checklists or targets, but by confident, capable children who are becoming exactly who they are meant to be.

So, as we say goodbye, let's celebrate more than just their next step. Let's honour the learning, the relationships, and the deep impact of what we do—quietly, consistently, and with heart.

For further reading on the unique child and EEF Pedagogical Continuum please visit

Birth to Five Matters – Principles of the EYFS at:

<https://birthto5matters.org.uk/principles-of-the-eyfs/> <https://birthto5matters.org.uk/principles-of-the-eyfs/>

Education Endowment Foundation – Contexts for Teaching and Learning: The Early Years Pedagogical Continuum at:

https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/documents/pages/EY_Pedagogical_Continuum_0.3.pdf?v=1674479416

