



University of
Staffordshire

“I’m not going to
start a
revolution...but I'm
certainly going to
fight my corner'.”

Narratives from Early Years Teachers exploring how experiences, quality assurance mechanisms and policy discourses shape their pedagogy, professional relationships, and identity.

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the Award of Professional Doctorate in Education, University of Staffordshire, March 2026

Abstract.

This study is concerned with the quality discourse inherent in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) profession in England. The focus within this, is the role of the Early Years Teacher (EYT) and how their identity is shaped by policy discourses, conflicting notions of quality in ECEC and interactions within their respective workspaces.

The aim of the study was to reveal how EYTs working in a diverse range of contexts were able to fulfil their role in their workplace, given the complexity of the contexts and conditions in which they operate. The underpinning theoretical framework sits within a critical ecological perspective which problematises the layers of societal systems which influence constructions of identity.

Much existing literature in the field tends to situate the ECEC profession in a deficit position, the 'Cinderella' in the education system (Cameron et al., 2010), despite policy initiatives by successive governments to professionalise the sector, and to increase the number of graduate practitioners working in the profession. This culminated in the introduction of the early years specific Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS). The public perception of those working with the very youngest children remains that of a low status occupation. At the time of writing the profession faces significant recruitment, retention and funding challenges.

The methodological approach adopted was that of a narrative enquiry. This involved utilising interpretations of the EYTs narratives conveyed in shared conversations about their experiences, alongside my own accounts from practice, in order to illuminate the role of the EYT and the conditions under which they resist and/or subvert or conform. The findings from the study reveal how participants think they fulfil their role. They recall instances when they have resisted or subverted the imposition of policy or practice as they recognise the specialist knowledge that they hold. There is also a sense of pride within their responses. The age of the children they work with is significant to them, as are the relationships with their colleagues, where they feel they have an impact in driving practice and provision change. Participants are aware of the outward image of the ECEC workforce as determined by the outer systems of the ecological system, yet from within the contexts that they operate they exercise agency and have an influence.

Therefore, this thesis contributes to knowledge by challenging taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning constructions of quality and school-readiness within England's ECEC sector. It advances an ecologically informed analytical framework that foregrounds the interconnections between developmental discourse, gendered workforce dynamics and policy enactment. In doing so, it offers a more contextually and politically situated understanding of early childhood practice, extending beyond dominant outcome-driven and technocratic models. Furthermore, it reconceptualises the EYT as a specialist professional who is able to exercise agency and subversion where and when they deem appropriate as they navigate competing discourses of policy.

Acknowledgements

I'm not sure 9 years is long enough to be studying something so important but then I'm also not sure if it has been too long! This period of study has taken place during role changes, workplace realignments and a global pandemic, as well as welcoming my wonderful grandchildren. There are many people to thank for their involvement over the course of almost a decade and to whom I owe a huge thanks.

Firstly, my amazing colleagues past and present, many who are now friends who have offered support, wisdom and experience when it has all seemed too hard and too much. The photocopier conversations, the coffee queue conversations, the graduation ceremony queues where I never thought it might be my turn any time soon, to each and every one a heartfelt thanks

To 'the lads' Caz, Kid and Jen, we have been by each other's side for well over 40 years, they have always been there, asking quietly how it was going and making plans for when I had finished. Also, Val and Tina, past colleagues with decades of ECEC knowledge and experience from practice who I had the joy of working with and are now much-loved friends.

To my incredible, patient, wise supervisors, Associate Professor Dr Jo Basford and Dr Caroline Bath for sticking with it and continuing to offer advice, ideas and suggestions, nudging, prodding and challenging me and being utterly inspirational.

Humble thanks to my participants who gave their precious time to talk to me. Their voices brought to life our important, nurturing, playful, creative, compassionate and optimistic profession, detailing the complexities of our work with babies, very young children and their families.

Lastly, my family. All of them. For my Mum for always being there. To Dolly dog, a most competent writing companion. But mostly Rob, who was happy to walk/sit by my side whilst my mind drifted into my work, or to listen whilst I unpicked my ideas. Thank you baby.

Author Declaration

I confirm that this thesis is the result of my own work and has not previously been submitted for any other degree at the University of Staffordshire or another institution.

Amanda Tayler

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Amanda Tayler', with a stylized, cursive script.

24th February 2026

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List of Abbreviations

AFA (Adult Focused Activity): A planned learning activity led directly by an adult to support children's development.

DfE (Department for Education): The UK government department responsible for education and children's services.

DfEE (Department for Education and Employment): A former UK government department that oversaw both education and employment policy.

DfES (Department for Education and Skills): A former UK department responsible for education, skills, and lifelong learning.

ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care): Services and settings that support young children's learning, development, and care from birth to school age.

EPPE (Effective Provision of Pre-School Education): A major UK research study examining the impact of early education on children's outcomes.

EYTDA (Early Years Teacher Degree Apprenticeship): A work-based degree apprenticeship that trains people to become graduate-level early years teachers.

EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage): The statutory framework that sets learning, development, and care standards for children from birth to age five in England.

EYPS (Early Years Professional Status): A former professional status recognising graduate-level expertise in early years practice.

EYITT (Early Years Initial Teacher Training): Training programmes that prepare trainees to become specialist early years teachers.

EYTS (Early Years Teacher Status): A professional status awarded to graduates trained to teach children from birth to five.

ITMP (In the Moment Planning): An approach developed by Ephgrave (2018) where teachers plan teaching spontaneously based on what children are doing and interested in at that moment.

Maintained settings: Early years or school settings that are funded and overseen by the local authority, meaning they follow national regulations and provide government-funded places.

NCTL (National College of Teaching and Leadership): A former body responsible for teacher training, leadership development, and school improvement.

OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development): An international organisation that works to improve economic and social policies worldwide.

OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills): The inspectorate that evaluates the quality of education and care services in England.

PVI sector (Private, Voluntary and Independent sector): Early years providers that operate outside state schools, including nurseries, playgroups, and childminders.

QTS (Qualified Teacher Status): The professional accreditation required to teach in state-maintained schools in England.

Chapter 1 Introduction

“Early Years Teachers make the education and care of babies and children their first concern. They are accountable for achieving the highest possible standards in their professional practice and conduct. Early Years Teacher Status is awarded to graduates who are leading education and care and who have been judged to have met all of the standards in practice from birth to the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Early Years Teachers act with integrity and honesty. They have strong early development knowledge, keep their knowledge and skills up-to-date and are self-critical. Early Years Teachers recognise that the Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 curricula follow the EYFS in a continuum. They forge positive professional relationships and work with parents and/or carers in the best interests of babies and children.”

(National College Teaching and Leadership (NCTL), 2013 p2)

1.1 Introduction to the study

The broad topic for this research is early years workforce reform utilising a conceptual anchor of quality discourse within early childhood education and care (ECEC) with reference to those holding the Early Years Teachers Status (EYTS). The purpose of this study is to explore how experiences and interactions in the ECEC workplace shape the professional identity of those with EYTS and how they are able to fulfil this role, as set out by the NCTL (2013) (see preamble the beginning of the chapter) against a backdrop of competing ideology and persistent policy reforms. Drawing on their workplace experiences, the research sheds light on the working lives of EYTs employed in both maintained and private, voluntary and independent (PVI) settings. The only inclusion criteria for participants being they had gained the EYTS qualification via any route (undergraduate, postgraduate or graduate employer based (GEB)) and were working in an ECEC setting. The aim of the study was to ascertain how the participants were carrying out their roles in the differing contexts within which they work, identifying challenges and opportunities therein. Contextual specificity is key to this study and a critical ecological perspective based upon the work of Miller et al. (2012) has been utilised throughout the thesis to understand this more fully.

1.2 Background

ECEC has been at the forefront of global policy initiatives for a number of years (Moss, 2014). Much of the interest of policy makers has been centred on the workforce, most explicitly the qualification levels and skills of those working with the youngest children and their families (Lloyd and Hallet, 2010; Nutbrown, 2012; Roberts-Holmes, 2013). This focus is informed by evidence from the seminal Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study (Sylva et al., 2004), which highlights the relationship between workforce expertise and quality improvement. This has resulted in the formulation and implementation of new qualifications, particularly in Higher Education, the most recent being EYTS, in 2013.

EYTS emerged following recommendations in the Nutbrown Review (Nutbrown, 2012) *Foundations of Quality*, an independent review of ECEC qualifications. Previously, the qualification pathway to professionalisation had been a foundation degree then top up degree in early years, or full-time early years degree with a further accreditation via differing routes to, Early Years Professional Status (EYPS). The rationale for the change was largely threefold. Firstly, EYPS was poorly understood and recognised, both inside and outside of the ECEC community, (Roberts-Holmes, 2012). Secondly, Nutbrown (*ibid*) proposed that the EYTS route would offer parity with teachers (those who have Qualified Teacher Status, (QTS)). Thirdly it was anticipated this new role would further increase professionalism (Truss, 2013) and drive quality. However, EYTS ultimately did not confer QTS and the conditions such as enjoying better pay, enhanced status and recognition for their work have yet to be realised (Traunter, 2019; Hudson, Brammer and Witton, 2023).

Exploring professional identity within an ECEC setting is complex and ambiguous for several reasons. Those who work within the profession identify with differing titles for their job role (such as nursery nurse, nursery practitioner, nursery assistant, early years educator, pre-school assistant, playgroup assistant, childcare worker, early years practitioner...) and are largely dependent upon where their work takes place. Again, several descriptions apply for the settings where young children are educated and cared for (pre-school, daycare, nursery, nursery school, sessional care). For EYTs, the complexity surrounding their professional identity is intensified as they could be said to be neither teacher nor practitioner, thus occupying a type of 'grey space' between both the ECEC profession and the primary education profession

(Traunter, 2019).

Existing literature which explores the professional identity of the EYT is scarce, partly due to the relative 'newness' of the role but also because there are limited numbers of those who hold the qualification. Studies by Basford (2019), Traunter (2019) and Hudson et al. (2022) are the most recent. However pertinent to the thesis are studies by Simpson (2010a: 2010b), Hadfield et al. (2010) and Roberts-Holmes (2012) which look at the preceding qualification, EYPS. Enrolment onto EYTS programmes has seen a steady decline since its inception. According to the Department for Education (DfE) (2017), there were 2327 candidates at the inception of the qualification in 2013, which had reduced to 365 in the 2018 cohort. The most recent development in relation to the role is the introduction of the Early Years Teacher Degree Apprenticeship (EYTDA) (DfE, 2025)

The concept of 'quality' has emerged as a defining feature and a dominant discourse in debates within ECEC in England and globally. Since the early 2000s, international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have positioned quality as the cornerstone of effective ECEC systems, linking it to long-term economic competitiveness, social mobility, and child development outcomes (OECD, 2001;2006). Within this policy discourse, quality is often presented as a universal and measurable standard, enabling governments to monitor provision and assure the public that ECEC services deliver value for money. Yet, as Dahlberg, et al. (2013) have consistently argued, quality is not a neutral descriptor but a socially constructed and contested concept. What counts as "quality" depends on the values, assumptions, and political priorities that underpin its definition (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). My understanding of quality is founded upon my experiences in practice and aligns with Moss (2019:42) and is one which encompasses 'complexity, plurality, and subjectivity'; services that value difference and diversity in children and families.

In positioning quality discourse as the thread running through the thesis, this study engages with both global and national perspectives. At the global level, reports such as 'Starting Strong' (OECD, 2001; 2006; 2011) have promoted a shared policy language around quality, emphasising the importance of workforce qualifications, curriculum frameworks, and child outcomes. At the national level, successive governments in England have adopted this language while inflecting it with distinct

policy rationale: raising quality has been tied to professionalising the workforce and increasing accountability (Irvine et al., 2023), whilst ensuring children are “school ready” by age five (Siraj et al., 2019). These shifts have significant implications for the workforce, particularly for Early Years Teachers (EYTs), who according to Boardman (2018) are expected to embody quality leadership while working within an increasingly marketised sector.

The schoolification of early childhood has been raised as a concern amongst the ECEC community (Moss, 2007, 2013; Dahlberg et al., 2013). This relates to practices and ideas about young children’s learning being imposed by policy makers in efforts to get them ‘school ready,’ resulting in less opportunities for them to play, exposing them earlier to the culture of a primary school (Organisation for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD), 2017). Indeed, the absence of play across the eight Early Years Initial Teacher Training (EYITT) teaching standards represents a significant omission that exposes conflicting constructions of quality within early years education. This marginalisation reflects the dominance of formalised, school-oriented priorities that sit in tension with pedagogical understandings of play as central to young children’s learning and development. Although play is referenced once in the revised EYTDA, its limited and peripheral inclusion suggests an unresolved ambiguity about its status within professional expectations. As a result, the EYTS role becomes a site of contestation, where they must navigate competing definitions of effective practice. The inclusion of the term ‘teacher’ within the qualification title, alongside success criteria aligned with school-based norms, further reinforces a schoolification agenda that reshapes early years pedagogy and professional identity in ways that may conflict with developmentally appropriate, play-based approaches. However, whilst teaching status nomenclature assumes a standardised title and job role with associated terms, conditions and pay, this is at odds with EYTS due to the fact pay and conditions are not the same and neither is the educational context in which they work (ie, it can be maintained, PVI etc).

1.3 Rationale

The rationale for the study lies partly in my own experiences. I was at the forefront of the policy initiatives aimed at driving quality and gaining higher qualifications whilst in practice. I had gained the foundation degree, then the level 6 top up degree, followed by EYPS. My professional identity when becoming a graduate working in the profession was somewhat insecure, EYPS was not recognised nor valued by others both in and out of the profession and I often found myself questioning my knowledge and worth after interactions with others of a higher status within education and society, particularly teachers or advisors. I write about these experiences in my narratives which are included in the study (Appendix A). The experiences highlight encounters which led to my resisting of impositions I did not feel appropriate for the contexts in which I worked. This ignited a research interest to explore if this was also the case for those who held EYTS and had the change of name to the qualification made any difference in relation to status and knowledge value.

I wanted to hear the untold narratives and to give voice to those EYTs working in settings who have not had opportunity to articulate their experiences. The EYITT standards (NCTL, 2013) refer just to children they do not refer to *young* children or babies (though the previously cited pre-amble does), which is an important part of professional identity for those working in the profession. Little is known about how the enactment of the standards manifests upon the individual and permeates their practice along with the everyday experiences and interactions in the workplace. Therefore, this study positions the research within a broader debate: how do EYTs make sense of, negotiate, and comply or resist dominant discourses of quality in their professional lives?

Miller et al. (2012) suggest a necessity for 'shaking off' of the historical low status of the profession, which has 'grown up' and should take its place alongside other parts of the education profession (p.168). I predominantly use the term 'profession' rather than sector or workforce throughout the thesis to reflect this idea, as language is important in relation to positioning the study and articulating my stance (Gallego-Balsa, 2018) whilst conveying my feeling, attitude, perspective, or position as enacted in discourse (Wing et al., 2024). Furthermore, Joyce et al. (2023) support this notion based on how teachers would like to be perceived externally as this would promote their internal validation. With this intent, the following aims, objectives

and questions were developed.

1.4 The research aim, objectives and questions.

The overarching aim, objectives and research questions were written to reflect my preoccupation with the ECEC workplace and the quality agenda, and how the systems in which EYTs operate influence aspects of their work lives. The research aims and questions are detailed below

Aim To explore how experiences, quality assurance mechanisms and policy discourses shape EYTs' pedagogy, professional relationships, and identity.

Objectives

1. To examine how Early Years Teachers understand, enact, and negotiate notions of "quality" within their everyday practice, with particular attention to the interplay between structural demands and relational work.
2. To analyse how developmental norms, gendered expectations, and policy discourses shape teachers' micro-interactions with children, families, and colleagues through an ecological theoretical lens.
3. To explore how teacher narratives and my own positionality as a teacher-researcher reveal tensions, contradictions, and embodied experiences of quality that are obscured or simplified within policy representations.

RQ1. How does the quality agenda create challenges and opportunities for EYTs' agency in shaping practice and sustaining professional values?

RQ2. How do EYTs perceive, negotiate, and respond to their role as graduate leaders within a quality-driven policy context?

RQ3. How do tensions between external quality frameworks and relational, pedagogical understandings of quality influence EYTs' professional identity and practice?

1.5 Summary of the thesis chapters

The thesis is organised into the following chapters, a short overview of each is provided.

Chapter 2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework is based upon the work of Miller et al. (2012) who employed a critical ecological perspective based upon the ideas of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological system (1979) from which to explore the everyday lives of those working in ECEC. A critical ecological systems theory application recognises the multi layered quality agenda and illuminates contextual specificity. Using a critical stance illuminates the political issues within the societal systems where the EYT works. Within this section I offer further insight into my own experiences as well as the philosophical stance that the study takes alongside explaining how this framework informs the thesis.

Chapter 3 Literature review

This chapter is organised into subheadings dictated by the conceptual framework of quality. The themes identified are discourses of quality, policy reforms and the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce, quality and the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector and the case for democratic practice. The purpose of the literature review chapter is to identify gaps in knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon in order to inform the research focus and methodological approach.

Chapter 4 Methodology

This chapter explains the research approach, the recruitment of participants, the data collection tools utilised, and the approach taken to data analysis. This chapter also includes my thoughts and decisions made throughout the research process. I also refer to my own narratives in here with discussion as to how this influenced a review of my interview approach.

Chapter 5 Findings, analysis and discussion

This chapter presents the findings that were generated from participants' narratives, alongside my own accounts to explore how these reveal the interplay between

personal experience, professional identity, and the wider policy and practice contexts of ECEC. Connections are made to existing literature in the field.

Chapter 7 Conclusion and Recommendations

This final chapter makes closing comments and wider discussion which lead to recommendations relating to further research, early years practice and personal learning as a researcher. Finally, I present my contribution to knowledge.

Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter justifies my choice of theoretical framework and articulates how this is applied throughout the thesis. It also explains how this selection underpins the philosophical positioning of the study and aligns to the methodologies utilised. My theoretical framework is informed by my beliefs which are rooted in my assumptions, values and ethics formed by my workplace experiences.

Selecting the theoretical framework required significant consideration as there were multiple frameworks which would lend themselves to this study. My selection needed to illustrate how I see the world, as Lysaght (2011) infers, the choice made by the researcher of which framework to select gives an indication of their beliefs, their positionality in the study as well as their epistemological and ontological stance. Therefore, the framework recognises how respective contexts shape an individual in distinct ways including my own. Tudge et al. (2009) suggest that the meaning of theory in any project is to provide a framework to explain the connections inherent in the phenomena being studied and to illuminate new connections.

2.1.1 The research problem

The study aimed to illuminate the work lives of EYTs operating in a range of contexts, to begin to understand how experiences, quality assurance mechanisms and policy discourses shape EYTs' pedagogy, professional relationships and identity. Therefore, I sought a theoretical perspective that enabled me to look at the effect of the inter-relatedness of policy, people and places and how these informed perspectives of ECEC. Urban (2008) suggests that the questions we ask as researchers are dependent upon how we position ourselves in the micro and macro-politics of early childhood. Employing critical ecology aligns because it allows examination of power relations, systemic influences, and experiences. This framework gave me a strong foundation to interrogate how quality in ECEC is constructed, operationalised, and experienced across multiple systems and will be discussed at length in section 2.5.

2.2 Bronfenbrenner

Originally developed in 1979 to explore human development in context, particularly child development, Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory had been revised multiple times until his death in 2005. Bronfenbrenner (1979) firstly suggested that studying children out of the context of their environments (for example in unfamiliar laboratory situations with persons who were new to them) did not offer a true picture and that children's environments were fundamental in understanding an individual's development.

Bronfenbrenner revised his ideas over 3 main phases from the ecological to the bioecological (Rosa and Tudge, 2013) with his second phase model giving particular attention to the concepts of person and environmental characteristics as well as the passage of time (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). This recognises development as a process of continuity and change, which occurs over the individual's lifetime. Bronfenbrenner (1989) further suggested that these experiences may be normative (expected) or non-normative (unexpected) and emerge from the external environments or from the individual's own organism. Furthermore, according to Bronfenbrenner, 1979 and Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006, the key feature of these experiences or events is that they alter the dynamic between the individual and environment, creating the conditions for developmental change.

This framework has been developed more recently by Miller et al. (2012) into a critical ecological perspective. The framework is particularly applicable to this study as the role of the EYT was a result of policy change which was intended to drive change and influence practice via quality policy discourse. The critical stance that influences this approach is informed by critical theory, as discussed below.

2.3 Critical theory

Critical theory is an approach to social philosophy that focuses on society and culture which tries to expose, critique, and contest power structures (Campbell, 2021) and from a sociological perspective, it argues that issues in society arise predominantly from social structures and cultural assumptions as opposed to individuals. The importance it has for my study is the need to recognise and critique the systems and power structures in which the EYTs operate and how these can shape identity and pedagogy. This is significant because it would facilitate

understanding of the challenges they face but also the opportunities available to exert influence and agency.

Thompson (2017) argues that the central aim of a critical theory of society is not to impose predetermined values or ideals onto social life, but to reveal and unpack the contradictions already embedded within it, to illuminate the emancipatory possibilities hidden in the fundamental assumptions we treat as natural features of our social world. Again, this had relevance to the study as I wanted the research to give voice to EYTs who may previously not had opportunity to share their narratives which may disrupt long held societal perceptions of the ECEC profession.

Critical theory, as outlined by Habermas (1987), exposes the underlying distortions, representations, and power dynamics that shape both knowledge and communication (Campbell, 2021). Building on this, Baxter (2011) explains that Habermas centred his work on the concept of the lifeworld, an individual's everyday experiences and social reality. The lifeworld encompasses cultural norms, social interactions, and routine communicative practices. However, Habermas argued that this lifeworld is increasingly encroached upon by political and economic systems (Friedland and Kunelius, 2023). Political priorities and ideological agendas are translated through policy into structures, expectations and practices that shape everyday life and within ECEC, these influences are evident in successive reforms that have reconfigured professional identities, accountability requirements and understandings of quality (Ball, 2003; Osgood, 2010; Moss and Mitchell, 2024). This is particularly pertinent for those working in ECEC, who have been at the forefront of policy interventions and quality initiatives introduced by successive governments over several decades (Akhal, 2019). Although practitioners have continually navigated the challenges created by shifting political priorities, they have not necessarily possessed the power to challenge or inform the policy imperatives shaping their work. Foregrounding their voices therefore makes visible forms of experiential and pedagogical knowledge that have frequently been marginalised within policy discourse.

Structural inequalities have been intensified by the global pandemic, and within the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) profession, Moss (2020: xv) argues that COVID-19 has starkly revealed the deep-rooted flaws within the societies it has affected. These include longstanding injustices and inequalities, particularly as

“the poor, the precarious and other vulnerable groups have suffered the most”. Moss (ibid) further contends that the pandemic laid bare the chronic neglect of public services and the erosion of welfare states, which has weakened society’s ability to challenge persistent policy pressures. This erosion has also undermined key collective values essential for coordinated social action, specifically “equality, democracy, [and] solidarity” (p. xv). According to O’Higgins (2020), these conditions demonstrate the damaging consequences of decades of unrestrained neoliberalism across multiple professional sectors, leaving them exposed and under-protected in relation to security, participation, and access to basic life necessities.

Urban (2012) outlines a further relationship between policy and practice in ECEC. Educating and caring for the youngest children lies at the heart of any society. Childrearing practices and the establishments and professions created around them are the most deep-seated manifestations of the relationship between the public and the private which he suggests is ‘not static, universal or uncontested’ (p.494). This study examines the unequal distribution resulting from a series of policies implemented by succeeding governments, giving an additional layer of context. In the case of the conception of the role of the EYT, the desire to drive quality by upskilling the profession via measurable standards to improve outcomes for children has, according to Nutbrown (2013), produced teachers ‘on the cheap’ and a two-tier status between EYTS and those with QTS.

The construction of the EYT role exposes a central contradiction within the professionalisation agenda. The policy ambition was to improve children’s outcomes by increasing graduate expertise and establishing measurable Teachers’ Standards (Early Years). However, the Government rejected Nutbrown’s recommendation for an early years specialist route to QTS, instead introducing EYTS as a status that would be regarded as equivalent to QTS without conferring the same professional and occupational recognition (Nutbrown, 2012, 2013). This raises questions about whether the policy represented genuine professionalisation or a more partial form in which EYTs acquired graduate-level knowledge, standards and leadership responsibilities without equivalent pay, authority or career opportunities (Wild, Silberfeld and Nightingale, 2015; Kay et al., 2021). Nutbrown’s critique therefore points towards a form of symbolic recognition in which the title of teacher was granted while the material conditions associated with teacher status were withheld;

viewed through Fraser's (1995) distinction between recognition and redistribution, professional recognition was not accompanied by equivalent redistribution of pay, status and occupational opportunity. In this sense, the policy simultaneously strengthened specialist early years expertise while institutionalising a two-tier hierarchy between EYTS and QTS (Kay et al., 2021).

2.4 Critical ecology

The term critical ecology has been utilised by Miller et al. (2012) to understand the workplace experiences of early childhood professionals, and it is this framework that my study has adopted. The critical ecological perspective that the authors propose, has its origins in the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and uses the same terminology for the systems but develops this further. A critical ecological stance, they suggest, is characterised by critical thinking about 'practices at every layer of the early childhood professional system' (p.7) (Figure 2.1). Adopting a critical ecological perspective for exploring the experiences and policy upon the identity and work of the EYT served to illuminate the complex realities and local contexts in which they operate.

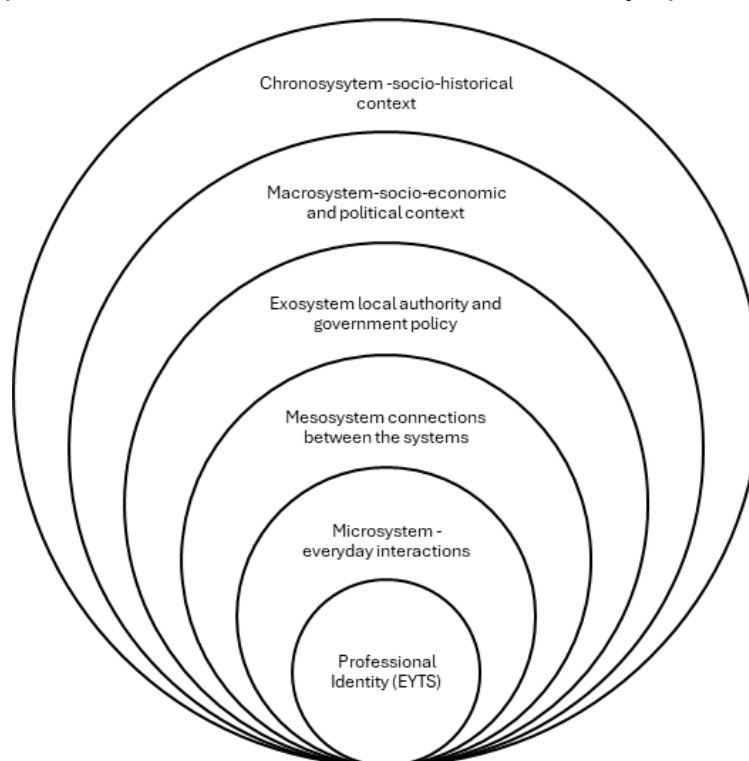


Figure 2.1 Critical ecological Framework Miller et al (2012)

Using this perspective acknowledges that identity, pedagogy and influence cannot be discussed in simplistic, universal terms but recognises that contextual specificity is key, involving many layers of interactions that influence the construction of identity and the shaping of pedagogies. Urban (2008) suggests that this stance of inquiry is

'informed by the political and social realities' (p.146) whereby practice is transformed from within as we have an awareness to the challenges within the settings that we act in. Viewing practice from within has greater potential to understand the *context* of practice and therefore transform it. Adopting this perspective enabled the illumination of the conditions and occasions whereby the EYT feels able to influence and transform as well as those other times when resistance would be subtle and subversive. An ecological approach enables the experiences of EYTs to be understood through the reciprocal relationships between the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). However, the addition of a critical perspective directs attention to the fact that these systems and relationships are not neutral. They are shaped by unequal distributions of power, authority, status and resources, as well as by dominant political and professional discourses (Houston, 2017). The framework therefore asks not only how policy and structural conditions influence everyday practice, but whose knowledge is privileged, who has the power to define quality, whose voices are marginalised and who carries the consequences of policy decisions (Kay et al., 2021). It also recognises EYTs as active ecological actors who may interpret, negotiate and resist dominant expectations, while acknowledging that their capacity for agency is unevenly distributed and dependent upon wider structural, cultural and relational conditions (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015; Urban, 2012).

This enables exploration of how the layers of the systems impact upon the daily lives of the EYT. This act of politicising and problematising interactions in each part of the system, the taking of a critical stance and how it has been applied to the content of this thesis is now outlined.

2.5 Application to the thesis

This study places the EYT at the centre of the model as I am concerned with interpreting individual experiences and how the systems impact upon the professional identity and pedagogy of the EYTs' in a diverse range of settings. The theory has been adapted and applied throughout the thesis to articulate my thinking within different contexts. Such integration enables the theoretical framework to structure and weave together all aspects of the research process (Grant and Osanloo, 2014). The purpose of the initial utilisation is to familiarise the reader with the framework (Figure 2.1). Following this it is used again to support the alignment

of the thesis to my methodological approach of narrative inquiry (Figure 4.2). The final version is to represent my positionality within the study (Figure 4.3). The utilisation of this framework allows recognition of the complex multi-faceted nature of an individual's development which arises from the impact (directly or indirectly) that the contextually specific systems in which we exist impress upon us.

A point to note is that I do not visualise the different systems to be distinct but as permeable, ebbing and flowing, rippling systems. Utilising a critical ecology model, (Miller et al., 2012), allows me to critique how identity is constructed from multiple perspectives to understand the instigative characteristics and individual beliefs and values of interacting individuals. Furthermore, events and experiences from the micro and macrosystems that shift and shape individual beliefs and practices are then shared within communities, which impacts upon the macro and exo levels. This appears to indicate that individuals have influence and agency in their context (Jones et al., 2014), therefore, adopting this theoretical lens serves to disrupt the deficit discourse associated with the profession by recognising significance of context as a medium for the EYT to have influence and to exercise agency.

Discourses of quality are significant in this study in relation to identity formation and practice, quality is not a neutral descriptor; it is produced through policy, inspection frameworks, workforce reforms, and dominant narratives about ECEC. These discourses carry implicit assumptions about what counts as valuable pedagogical work, which competencies matter, and which roles are afforded higher status (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2007; Osgood, 2010). As EYTs navigate these expectations, they negotiate tensions between relational, child-centred pedagogies and more technical, measurable forms of quality (Papatheodorou, 2009; Osgood, 2010), influencing both how they see themselves and how they enact their practice (Ball, 2003; Osgood, 2010).

In this way, discourses of quality operate as powerful identity-making forces, structuring not only what EYTs do, but who they can be within their professional communities.

2.5.1 The systems in detail

A critical ecological exploration of quality entails unpicking each layer of the system to map how different system levels influence or construct quality. Each level will be

explored in relation to quality discourses, policies, and experiences as follows; *Microsystem*: interactions between children, teachers, families. *Mesosystem*: relationships between settings, schools, local authorities. *Exosystem*: policy actors, funding mechanisms, regulatory bodies (e.g., Office for Standards in Education, children's services and Skills (Ofsted)). *Macrosystem*: cultural discourses (e.g., school readiness, neoliberal accountability). *Chronosystem*: historical policy shifts such as SureStart, followed by austerity and most recently Best Start in Life.

2.5.1.1. The microsystem; Quality as Everyday Practice and Interaction

The *microsystem* explores the direct, regular, face to face relationships and interactions that the individuals have with those in their immediate lives. For this study this would refer to their colleagues, the setting context, their family, the children and families they work with and other professionals that come into the setting. This layer looks at the 'complex dynamics' (Price and McCallum, 2014), which directly influence the pedagogy and identity of the EYT and reciprocal interplay between them, giving an insight into the complex, socio-cultural world of the EYT and the multi-directional myriads of influences that have an impact upon them. In relation to the conceptual anchor of quality, this layer critically explores notions of how interactions between the EYT and child embody or resist dominant quality discourses, and how agency in this level could provide spaces for subtle resistance or democratic practices. Furthermore, critiquing the influence on daily pedagogical practices from specialist knowledge, care practice, and cultural values sit alongside wider issues such as the implementation of the EYFS, assessment practices and professionalisation agendas influence.

2.5.1.2 The mesosystem; Quality as Organisational and Inter-institutional Relationships

The next system is the *mesosystem* which explores the relationship between different microsystems, for example the relationship between the family and the setting or the teacher and the child. This layer further examines relationships and interactions between the individual and one or more of the other parts of the system and influence can work in both directions (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Children may influence aspects of practice whilst teachers may have some influence over children. It is here that we may see some challenges between the EYTs and others in the *microsystem* who may hold different beliefs and values or require different

demands and have different expectations. There may also be issues in relation to power dynamics between professional groups (e.g., EYTS vs. primary teachers with QTS), however, there may be some positive opportunities here according to Newman and Newman (2020) such as respectful relationships and knowledge sharing between teachers. It is in this layer we would see how policy/contextual connections in relation to the quality agenda manifest in such areas as Local Authority guidance and funding and transition to school and “school readiness” agendas.

2.5.1.3. The exosystem; Quality as Shaped by Policy, Regulation, and Funding Structures

The *exosystem* consists of the connections and processes that occur between two or more systems. This layer relates to factors that affect aspects of the EYTs’ pedagogy and identity though this may be indirectly, so this is where the individual has no relationship with the factor. This system would explore policy, including guidance frameworks, funding initiatives and qualification standards set at national level, the higher education institution, and how policy instruments frame and standardise “quality”. These can have an indirect impact upon the individual in varying measures. The raft of policy initiatives over the past few decades has, positioned ECEC as the ‘mythical silver bullet’ (Grenier, p1., 2024) that will cure societal ills and firmly positions the profession within an economic plan, thereby acknowledging ECEC’s position as a marketised sector. In relation to the study’s focus on quality in ECEC, exploration of this layer would illuminate how broader structures exert influence on settings without direct interaction with children alongside the role of inspection, regulation, and funding in shaping practice and how accountability regimes and their effects on teacher autonomy.

2.5.1.4 The macrosystem; Quality as Ideological and Cultural Discourse

The *macrosystem* layer, consists of societal values, ideologies, and cultural narratives and constructs of what counts as “quality” in ECEC. This has indirect influence and has a further focus of “institutional patterns of the culture (or subculture), such as the economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems, of which the micro, meso, and exo are all concrete manifestations” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979;515). According to Faulkner and Coates (2013), this could include cultural attitudes about children’s needs, developmentally appropriate practices, and best interests, as well as long-held opinions about how early years practice should be

done. In relation to quality this layer would foreground the dominance of neoliberal, economic, and performative discourses in shaping ECEC policy and practice. Bronfenbrenner (1989) further proposes that though this system is distant from the individual, it has impact upon cultural differences, causing 'culture shocks' (Zhang, 2018). These may have the capacity to disrupt practice, pedagogy and identify of the EYT as ECEC is a specific practice in a far wider education system, poorly understood outside the profession (Dahlberg and Moss, 2008). The schoolification and 'school readiness' discourses which have become synonymous with the profession disregard many important principles and pedagogical practices of EYTs, which, according to Georgeson (2022), have evolved to achieve a number of goals, which include promoting children's holistic development, fostering attitudes that support lifelong learning, assisting with the smooth transition to school, enabling children to exercise their right to an education, and assisting parents in obtaining employment. The influence of discourses such as "school readiness," "early intervention," and "investment in human capital" reflect and reinforce broader social hierarchies and inequalities and illuminate a wider debate around quality as a measurable, standardised outcome versus relational, context-dependent quality.

2.1.5.5 The chronosystem; Quality as Historically and Politically Situated

The *chronosystem* is the outer layer of the ecological system and the furthest from the centre and the EYT. It is concerned with the development of the systems and the individuals over time. This layer has significance for the study as beliefs and practice change as one interacts with the various systems over the life course. Not only do these interactions shape practice and beliefs they then in turn influence the lives of others based upon these interactions. The important characteristics of these interactions and events is that they "alter the existing relation between person and environment, thus creating a dynamic that may instigate a developmental change" (Bronfenbrenner, 1989:201). The *chronosystem* envelopes all the systems and reflects the past, present and future of the other systems, with some intermittently more prominent whilst others may become less so at times. In relation to quality this has been exemplified in cycles of reform and policy change in ECEC as historical legacies such as the EPPE report (Sylva et al., 2004) and the implementation of SureStart have shaped present understandings of quality leaving a legacy of qualification reform, desirable pedagogical practices and a two-tier system of provision.

2.4 Chapter summary

I have presented these systems separately here for discussion, but they are networked relationships, as Jones et al. (2014) refer to as 'assemblages', they work interrelatedly. Furthermore, Elliot and Davis (2018) suggest that individuals, though positioned in the centre of the framework, have a relational position within an ecosystem. Employing this gaze allows further flexibility and reflexivity with which to unpick the world of the EYT from multiple perspectives. Utilising the critical ecological framework allows analysis of quality as a multi-layered, politically situated, and dynamic construct and makes explicit Intersections of policy, practice, and discourse across levels. It also reveals the tension between top-down policy imperatives and local enactment and explains the non-linear, contested nature of quality.

The following literature review chapter will be structured using the conceptual anchor of quality, exploring political change and policy initiatives which have affected the ECEC workforce in England, taking account of how wider discourses affect the professional identity of the EYT.

Chapter 3 Literature Review: Discourses of Quality in ECEC

3.1. Introduction

The literature review was conducted using a systematic and iterative search strategy to ensure comprehensive coverage of sources relating to ECEC policy and practice in England. Initial searches were undertaken through the University of Staffordshire Library's online catalogue and electronic databases, including education and social policy-focused collections, to identify peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, government publications, and policy reports. Search terms were developed from key themes within the study, such as early childhood policy, quality in ECEC, school readiness, child development, workforce, and ecological perspectives. Boolean operators and filters (e.g., date range, peer-reviewed status, geographical focus) were applied to refine results and ensure relevance.

Google Scholar was used as a supplementary search tool to broaden the scope of the review, identify highly cited works, and capture recently published material not yet indexed in some databases. ResearchGate was consulted to access full-text articles and to trace ongoing research activity by leading researchers in the field. Additionally, LinkedIn was used to identify academics, sector leaders, and policy specialists sharing current research outputs and professional commentary relevant to contemporary developments in ECEC in England.

Sources were evaluated according to relevance, methodological rigour, publication credibility, and their contribution to debates surrounding quality, workforce professionalisation, and school readiness within the English policy context. Priority was given to peer-reviewed literature, seminal theoretical works, and key policy documents from organisations such as the Department for Education and Ofsted, given their central role in shaping ECEC policy and regulatory frameworks in England.

This structured approach ensured that the review was both comprehensive and critically informed, capturing historical developments as well as contemporary policy discourse within the ECEC sector. This literature review takes discourses of quality as its conceptual anchor, examining how different constructions of quality have shaped ECEC policy, workforce reforms, and professional practice in England. In

relation to EYTS, those holding the qualification are the human manifestation of the quality agenda. Furthermore, existing literature also highlights the persistent undervaluation of the ECEC workforce in England. Historically labelled a “Cinderella profession” (Cameron et al., 2010), early years work has been feminised, low paid, and treated as semi-professional. Policy attempts to redress this through graduate-led roles such as EYPS, introduced in 2007 and its successor EYTS in 2013, sought to raise quality by increasing workforce qualifications. However, the lack of parity with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) has generated ongoing tensions and a sense of partial recognition within the profession (Osgood, 2012). These reforms exemplify the paradoxes of quality discourse. Furthermore, Georgeson et al., (2022) suggests that whilst professionalisation is promised, it is delivered through managerial acts such as targets, inspections, and cost-effectiveness.

Another dimension of the review is the role of the private, voluntary, and independent (PVI) sector. In England, the majority of ECEC provision is delivered through the PVI sector (Moss, 2020), which is shaped by market pressures, parental demand, and public funding constraints. Quality, in this context, is often negotiated against competing imperatives, as Archer and Merrick (2020) suggest, keeping provision affordable for parents, meeting Ofsted inspection standards, and maintaining financial sustainability despite chronic underfunding. Empirical studies show that PVI staff experience low pay, high turnover, and limited career progression (Bonetti, 2019), yet are simultaneously expected to deliver “high-quality” pedagogy and leadership. Here, discourses of quality intersect with broader structural inequalities of gender and class, (Colley, 2006; Fairchild and Mikuska, 2021) reinforcing the marginalised status of the workforce.

Essentially, the review will contrast dominant managerialist constructions of quality with alternative visions of practice. Moss (2007; 2014; 2025) has long argued for reconceptualising ECEC as a democratic space, where quality is understood not as compliance with external standards but as co-constructed through dialogue, participation, and ethical relationships. This democratic perspective challenges the narrow focus on school readiness and measurable outcomes, instead foregrounding the relational, cultural, and political dimensions of early years pedagogy (Whittington et al., 2024). For EYTs, this presents both tension and possibility: while they are

positioned within systems that demand accountability and measurable impact, they may also draw on relational pedagogies and democratic values to resist or reframe dominant discourses of quality. The following conceptual map (Figure 3.1) illustrates how discourses of quality are situated within the English ECEC system. Policy reforms, the PVI sector, and accountability mechanisms such as Ofsted and the EYFS contribute to shaping the status and practices of EYT. Moss's notion of democratic practice is shown as an alternative discourse, highlighting the potential for participatory and relational approaches. These systemic influences intersect pedagogy, relationships, and professional identity, the three focal points of this research.



Figure 3.1 Conceptual Map: Discourses of Quality in ECEC

By examining these intersecting themes, discourses of quality, workforce professionalisation, the PVI sector, and democratic alternatives, this review aims to provide a critical, ecological account of the ECEC policy and practice landscape in England. It will demonstrate how “quality” functions as both a powerful organising principle and a site of contestation, shaping not only institutional frameworks but also the workplace realities of EYTs.’ Therefore, this review positions the research study within a broader debate: how do EYTs make sense of, negotiate, and comply or resist dominant discourses of quality in their professional lives?

3.2. The Discourse of Quality in ECEC

3.2.1 The origins of quality

The discourse of quality in ECEC in the UK has not emerged organically from practice within microsystems, rather it has been constructed in the chronosystem through a particular set of policy, research, and international influences from last century. Hunkin (2019) considers that whilst notions of what constitutes ‘good’ practice and pedagogy have long existed, the 1990s and early 2000s policy preoccupation with ECEC is when “quality” became institutionalised as the central policy driver for both national and international reform agendas.

3.2.2 The Internationalisation of Quality

A significant influence on the international quality agenda has been the OECD’s Starting Strong series, which provides comparative information intended to support countries in reviewing and developing their ECEC policies and systems (OECD, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2015, 2017, 2021). Across successive reports, the focus has shifted from broad examinations of the social, cultural and policy contexts of ECEC towards more specific consideration of quality-related policy levers, monitoring arrangements, transitions and process quality. The reports frequently associate high-quality ECEC with longer-term benefits for children, families and society, including educational, social and economic outcomes. However, it would be reductive to present their purpose solely as the promotion of human-capital investment or standardisation.

Nevertheless, the comparative and policy-oriented nature of the series means that quality is often translated into categories that can be identified, compared and influenced through policy, including staff qualifications, adult–child ratios, curriculum frameworks, governance and monitoring systems. Urban (2015) critiques the future-oriented assumptions underpinning such policy approaches, arguing that children risk being understood primarily in relation to their future educational and economic contribution, rather than as citizens whose present experiences possess value. A tension therefore emerges within the series: although later reports, particularly Starting Strong VI, explicitly recognise meaningful interactions and the multidimensional nature of process quality, these relational dimensions continue to be framed through policy levers and indicators intended to support system improvement. From a critical perspective, the concern is therefore not that the Starting Strong series offers an exclusively technicist definition of

quality, but that complex, relational and contextually situated practices risk being translated into predetermined and governable policy categories.

This attempt to organise 'universal' standards of quality and understand the meaning (s) of quality in ECEC via classifying is evident in studies by Sylva et al. (1999a: 1999b); Early et al. (2007); Slot et al. (2015); Bonetti and Brown (2018); Melhuish and Gardiner (2019). Collectively, they suggest two broad inter-related dimensions, *Structural quality* (features of the learning environment, qualifications and professional learning leadership and management elements of the setting) and *Process quality* (pedagogy, curriculum, practice, experiences of the child and child-adult interactions). Tori et al. (2017) have introduced a third domain, '*system quality*' to denote the role of regulatory standards and funding in determining quality in ELC. Bonetti and Brown (2018) argue that within the dimension of structural quality, it is often difficult to ascertain the impact of individual elements, for example, the 'iron triangle' of quality, (ratios, group size and training), are intertwined in both government regulations as well as in their impact and relationship to each other (Slot et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2000). Each element may be essential, but often not enough alone, to improve the quality of provision and relaxing regulations on any one of the three could negatively impact outcomes (Bonetti and Brown 2018)

3.2.3 The Iron Triangle

From a UK perspective, this 'iron triangle' has a direct effect on teacher ability to provide sensitive, responsive care for children (Bonetti and Brown 2018) and are the elements that are most easily regulated through government legislation in the macrosystem. Improvements in ECEC quality are further influenced by a combination of macro-structural features, such as the local authority, community Socio-Economic Status (SES), type and size of approved provider organisations, and the size and stability of individual settings (Harrison et al., 2023). However, what happens in the microsystem in relation to process quality where EYTs have direct influence and impact is also significant, as findings from Phillips and Boyd (2023) indicate. Educator characteristics, leadership qualities and teamwork were important in determining high-quality ECEC, yet the study found that while these are important, there was a positive connection between wider factors such relationships between educators and children and their families, financial capacity and structure of the setting which can also contribute to high-quality provision which has been widely

acknowledged internationally and nationally at policy level.

Phillips and Boyd (2023) argue that the personal qualities teachers bring to their ECEC roles play a significant part in shaping process quality. However, many of these individual attributes or strengths remain poorly understood and are often “hidden” features of high-quality ECEC. Research has identified several attributes considered essential for teachers: Cleveland and Krashinsky (2009) highlight motivation, enthusiasm, professional values, and the ability to make complex decisions, while Goodfellow (2003) emphasises forms of practical wisdom, including expert knowledge, sound judgement, thoughtful action, autonomy, and effective communication. McMahon (2017) further adds the importance of listening skills, strong communication, reflective practice, passion, and emotional intelligence. According to Haslip and Donaldson (2021), such attributes can have a positive influence on team functioning, which has been linked to reduced absenteeism and, in turn, increased productivity.

The division between process and structural elements evident in literature does not imply that they are distinct and act in isolation. Bonetti and Brown (2018) suggest the opposite is the case, as structural elements provide the framework for the elements of process quality to operate and to have the fullest impact on children’s outcomes. Within the standards for Early Years Initial Teaching Training (EYITT) (NCTL, 2013) both process and structural quality is evident as criteria that must be met and be observed in practice. For example, Criteria 3 explicitly addresses these structural conditions by outlining how EYITT partnerships must be organised, the requirements for internal and external moderation and expectations for evaluation and quality assurance. The case for the highly qualified graduate leading practice is acknowledged, yet the barriers to achieving this remain. Issues with recruiting and retaining high-quality staff in the PVI sector are due to graduates not being paid graduate rates (Education Committee, 2016). Baryam (2016) elaborates there are difficulties in attracting staff; too few graduate roles and low wages, with many leaving the profession or choosing work in schools due to increased salary and better working conditions.

The policy emphasis on graduate leadership also raises questions concerning the meaning of gradueness. Gradueness can be understood as more than the possession of a degree or professional status; it encompasses developing ways of

thinking, understanding and acting that include critical reflection, ethical judgement and the capacity to apply knowledge within complex situations (Barrie, 2006; Hager and Holland, 2006). Within Early Childhood Studies, these attributes include reflexivity, interdisciplinary understanding, critical engagement with theory and the ability to connect theoretical knowledge with practice (Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), 2022). However, gradueness should not be treated as an automatic consequence of completing a qualification, neither should quality be reduced to qualification level alone, since professional practice is shaped by experience, attitudes, dispositions, values and contextual knowledge (Campbell-Barr, 2017; Nutbrown, 2021)

3.2.4 The EPPE Project

Within the English ECEC context, the publication of the EPPE findings can be understood as a significant turning point in the development of evidence-based approaches to quality (Sylva et al., 2004). Conducted during a period of rapid expansion and reform in early years provision, EPPE, (Sylva et al., 2004; Melhuish, 2016), was the first major European longitudinal study to investigate the effects of different forms of pre-school provision on a national sample of children. Its scale and longitudinal design enabled the researchers to examine associations between children's pre-school experiences and their subsequent cognitive and social-behavioural outcomes, while taking account of a range of child, family and home-background characteristics (Sammons et al., 2004). The study consequently provided policymakers with an influential evidence base that was subsequently drawn upon to support investment in early education and the development of interventions intended to improve the quality of provision (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2006; Melhuish, 2016).

EPPE reported that attending pre-school, compared with having little or no pre-school experience, was associated with benefits for children's development, particularly where provision was assessed as high quality (Sylva et al., 2004). Higher levels of quality were found overall in nursery schools and settings integrating education and care. Quality was also associated with practitioner qualifications, the presence of highly qualified managers and curriculum leaders, and pedagogical interactions sometimes associated with teaching. Importantly, however, EPPE did not define effective provision solely through structural characteristics or measurable

outcomes. According to Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002 and Sylva et al., 2004), its findings also emphasised warm and responsive adult–child relationships, sensitivity to children’s individual needs, a balance between educational and social development and sustained shared thinking.

The significance of EPPE for the subsequent quality agenda therefore lies partly in how its findings were translated into policy. Features associated with effective provision, including graduate leadership, qualifications, curriculum organisation and observable interactions, offered policymakers apparently identifiable levers through which quality might be improved and monitored (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Sylva et al., 2004). For example, Mathers et al (2011) suggest that later graduate-workforce initiatives explicitly drew upon EPPE’s reported relationship between higher practitioner qualifications and higher assessed quality. This translation did not necessarily reproduce the full complexity of EPPE’s findings: relational and context-dependent processes risked becoming separated into indicators, standards and replicable models of effective practice. As Siraj-Blatchford and Wong (1999) argue, how quality is defined has important consequences for how it is subsequently evaluated, regulated and used to shape policy.

It is this movement from situated research findings towards apparently universal definitions of quality that can be questioned through Dahlberg and Moss’s (2005) critique of positivist approaches. Their concern is not that outcomes, qualifications or observational evidence are without value, but that quality may be presented as an objective truth waiting to be discovered, rather than as a value-laden and provisional construction. From this perspective, Dahlberg and Moss, (2005) and Moss, (2014) suggest that ECEC settings risk being positioned primarily as sites of technical practice in which predetermined methods are implemented to secure predetermined outcomes. This contrasts with understandings of quality and professional competence as relational and systemic, produced through interactions between practitioners, institutions, communities and wider political and social conditions (Urban et al., 2012). The critical issue is therefore not simply whether EPPE measured quality, but how particular aspects of its evidence were privileged within policy, which understandings of quality became governable, and which relational, ethical and contextual dimensions became less visible.

3.2.5. Early Critiques of the Quality Agenda

From the outset, the quality agenda attracted critical voices. Penn (2011) argued that the apparent universality of quality was misleading, since definitions were deeply rooted in Western, middle-class assumptions about child development and pedagogy. Similarly, Dahlberg et al. (2013) contended that “quality” had become a *regulatory discourse*, producing a singular vision of what counted as good practice while silencing alternative values and perspectives.

These critiques highlighted that quality was not an objective descriptor but a socially constructed and contested concept and according to Dahlberg et al. (2013) as what counts as “quality” depends on who is defining it, for what purposes, and in what cultural or political context. Nevertheless, the policy uptake of international benchmarks and national studies means that critiques are often marginalised, (Raikes et al., 2023), as governments prioritise measurable outcomes and international competitiveness. Defining or understanding the notion of quality, is far from straightforward, rather as Dahlberg, et al. (2013) suggest, discussion might be framed around the ‘problem with quality’ (p.3). In correlation with this, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) problematise that quality has become a cliché and is devoid of substantive meaning; a scratch at the surface of the concept will reveal an underlying perspective, that quality is something that through various actions can be assured and measured, a search for generalisable codes to enable to us to know what is ‘good’ (p.12).

Moss (2025) proposes that this obsession with ‘quality’ has been evident for decades whereby the mechanisms in place for assuring quality mean there is no choice for alternative constructs. Furthermore, Dahlberg et al. (2013) argue that ‘quality’ is a value-based notion, assumptive in the existence of expert-derived, objective and universally agreed value and context-free standards that can be employed to assess ECEC, meaning ‘quality’ from Moss’s (2025) perspective is “inscribed with a very particular, but unacknowledged, set of beliefs, values, contexts and understandings” (p.2). However, Bonetti and Brown (2018) suggest that the existing evidence concerning what constitutes high-quality ECEC is dense, poorly understood and often inaccessible to practitioners, commissioners and policymakers. This does not indicate an absence of evidence. Research by Siraj-Blatchford et al., (2002); Sylva et

al., (2004); Bonetti and Brown, (2018); and Slot, (2018), has identified recurring features associated with quality, including favourable adult–child ratios, smaller group sizes, specialist practitioner qualifications and continuing professional development, alongside responsive adult–child interactions and pedagogical practices such as sustained shared thinking. Yet evidence varies in strength and is complicated by the interaction between structural conditions, pedagogical processes and the social and organisational contexts in which provision takes place. I argue that the difficulty therefore lies in determining which combinations of conditions work best, for whom and in which contexts, and in translating this complex evidence into accessible guidance without reducing quality to a universal set of measurable indicators.

By the mid-2000s, “quality” had become embedded as a policy technology, a tool for governing provision, legitimising reforms, and holding providers accountable (Moss, 2020). In England, this was evident in the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in 2008, which translated abstract notions of quality into statutory standards and inspection criteria (Wood, 2020) with Ofsted becoming the arbiter of quality, where inspection grades shaped both funding and parental choice (Bokhove et al., 2023). This process also aligned with the broader neoliberal turn in education policy (discussed in more detail in 3.5.11). Quality became tied to efficiency, accountability, and return on investment (Sims, 2017), particularly in discourses of *school readiness* and long-term economic outcomes. As Moss (2007) argued, quality shifted from being a descriptive term to a normative and political one, mobilised to promote particular visions of the child, the teacher, and the purpose of early education.

The quality agenda provides an important mechanism through which this rationality enters ECEC practice. Complex and contextually situated ideas about quality are translated into standards, qualifications, assessment requirements, inspection judgements and indicators of children’s progress. Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, (2016) maintain that such mechanisms can provide public accountability and may contribute to improved provision; they should not therefore be dismissed as intrinsically harmful. However, they also determine which aspects of practice become visible and valuable. Structural characteristics and measurable outcomes can be more readily recorded and compared than care, emotional labour, play,

ethical judgement and sustained relationships. Consequently, Dahlberg and Moss, (2005); Osgood, (2010); and Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, (2018) argue that relational and pedagogical work may be acknowledged rhetorically while remaining less influential within systems of evaluation and professional recognition.

3.2.6 Setting the Scene for Contemporary Tensions

The origins of quality discourse thus established both the dominance of measurable, outcomes-driven definitions and the space for critical alternatives. Firstly, research and international policy gave governments the language and evidence to frame quality as a technical, governable construct. Secondly, critical scholars exposed the limitations and exclusions inherent in such definitions, pointing towards democratic, relational, and pluralistic alternatives. Understanding these origins is crucial because they underpin many of the tensions traced throughout this review. Workforce reforms (Section 3), the dominance of the PVI sector (Section 4), and the clash between managerial accountability and democratic practice (Section 5) can all be read as consequences of how quality was initially constructed: at once powerful, universalising, and contested.

3.3 Competing Definitions of Quality

The question of what constitutes “quality” in ECEC has been the subject of extensive debate in both academic and policy circles (Edwards, 2021). Firstly, developmental and relational perspectives emphasise the centrality of children’s experiences, relationships, and holistic well-being (Herczog, 2012). Secondly, however instrumental definitions frame quality in terms of measurable outcomes, often linked to school readiness and future economic productivity (Heckman et al., 2013). These competing conceptions are not merely academic distinctions, they carry significant implications for policy design, workforce expectations, and the experiences of teachers in ECEC settings.

3.3.1 Developmental and Relational Quality

Relational definitions of quality are rooted in traditions of child-centred pedagogy and care, (Cliffe and Solvason, 2022) so from this perspective, quality is associated with secure attachments, sensitive caregiving, and pedagogical practices that are responsive to children’s interests and cultural contexts. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979) has been influential in articulating how children’s development

is shaped by multiple layers of relationships and environments, suggesting that quality cannot be divorced from the wider social and cultural context in which care takes place. Similarly, Moss and Petrie (2002) propose the notion of ECEC as a public good grounded in the *ethics of care*, highlighting that quality is enacted through trust, dialogue, and relationality rather than compliance with external standards.

The EPPE project (Sylva et al., 2004) also underlined the importance of relational quality, demonstrating that warm, sustained adult–child interactions and opportunities for shared thinking were strongly associated with positive child outcomes and are complex concepts that are far from innate. Such findings reinforce arguments that quality should not be reduced to structural indicators (such as staff qualifications or ratios) but must also include process dimensions, including pedagogy, relationships, and children’s experiences in settings. Zeedyk (2017) asked the question ‘What is it that we still don’t get?’ when referring to the Scottish curriculum approach for ECEC at the time, but Cliffe and Solvason (2022) state this could be asked of any western-based approach to ECEC policy. Zeedyk’s point was that we are often still not ‘getting’ the importance and power of relationships, neither at policy nor practice level.

3.3.2 Theoretical and Critical Debates

Osgood’s (2012) feminist critique further highlights how quality discourses can discipline practitioners’ identities, particularly in a workforce dominated by women. By situating quality within neoliberal and gendered policy frameworks, Osgood demonstrates how practitioners are required to embody particular subject positions, efficient, compliant, professional, often in tension with their own pedagogical values.

These debates emphasise the importance of asking not only *what* quality means but also *who defines it* and *to what end?* If quality is defined by policymakers and international organisations, it is equated with measurable outcomes and economic justifications. By contrast, instrumental definitions of quality are strongly associated with policy agendas that link ECEC to national economic competitiveness and school readiness, (Layzer and Goodson, 2006). Within this discourse, quality is primarily measured through children’s attainment of early learning goals, staff qualifications, and compliance with inspection frameworks. The EYFS (DfE, 2024) in England exemplifies this outcome-driven model, it sets statutory learning and

development goals against which children's progress is assessed, and these outcomes form the basis of Ofsted inspections.

This approach reflects a wider shift towards what Ball (2003) describes as *performativity*, a culture in which teachers' work is continually evaluated against external targets, benchmarks, and audits. Osgood (2006b) argues that this performative culture has reshaped the early years workforce, requiring teachers to prioritise paperwork, assessments, and evidencing outcomes, often at the expense of relational and play-based pedagogy. In this sense, according to Moss (2020) instrumental definitions of quality are tightly bound to managerial accountability regimes, positioning teachers as deliverers of measurable results rather than as reflective professionals engaged in pedagogical dialogue.

3.4 The Contemporary English Context: Quality Bound to Measurement and Accountability

In England, discourses of quality have become firmly embedded in statutory frameworks, inspection regimes, and government narratives around school readiness. Since the late 1990s, successive governments have positioned ECEC as both a vehicle for social mobility and a means of securing long-term economic competitiveness (Department for Education and Employment, (DfEE), 1998; Department for Education and Skills, (DfES), 2006). Within this policy environment, quality is framed less as a relational or democratic construct and more as a measurable outcome to be assured through regulation and accountability.

3.4.1 Policy Developments

The EYFS did not emerge as an entirely new statutory framework in 2008. Its immediate antecedent was the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) DfEE, 2000), which established the Foundation Stage for children from the age of three to the end of the Reception year and organised provision around six areas of learning. Although the guidance introduced early learning goals and stepping stones towards them, it also foregrounded play, observation, responsive adult involvement and children's physical, intellectual, emotional and social development. The 2008 EYFS subsequently brought this guidance together with Birth to Three Matters and the National Standards for Under 8s Daycare and Childminding within a single statutory framework (DCSF, 2008). This history is significant because it reveals a gradual movement from non-statutory curriculum guidance towards an integrated and legally

enforceable framework, (DfES 2005) rather than a wholly new turn to measurement beginning in 2008.

The development of the Foundation Stage and the EYFS was also connected to the EPPE (Sylva et al., 2004) and Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) (Siraj-Blatchford et al 2002) studies, which formed part of the stated evidence base for early years policy. EPPE associated high-quality provision not only with qualifications and curriculum content, but with warm and responsive adult-child interactions, (Sylva et al., 2004), the integration of care and education and sensitivity to children's individual needs. REPEY developed this process-oriented account through the concept of sustained shared thinking, demonstrating that effective pedagogy involved adults extending child-initiated activity, balancing child- and adult-initiated experiences, using open-ended dialogue and developing shared educational aims with parents (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). These studies therefore complicate a purely outcomes-based reading of the policy trajectory: although their findings were used to support claims about later attainment, their account of how quality was produced was strongly relational, interactive and context dependent.

The conception of the EYFS further back in 2001 was a pivotal moment in defining quality in measurable terms. As a statutory framework, the EYFS specifies learning and development goals that children are expected to achieve by the age of five, covering areas such as literacy, numeracy, and personal, social, and emotional development. Quality is therefore tied to the extent to which teachers can evidence children's progress towards these benchmarks (Hester et al., 2021). This construction aligns with international policy discourses that link early childhood provision to readiness for school and, ultimately, readiness for the labour market. Therefore, quality according to Hester et al., (2021), is increasingly associated with teachers' capacity to demonstrate children's progress towards predetermined benchmarks. This construction resonates with national and international policy frameworks that position ECEC as preparation for successful transition into school and as the foundation for lifelong learning (Department for Education, 2024; OECD, 2017; Council of the European Union, 2019). Within human-capital discourse, these anticipated benefits are projected still further into adulthood, and as the World Bank, (2021) and Urban, (2015) suggest, early childhood investment is linked to later educational attainment, employability and economic productivity.

Most recently, early intervention and lifting children out of poverty with targeted intervention is reinforced in policy texts, mostly recently with Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life (His Majesty's Government, 2025). As a component of their Plan for Change, 'Best Start' sets out the Starmer administrations ambitious targets for ECEC across England including the expansion of provision. These aims can be condensed into the following broad statements; building better family support services, making ECEC more affordable and inclusive; raising the quality and status of the ECEC workforce; supporting long term reform. This strategy arrives at a time that Pite (2025) suggests, the ECEC workforce is experiencing a significant recruitment and retention crisis, creating substantial challenges for the delivery of the expanded childcare entitlements. One government response has been the development of school-based nursery provision, initially presented as a commitment to create more than 3,300 nurseries by repurposing empty or underused classrooms in English primary schools (Crerar, 2024). The proposal has potential benefits as the DfE (2026) propose, it may increase provision in areas where places are insufficient, make productive use of surplus public buildings, strengthen relationships between families and schools and support continuity as children move into statutory education.

However, locating nursery provision within schools is not inherently synonymous with either increased access or improved quality. An available classroom is not necessarily an appropriate environment for babies and young children, whose care and education require suitable spaces for movement, rest, intimate care, exploration and indoor–outdoor play (Bilton, 2010; Department for Education, 2026). Substantial adaptation, sustainable funding and specialist early years knowledge are therefore necessary if the physical and pedagogical environment is to respond to children's developmental needs rather than merely accommodate additional places. However, Flemons and Worth, (2025) and Kay et al., (2021) warn without these conditions, the initiative risks treating childcare capacity principally as a problem of vacant buildings, while leaving the more fundamental issues of workforce pay, qualifications, status, working conditions and retention unresolved. There is also a risk that locating provision within primary schools may intensify the schoolification of ECEC. The institutional culture, leadership structures and accountability priorities of schools may privilege preparation for Reception, measurable outcomes and more formal constructions of teaching over care, play, relational pedagogy and children's experiences in the present (Moss, 2014; Bradbury, 2019; Roberts-Holmes and Moss,

2021). This outcome is not inevitable, particularly where provision is led by specialist early years professionals and retains a distinctive pedagogical identity.

Nevertheless, the policy raises questions about which professional knowledge will shape the provision, whether early years expertise will carry equal authority within school structures, and as Kay et al (2021) suggest, whether EYTs will be recognised as pedagogical leaders or positioned beneath colleagues holding QTS.

The expansion may also have wider ecological consequences. New school-based places could strengthen local provision where they respond to evidenced community need and operate collaboratively with existing providers (Department for Education, 2026; Farquharson, 2024) yet conversely, they may displace PVI, voluntary or maintained provision that already holds established relationships and specialist expertise, particularly if schools are institutionally or financially advantaged within the mixed market.

The benefit of the strategy therefore depends not simply on the number of places created, but on where they are located, (Farquharson, 2024; Drayton et al., 2025).

how they are funded, who leads them and whether they add to rather than destabilise existing local capacity.

The Government's recognition that a well-qualified and professional workforce has the potential to transform children's lives, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, is therefore important (His Majesty's Government, 2025). Yet this ambition contains a contradiction as according to Flemons and Worth, (2025), if the workforce is expected to deliver expanded provision, inclusion and improved outcomes without equivalent action to address its material and professional conditions school-based nurseries may form one element of a more coherent early childhood system, but they cannot substitute for sustained investment in specialist expertise, equitable status, appropriate environments and the retention of experienced practitioners.

A related movement can be traced across the OECD Starting Strong series. Starting Strong I and II offered a broad, holistic and context-sensitive account of ECEC, locating children's learning within family life, communities, cultural values, democratic participation and well-being (OECD, 2001, 2006; Moss, 2007). In subsequent volumes, however, quality became increasingly organised through the language of policy levers, toolboxes, standards, monitoring, indicators and transitions: Starting Strong III presented a quality toolbox, Starting Strong IV focused on monitoring quality, and Starting Strong V centred continuity and transition into primary education (OECD, 2011, 2015, 2017). Urban (2015) argues that, between Starting Strong II and III, references to children's rights, democracy,

dialogue, participation and social justice diminished, while the language of compliance became more prominent. This suggests that the relational and democratic purposes of ECEC became less visible as quality was translated into more governable and comparable policy categories.

The later series does not abandon relationships altogether. Starting Strong VI explicitly re-centres process quality and meaningful interactions between children, teachers, peers, families, spaces and communities (OECD, 2021). Nevertheless, these relational processes are still framed through policy levers, indicators, monitoring systems and their contribution to learning, development and well-being. Relational pedagogy may therefore be acknowledged in policy while simultaneously being narrowed: rather than being valued as an ethical, reciprocal and contextually situated way of being with children, relationships risk becoming instrumentalised as mechanisms for securing predefined developmental and educational outcomes (Cliffe and Solvason, 2023). This tension is important to the present study because it helps explain why participants prioritised relational and process quality while experiencing policy as increasingly structural, measurable and future oriented.

3.4.2 Inspection and Accountability

Alongside the EYFS, Ofsted inspections introduced in the Children Act 1989, have become a central mechanism for assessing and assuring quality. Settings are graded on a five-point scale based on their compliance with EYFS requirements and their effectiveness in promoting children's outcomes. Providers and teachers are subject to a 'disempowering, regulatory gaze' in the name of raising standards (Osgood, 2006). Teachers are regulated and controlled in their attempts to satisfy the demands for accountability and technicist practice. Requirements such as the completion of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) influence how EYTs endeavour to fulfil performance criteria which serve to assess outcomes, evaluate standards and define 'quality' (Wood, 2020). Osgood (2006b) suggests that teachers are not merely shaped by external discourses; rather, they actively challenge, negotiate, and reshape the very discourses that position and define them. In doing so, they create opportunities to resist the regulatory gaze. Ofsted judgements carry high stakes for providers, affecting reputation, parental

choice, and even financial viability. In this sense, quality is not only defined by the state but also operationalised through a system of surveillance and external judgment (Ball, 2003).

Critics argue that this accountability-driven approach narrows the meaning of quality. Roberts-Holmes (2015) highlights the “datafication” of early years practice, in which teachers spend increasing amounts of time recording, evidencing, and reporting children’s progress to satisfy inspection demands. Moss (2016) similarly contends that the dominance of measurement undermines pedagogical creativity, reducing quality to a checklist of outcomes rather than a lived, relational process. The discourse of school readiness further illustrates how quality in England has been aligned with policy priorities. Government rhetoric frequently frames ECEC as a means of ensuring that children arrive at school “ready to learn,” often measured through literacy and numeracy indicators (DfE, 2011). This outcome-oriented framing risks overlooking broader dimensions of child development, such as play, creativity, and emotional well-being, which are harder to measure but no less central to children’s lives, see further discussion in section 5

3.5 Policy Reforms and Workforce Professionalisation

3.5.1 Historical Context: The “Cinderella Profession”

The ECEC profession in England has long been characterised as a “Cinderella profession” (Cameron et al., 2010), a phrase that captures its historic marginalisation, invisibility, and lack of recognition. Unlike teaching in primary or secondary schools, early years work has rarely been accorded the same professional or societal status, despite its central role in supporting children’s development and families’ well-being, (Miller et al., 2012), this disparity reflecting deeper gendered and classed inequalities that have shaped the sector since its inception.

ECEC in England developed through a patchwork of voluntary, charitable, and private provision, often rooted in traditions of care rather than formal education (Moss, 2020). As a result, the workforce has been feminised and associated with “natural” maternal skills rather than with professional expertise (Osgood, 2012). According to Otten et al. (2019) the low pay, insecure conditions, and lack of structured career pathways reinforced the perception that early years work was less

skilled than school teaching, even though teachers were responsible for complex pedagogical and relational work. Cameron et al. (2010) highlight how this “Cinderella” status positions the workforce as perpetually undervalued and underfunded, operating in the shadows of mainstream education.

The implications of this historical undervaluation for discourses of quality are significant. In one respect, the persistence of low wages and limited progression undermines recruitment and retention, creating instability in the workforce that can directly affect children’s experiences. Empirical studies consistently show high turnover and low morale in early years settings, particularly in the PVI sector (Bonetti, 2019). The persistent undervaluation of the ECEC workforce has been accompanied by a policy narrative in which according to McMahon, (2016), improving quality is frequently associated with raising qualification levels and professionalising practitioners. Investment in qualifications may enhance specialist knowledge, confidence and pedagogical leadership (Mathers et al., 2011); however, the construction of professionalisation as a remedy for poor quality also warrants critical examination. Osgood (2006a, 2010) states, it can position the existing workforce as insufficiently skilled or professional, rather than recognising the expertise already embedded within practitioners’ relational, experiential and contextually situated knowledge. In this way, responsibility for quality may be individualised, with practitioners expected to improve their qualifications and performance while structural constraints such as low pay, insecure employment, limited career progression, insufficient staffing and unequal professional status remain less directly addressed (Urban et al., 2012; Flemons and Worth, 2025).

This creates a contradiction within the professionalisation agenda. Practitioners are afforded greater responsibility for securing children’s outcomes and demonstrating quality, yet as Kay et al (2021) suggest, the material recognition normally associated with professional status is not necessarily extended to them. Viewed through Fraser’s (1995) distinction between recognition and redistribution, professional responsibilities and symbolic status may be extended without an equivalent redistribution of pay, authority and occupational opportunity. Moreover, when professionalism is defined primarily through prescribed qualifications, competencies and measurable standards, particular forms of knowledge become privileged. Technical and externally validated expertise may acquire greater legitimacy than care, emotional labour, practical wisdom and knowledge developed through sustained relationships with children and families (Osgood, 2006a). Osgood continues, professionalisation may therefore operate simultaneously as a source of knowledge and agency and as a means of governing the workforce by defining what a competent professional should know, do and

demonstrate.

From a critical ecological perspective, Urban (2012) proposes this deficit construction also obscures the distribution of responsibility across the wider ECEC system, quality is produced through the interaction of practitioner knowledge with leadership, staffing, funding, organisational cultures, policy expectations and wider social inequalities. Locating the problem predominantly within practitioners' qualifications risks overlooking these interconnected conditions and requiring individuals to compensate for structural weaknesses beyond their control. An ecological understanding of agency further indicates that practitioners' capacity to enact their professional knowledge depends upon the cultural, structural and relational conditions available to them (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2015). As Kay et al., (2021 and Flemons and Worth, (2025) offer, the critical issue is therefore not whether qualifications matter, but whether qualification reform is accompanied by the pay, authority, resources and working conditions required for professional knowledge to be meaningfully enacted.

The Cinderella metaphor also highlights the workforce's ambiguous professional identity. While policy discourse increasingly demands that practitioners embody graduate-level expertise and leadership, their conditions of work remain closer to those of low-paid care labour (Moloney, 2015). This tension sets the stage for the reforms introduced in the 2000's, most notably the creation of EYPS and later EYTS, which sought to elevate the workforce by embedding graduate leaders in every setting with two in areas of social deprivation (Moss, 2020). However, as the following subsection will show, these reforms often reinforced rather than resolved the contradictions inherent in the Cinderella profession.

3.5.2 Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) and the Shift to Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS)

One of the most significant policy interventions aimed at addressing the historic undervaluation of the early years workforce was the introduction of EYPS in 2007. This reform reflected policy makers recognition of longitudinal and international research, particularly the EPPE project (Sylva et al., 2004) and OECD *Starting Strong* reports (2001, 2006) which appeared to demonstrate that graduate-led provision was strongly associated with higher quality outcomes for children. The policy ambition was explicit: to ensure that every early years setting in England had a graduate leader responsible for driving quality improvement and pedagogy.

3.5.3 The Rationale for EYPS

The creation of EYPS was underpinned by the argument that workforce reform was essential to “raising quality” in ECEC (Pascal et al., 2020). Policymakers linked qualifications and leadership with improved practice, positioning EYPS as a lever for change in a fragmented and underqualified sector (Roberts-Holmes, 2012). Unlike Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), however, EYPS was designed specifically for the early years, acknowledging the distinctive pedagogical approaches associated with birth-to-five education (Hadfield et al., 2010). Holders of EYPS were expected to lead practice, mentor colleagues, and act as champions for quality and change within their settings.

The status was promoted as the early years equivalent of QTS, but without the legal rights or pay parity associated with schoolteachers (Lumsden, 2010) which immediately created an ambiguity. EYPS carried symbolic recognition but lacked the structural authority to command equal status, Cameron et al. (2010) note that this duality reinforced the marginalisation of Early Years Professionals, elevating expectations without delivering corresponding rewards.

3.5.4 From EYPS to EYTS

In 2013, the government replaced EYPS with EYTS, partly in response to criticisms that EYPS was not widely understood by parents, employers, or even within the profession itself and in response to recommendations from a review of the workforce and qualifications, (Nutbrown, 2012). The rebranding aimed to align early years professionals more closely with the status of “teacher,” reflecting policy ambitions to raise the visibility and credibility of the role.

Despite this change in title, a significant structural distinction remained between EYTS and QTS. EYTs are trained as specialists in the education and development of children from birth to five; however, EYTS does not confer QTS or provide access to qualified-teacher posts in maintained schools. As Bonetti and Brown, (2018) and Kay et al., (2019) indicate, teachers employed in such posts are located within statutory frameworks governing qualifications, pay and conditions, whereas no equivalent statutory instrument defines the employment status, remuneration or progression entitlements of EYTs working within the PVI sector. Consequently, EYTs may undertake graduate-level pedagogical leadership and carry substantial responsibility for improving quality, while their role and reward remain subject largely to the discretion and financial capacity of individual employers.

The resulting inequality is therefore not simply a difference between two qualifications. It reflects the absence of a statutory mechanism through which the Government's claim of equivalence could be translated into material professional parity. The introduction of the title 'teacher' provided symbolic recognition, but without corresponding rights, authority and employment conditions, EYTs remained positioned outside the established teaching profession. This connects to the earlier discussion of professionalisation as a contradictory process: EYTs were required to meet graduate standards and lead improvements in quality, but the responsibility attached to the role was not accompanied by an equivalent redistribution of status, power or reward.

In this case, the nomenclature used throughout this thesis requires careful distinction. Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) was replaced by Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS), with the holder of the latter referred to as an Early Years Teacher (EYT). Early Years Initial Teacher Training (EYITT) describes the route through which EYTS is attained, whereas Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) remains a separate status associated with teaching in maintained schools. EYTS should therefore be understood as a professional status rather than used interchangeably with the terms qualification, training programme or QTS. These distinctions are not merely technical: the adoption of the word *teacher* appeared to offer greater public intelligibility and recognition of the pedagogical expertise involved in work with babies and young children, while the continued separation of EYTS from QTS created ambiguity concerning professional authority, employment, pay and progression (Hadfield et al., 2012; Traunter, 2019; Hudson, Brammer and Witton, 2023). The nomenclature therefore embodies a policy contradiction: EYTs are named as teachers and expected to lead pedagogy, yet the status does not confer the structural recognition ordinarily associated with the teacher title.

3.5.5 Policy Paradoxes

The trajectory from EYPS to EYTS illustrates the paradoxes inherent in professionalisation reforms. Firstly, policymakers sought to raise the status of the workforce by creating a graduate-led pathway; conversely, they embedded this pathway within a system that continued to deny practitioners full recognition. The result has been what Osgood (2012) describes as a partial professionalisation, in which practitioners are expected to embody the responsibilities of professionals without

enjoying the corresponding status or material conditions.

This paradox is particularly evident in the expectations placed on EYTs to lead quality in their settings. Work from Urban (2008) cautions against simplistic policy assumptions that equate graduate qualifications with quality improvement. While qualifications can enhance professional knowledge and practice, quality is also relational, contextual, and shaped by systemic conditions such as funding, workforce stability, and pedagogical culture. Similarly, Osgood (2012) highlights the emotional and identity work required of practitioners navigating these contradictory expectations: they are encouraged to see themselves as leaders and professionals yet denied the recognition that would consolidate such identities.

3.5.6 Tensions in Professional Identity

The reforms that introduced EYPS and later EYTS were framed as mechanisms to professionalise the ECEC workforce and, thereby, to raise quality. Yet, these reforms also produced profound tensions in how practitioners understood and enacted their professional identities (Dickerson and Trodd, 2020). At the heart of these tensions lies a clash between different models of professionalism, competing discourses of quality, and the everyday realities of working in a sector that remains undervalued and underfunded. Pertinent for this study is Chalke's (2013) proposition that professional identities in a heavily gendered, low paid sector may be confined by the ways in which practitioners have grown to perceive themselves, through the more dominant discourses that have historically positioned them.

3.5.7 Occupational vs. Organisational Professionalism

Evetts (2009) distinguishes between *occupational professionalism*, which is grounded in professional ethics, autonomy, and trust, and *organisational professionalism*, which is shaped by managerialist notions of accountability, performance indicators, and external control. Early years practitioners often find themselves caught between these two models. Firstly, they aspire to exercise judgment, creativity, and relational pedagogy in line with occupational professionalism. Secondly, they must comply with inspection regimes, statutory frameworks, and managerial expectations that exemplify organisational professionalism. Havnes (2018) suggests that professionalisation should be understood as a process rooted in the development of individual practitioners and their local practice. In this view, professionalism emerges from within the profession

itself rather than being imposed externally, aligning more closely with the idea of *occupational* rather than *organisational* professionalism.

3.5.8 Emotional Labour and Identity.

The emotional dimension of professional identity of practitioners is highlighted by Osgood (2012) and Lloyd (2015) as they invest heavily in their work, often seeing it as a vocation grounded in care and commitment to children. Yet the lack of recognition and structural inequities can produce frustration, disillusionment, and burnout. EYTs, are expected to lead practice without corresponding rewards, Reissner and Armitage-Chan (2024) propose an identity dissonance, the gap between how they are positioned by policy and how they see themselves in practice. Emotional labour is a key feature of working with the youngest children and their families, conceptualised in the UK as an emotional entanglement where emotional labour (Taggart, 2011; Elfer, 2012), professional love (Page, 2018), and love labour (Lynch, 2007) are implicit expectations of the ECEC workers role (Fairchild and Mukiska, 2021). According to Dodds (2025), ECEC is fundamentally relational work in which practitioners' emotional attentiveness and responsiveness are central to meeting young children's needs. Such work involves emotional labour, as practitioners continually interpret, regulate and communicate emotion in ways intended to provide children and families with security, reassurance and continuity. Emotional engagement should not, however, be treated as synonymous with professional love. Emotional labour may include affection and close attachment, but it may also involve the professional management of anxiety, frustration, uncertainty or emotional distance. Professional love (Page 2018) represents a more specific conceptualisation of the reciprocal and ethically bounded relationships that may develop between practitioner, child and parent. The relationship between emotional labour and professional love is therefore overlapping rather than equivalent: professional love may involve emotional labour, but not all emotional labour is necessarily rooted in love.

3.5.9 Workforce Development as a Quality Intervention

As previously discussed, a central feature of early years policy in England has been the framing of workforce development as the key mechanism for improving quality.

Successive governments have drawn on research to argue that raising staff qualifications and embedding graduate leadership will deliver better outcomes for children. The EPPE project, (Sylva et al., 2004), for example, provided robust evidence that higher-qualified staff were associated with richer pedagogical environments and stronger child development outcomes. This research was frequently cited in policy documents to justify reforms such as EYPS and EYTS.

3.5.10 Workforce as a Policy Lever

Within this policy discourse, workforce development is constructed as an important lever through which quality might be improved. EPPE (Sylva et al., 2004) identified a positive relationship between higher staff qualifications, assessed setting quality and children's progress, particularly where trained teachers occupied curriculum-leadership roles and worked directly with children. However, it would be reductive to interpret EPPE as demonstrating that qualifications alone guarantee quality. Its findings also emphasised warm and responsive adult-child relationships, sustained shared thinking, curriculum balance and sensitivity to children's individual needs. The significance of EPPE therefore lies partly in how this complex evidence was subsequently translated into policy.

The DfE (2011) positioned the recruitment and retention of highly skilled graduates as a means of strengthening curriculum delivery, leadership, management and the professional status of the sector. As a policy objective, investment in specialist knowledge and pedagogical leadership is reasonable and potentially beneficial, as Mathers et al., (2011) indicate an association between graduate leadership and aspects of the quality of early years provision. The difficulty arises when the association between qualifications and quality is converted into a linear theory of change in which raising qualification levels is assumed to produce higher standards and improved outcomes. Qualifications may create the capacity for high-quality practice, but Urban et al., (2012) and Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, (2015) question whether this capacity can be enacted depends upon practitioners' authority, pay, continuing professional development, staffing conditions, organisational culture and access to appropriate resources.

However, this framing reduces the complexity of quality to a single variable that of qualifications while downplaying the broader structural conditions that shape practice. Urban (2008) cautions against this technocratic approach, noting that while

qualifications matter, they cannot on their own overcome issues such as underfunding, high staff turnover, and the pressures of marketisation.

3.5.11 Marketisation and Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is used within this thesis to describe more than a preference for private markets or reduced public expenditure. It is understood as Harvey (2005) suggests, as a political and governing rationality through which market principles, competition, individual responsibility and economic calculation are extended into social institutions and everyday life. Within education, neoliberal reform has been associated with the introduction of market mechanisms alongside increasingly centralised systems of standards, measurement, accountability and comparison. Although market competition and state regulation may appear contradictory, they frequently operate together: providers are expected to compete and respond flexibly to demand while simultaneously demonstrating compliance with centrally defined expectations of effectiveness and quality (Lloyd and Penn, 2012; Ball, 2003).

Within ECEC, neoliberalism is visible through several interconnected developments. Provision is organised through a mixed market in which parents are positioned partly as consumers and settings compete for children, funding and favourable inspection outcomes (Lloyd and Penn, 2012; Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016). At the same time, investment in early childhood is frequently justified through its anticipated contribution to school attainment, social mobility, parental employment and future economic productivity. Moss, (2014) and Roberts-Holmes and Moss, (2021) propose that children may therefore be positioned not only as citizens with rights and valuable present experiences, but as future pupils, workers and contributors whose development should be optimised through early intervention. This does not mean that improving children's lives or reducing inequality are inherently neoliberal aims. Rather, a neoliberal orientation becomes apparent when these purposes are predominantly expressed through economic returns, individual outcomes and measurable indicators of future success.

Neoliberal governance also operates through professional subjectivity. Ball's (2003) concept of performativity describes how educators are encouraged to organise and understand themselves through externally produced indicators, evaluations and judgements. Within early years education, processes of datafication and comparative accountability can similarly regulate professional practice by shaping

what practitioners are expected to record, demonstrate and prioritise (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016). Responsibility for achieving policy outcomes is increasingly located with individual practitioners and settings, even where their capacity to do so is constrained by funding, staffing, pay and wider social inequalities.

In ECEC, professionalisation can therefore be contradictory. Practitioners are expected to become reflective, adaptable and entrepreneurial leaders of quality, yet their professional value continues to be judged through prescribed competencies and demonstrable outcomes. Osgood (2006a, 2010) argues that these constructions may marginalise emotional, relational and gendered dimensions of early childhood professionalism, while practitioners may also negotiate, reinterpret or resist them.

Neoliberalism is not treated within this thesis as a totalising force that determines practice in a uniform manner. Policies contain competing purposes, and practitioners are not passive recipients of political discourse. The significance of a neoliberal analysis lies instead in identifying recurring assumptions about markets, investment, accountability, individual responsibility and measurable performance, and examining how these assumptions privilege particular constructions of children, quality and professionalism. This makes it possible to explore both the reach of neoliberal governance and the spaces in which alternative relational, ethical and democratic understandings of ECEC continue to be enacted.

Moreover, workforce development initiatives have been embedded within broader neoliberal levers of accountability and cost-effectiveness (Sims, 2017), professionalisation is framed not as an investment in practitioner autonomy or pedagogy but as a strategy for achieving measurable improvements at minimum cost. Ball's (2003) analysis of *performativity* is instructive here: workforce reforms operate as technologies of governance, aligning practitioners with the state's priorities of accountability, efficiency, and outcomes. Professionalisation becomes less about empowering practitioners and more about securing compliance with policy-defined standards of quality.

3.6. Quality and the Private, Voluntary, and Independent (PVI) Sector

3.6.1 The Dominance of the PVI Sector in Provision

One of the defining features of the English ECEC system is the dominance of the PVI sector (Moss, 2020), unlike countries such as (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, and Finland and Slovenia, France, and Belgium, where early childhood services are predominantly state-funded and delivered through public institutions, England has

relied heavily on non-state providers to expand access since the 1990s. This reliance reflects a distinctive policy trajectory shaped by neoliberal principles of marketisation, parental choice, and reduced state responsibility.

3.6.1.1 Historical and Policy Background

The rapid expansion of childcare places during the late 1990s and 2000s was largely achieved through incentivising private and voluntary providers rather than significantly investing in state-maintained nurseries. Policy documents at the time emphasised flexibility, diversity, and responsiveness to parental demand (DfEE, 1998; DfES, 2006). This market-led approach created a fragmented landscape in which provision is delivered through a patchwork of private nurseries, voluntary and charitable organisations (Vandenbroeck, 2021) and independent childminders, with only a minority of places located in maintained nursery schools or nursery classes within primary schools.

The entitlements to free early education introduced in 1998 (initially 12.5 hours per week, now 15 or 30 hours depending on eligibility) further reinforced this structure. While framed as universal or near-universal offers, these entitlements are delivered predominantly by PVI settings, who receive government funding to cover the “free” hours. However, research consistently shows that this funding is insufficient to meet the true cost of provision (Paull and Xu, 2019), creating financial pressures that reverberate throughout the sector.

3.6.1.2 Current Dominance and Structural Implications

Currently in England, the majority of children under five attend PVI settings rather than maintained nurseries or schools. According to DfE statistics, over two-thirds of funded early education places are delivered by PVI providers (DfE, 2022). This dominance has significant implications for equity and quality. Unlike maintained nursery schools which are directly state-funded and often staffed by teachers with QTS, PVI settings operate under tight financial constraints, with lower wages, higher

staff turnover, and fewer opportunities for professional development (Education Committee, 2023)

This structural imbalance creates what Urban (2008) describes as a “two-tier” system of provision. While the maintained sector is often held up as the gold standard of quality, it represents only a small fraction of places and is concentrated in certain local authorities. The vast majority of families rely on PVI provision, where the conditions for sustaining high-quality practice are structurally disadvantaged. This structural contradiction reinforces the Cinderella metaphor introduced earlier: PVI practitioners are tasked with delivering the same outcomes as their better-resourced counterparts in the maintained sector yet remain undervalued and underpaid. The following subsections will explore how discourses of quality are negotiated within the PVI sector, the realities of workforce conditions, and the ways in which gendered and classed inequalities shape its professional status.

3.6.2 Market Pressures and Accountability

Within the PVI sector, quality is strongly shaped by the dual pressures of accountability and financial sustainability. Firstly, Ofsted inspection outcomes act as high-stakes indicators of quality, with settings graded which have a direct impact on parental demand, reputation, and, in some cases, access to local authority support. For many providers, maintaining a positive inspection outcome becomes central to their survival in a competitive childcare market (Roberts-Holmes, 2015).

Secondly, providers must balance these accountability demands with the financial pressures of operating within a marketised system. Government-funded hours are often *underfunded*, forcing providers to cross-subsidise by charging higher fees for additional hours or services (Paull and Xu, 2019). This dynamic creates a tension, while inspection frameworks demand evidence of high-quality pedagogy, staffing levels, and continuous professional development, the financial model leaves little scope for significant investment in the workforce.

Practitioners in the PVI sector often articulate a very different understanding of quality to that embedded in inspection frameworks. While compliance with EYFS criteria and Ofsted requirements is non-negotiable, many practitioners emphasise the relational, processual aspects of their work: the quality of interactions, the importance of play, and the development of trusting relationships with children and

families. These aspects of quality are harder to measure but are consistently highlighted in both research and practitioner testimony as central to meaningful early years pedagogy (Moss, 2016).

3.6.2.1 Parents as Consumers

The marketisation of ECEC has also positioned parents as consumers, making “quality” a commodity that providers must market to attract and retain enrolments. In this context, Ofsted grades often function as shorthand for quality, used in advertising and parental decision-making. However, research shows that parents’ own perceptions of quality may emphasise relational and affective dimensions (such as trust, safety, and the warmth of relationships with staff) over regulatory measures (Vincent and Ball, 2006). This consumer-oriented model creates further tensions between what quality means in policy, what it means in practice, and what it means for families.

3.6.2.2 Critical Perspectives

The tension between compliance-driven and relational understandings of quality has significant implications for the workforce. Osgood (2012) argues that the emphasis on accountability reshapes practitioners’ subjectivities, requiring them to prioritise documentation and evidence over relational pedagogy. At the same time, practitioners often resist these demands by reasserting the importance of care, creativity, and responsiveness in their daily practice. In this sense, discourses of quality are not simply imposed from above but negotiated and reinterpreted within the constraints of the PVI sector.

3.6.3 Workforce Realities in the PVI Sector

The dominance of the PVI sector means that the conditions of work within this part of the system are central to understanding how quality is enacted in English ECEC. While policy rhetoric positions the workforce as the key driver of quality, the realities of pay, working conditions, and morale in the PVI sector present significant barriers to fulfilling these expectations.

3.6.3.1 Pay and Conditions

Pay in the PVI sector remains persistently low, with many practitioners earning close to, or even below, the National Minimum or Living Wage (Bonetti, 2019). This stands in stark contrast to the salaries and conditions of teachers in the maintained sector, where QTS ensures access to nationally negotiated pay scales, pensions, and career progression

routes. EYTs, despite their graduate-level training and leadership responsibilities, often receive little or no financial recognition for their qualifications, leaving them frustrated and undervalued. For example, average hourly pay for practitioners hovered around £13.50 per hour in 2025. Annual salaries typically span from £18,000 for assistants to £30,000 for senior room leaders, heavily constrained by statutory minimum wage levels and tight funding (London Economics 2025).

Practitioner-centred studies such as Hadfield et al., (2012). complicate this picture by showing that graduate status can strengthen confidence, role awareness and pedagogical leadership even where material rewards remain absent. In the longitudinal evaluation of EYPS, 85 per cent of respondents reported an improved sense of professional status, three-quarters felt more credible among colleagues and 87 per cent felt more confident in developing colleagues' knowledge and skills. Yet two-thirds believed that other professionals had little understanding of EYPS and 91 per cent felt that people outside the sector did not understand it Davis (2014) similarly found that formal graduate development increased practitioners' awareness of their role, confidence and empowerment.

These accounts indicate that status operates both internally and relationally: graduates may understand themselves as leaders of practice, but this identity remains fragile when it is not recognised by colleagues, other professionals or the public.

The shift from Early Years Professional to Early Years Teacher may therefore be significant because the word 'teacher' carries a more publicly intelligible claim to educational expertise. Traunter's (2019) study of EYITT trainees found that participants associated the title with a professional teaching pathway and valued the rigorous theoretical and practical preparation of the programme; however, they also experienced confusion when EYTS did not confer QTS, equivalent employment opportunities or teacher pay and conditions. Earlier research on EYPS had already shown that qualified teachers continued to occupy a higher position within early years hierarchies and that graduate practitioners' ability to lead depended on whether their settings recognised and enabled the role (Simpson, 2010; Hadfield et al., 2012). The title EYT can thus help practitioners name themselves as specialists in early childhood education, rather than as workers whose role is understood primarily through care, but its symbolic force is weakened by the absence of formal parity.

This creates a central contradiction in the professionalisation agenda. The term 'teacher' can validate the pedagogical, intellectual and leadership dimensions of work with babies

and young children and may support practitioners in claiming a place within the wider education profession. At the same time, attaching ‘teacher’ to a status that is treated as ‘unqualified’ in maintained schools’ risks making inequality more visible rather than resolving it. Hudson, Brammer and Witton (2023) found that some EYTs sought QTS in order to obtain teacher pay, conditions and career opportunities, despite already holding a specialist early year teaching status. Practitioner voices therefore suggest that the word ‘teacher’ has genuine value for identity and recognition, but that linguistic recognition must be accompanied by material recognition through pay, conditions, progression and professional authority if graduate leadership is to be sustainable.

These disparities reflect the structural consequences of underfunding. Government reimbursement rates for funded hours are widely acknowledged to fall short of the actual cost of provision (Paull and Xu, 2019). As staff salaries make up the largest proportion of expenditure in nurseries, wages are the most obvious area where providers attempt to cut costs. The result is a sector where practitioners are expected to deliver high-quality provision while working under conditions that undermine their financial security and professional recognition.

3.6.3.2 Recruitment and Retention

Low pay and limited career progression contribute directly to recruitment and retention difficulties in the PVI sector. Reports highlight high turnover rates, with many qualified practitioners leaving for better-paid roles in schools or outside the childcare sector altogether (Bonetti, 2019; National Children’s Bureau, 2020).

Recruitment challenges are exacerbated by the limited appeal of a career path that offers high responsibility but little material reward.

High staff turnover has direct implications for quality and according to Hardy et al. (2023) continuity of relationships is a crucial dimension of relational quality, and frequent staff changes disrupt the security and stability that children need. Settings experiencing chronic staffing shortages often struggle to maintain consistent pedagogical practices, further undermining the quality agenda that policymakers claim to prioritise.

3.6.3.3 Morale and Professional Identity

The challenging conditions of the PVI sector also shape morale and professional identity. Practitioners frequently report feeling undervalued, describing their work as both essential and invisible (Osgood, 2012). The symbolic recognition offered by

graduate leadership initiatives such as EYT does little to offset the reality of poor pay and limited professional parity. Many practitioners experience identity dissonance, (Reissner and Armitage-Chan, 2024) caught between policy rhetoric that frames them as leaders of quality and a labour market that treats them as low-paid carers.

At the same time, there is evidence of resilience and commitment within the workforce. Many practitioners articulate strong vocational motivations, grounded in care, relationships, and a belief in the importance of early childhood education (Moloney, 2010; Moloney and Pope, 2013), these values provide a source of professional pride and identity, even when structural conditions work against them. However, the reliance on intrinsic motivation raises concerns about sustainability, as the emotional labour required to sustain morale in the face of systemic inequities can contribute to burnout.

3.6.4 Gender, Class, and Care/Education Binaries

The metaphor of the “Cinderella profession” remains a powerful way of understanding the marginalisation of the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce, particularly in the PVI sector. Moss (2014) suggests that despite decades of political interest there have been important gains, but overall ECEC in England is a story of missed opportunities, and a case of more of the same rather than transformative change.

While professionalisation reforms such as EYT have sought to raise recognition, the sector continues to be shaped by gendered, classed, and binary discourses that reinforce its undervaluation. Yet according to Miller et al. (2012), ECEC *has* evolved as a sector with practitioners having access to wider opportunities for CPD and education alongside increased demands within their roles. They argue that ECEC has ‘grown up’ to a position where pedagogical and regulatory frameworks have been introduced and linked to a terminology of professionalism but suggest that educators need to maintain a critical stance to all aspects of their role, which recognises the different political and cultural milieux that influence it.

3.6.4.1 Feminisation of the Workforce

ECEC in England remains an overwhelmingly feminised profession, with women making up the vast majority of the workforce and Osgood (2012) proposes that this

feminisation is not neutral: it reflects long-standing cultural assumptions that caring for and educating young children is “natural” women’s work rather than specialised professional expertise. As a result, Wilson-Thomas (2020) suggests that the skills and knowledge required in ECEC are often devalued, treated as extensions of maternal instinct rather than as forms of professional pedagogy, continuing that this feminised framing legitimises low pay and poor conditions, as the work is positioned less as a career deserving of professional recognition and more as a vocation or labour of love.

3.6.4.2 Class and Professional Mobility

The undervaluation of the ECEC workforce also has a classed dimension, (Wilson-Thomas and Brooks, 2024) with many practitioners having a working-class background who enter the profession through vocational rather than academic pathways. While graduate leadership initiatives have aimed to diversify and professionalise the workforce, structural barriers limit professional mobility, particularly in the PVI sector where career progression opportunities are scarce. As Cameron et al. (2010) argue, the Cinderella metaphor encapsulates how the workforce is left behind while other education professions, such as schoolteachers, receive higher recognition and reward. This classed marginalisation compounds the gendered devaluation of care, reinforcing the perception of early years work as “less than” teaching in schools. This intersectionality between class and gender in the workforce is seen in work by Colley, (2006) and Andrew, (2015), and has created what Andrew (ibid) describes as a lack of financial and cultural recognition for complex, emotional work.

3.6.4.3 The Care/Education Binary

The persistence of a binary between “care” and “education” further entrenches the marginalisation of the sector (Moss, 2020). Despite policy rhetoric that integrates care and education within the EYFS, in practice the two are often treated as distinct, with “care” seen as low-skilled and feminised, while “education” is aligned with professionalism and higher status (Wilson-Thomas, 2020). Maintained nurseries and schools, staffed by teachers with qualified teacher status, are therefore positioned as more educational, (Moss, 2013), while PVI provision is framed as primarily childcare and preparation for school. This binary reinforces structural inequalities, as the majority of children experience ECEC through the PVI sector, where practitioners

are denied parity with teachers despite undertaking complex pedagogical work.

3.7 The Case for Democratic Practice

While discourses of quality in English ECEC have largely been dominated by measurement, accountability, and outcomes, Moss (2007; 2014) has long advocated for an alternative vision rooted in democratic practice. This perspective challenges the idea that quality can be defined in universal, technocratic terms and instead positions ECEC as a public space for dialogue, participation, and ethical encounter. By reframing early years provision as a democratic project, Moss (2007;2014) offers a counter-discourse that centres plurality, uncertainty, and shared meaning-making, challenging dominant policy discourses that construct ECEC as a technical, instrumental endeavour working towards predetermined outcomes. This disrupts the notion of “quality” as a universal and measurable standard. Rather than conceiving quality as something externally defined through regulatory frameworks and accountability mechanisms (Dahlberg et al., 2013), this perspective positions it as a relational and negotiated concept, emerging through dialogue and collective interpretation within distinct contexts. In taking this perspective, EYTs are positioned as ethical and political subjects who actively participate in shaping pedagogical meaning (Moss 2007;2019), rather than as passive implementers of policy. This perspective resonates with a critical ecological perspective (Miller et al., 2013), as it conceptualises ECEC as situated within interconnected systems that are dynamic, reciprocal, and open to multiple interpretations. By disrupting dominant linear and outcome-focused models, Moss’s democratic project opens up theoretical space for understanding early childhood education as a contested, value-laden, and participatory field.

3.7.1. Democratic Practice as an Alternative Discourse

For Moss, democratic practice begins with the recognition that there is no single, objective definition of quality (2016), but is socially constructed through the values, assumptions, and relationships that shape early years provision. From this standpoint, ECEC should not be understood as a site for delivering predetermined outcomes but as a forum in which diverse voices, children, practitioners, parents,

and communities come together to co-construct meaning.

This vision draws inspiration from the Reggio Emilia approach in Italy, where early years provision is framed as a democratic, participatory endeavour (Roberts-Holmes, 2017) and children are seen as active subjects and citizens, not passive recipients of developmental interventions. Parents are respected as partners, and practitioners are positioned as reflective professionals engaged in dialogue rather than technicians delivering a standardised curriculum. Moss (2024) argues that such practices represent a fundamentally different discourse of quality: complex, skilled and one that embraces uncertainty, diversity, slow pedagogy and ethics of care rather than compliance and measurement.

3.7.1.1 Contrasting with Dominant Discourses

Democratic practice sits uneasily alongside the dominant discourse of quality-as-accountability that characterises ECEC in England. While inspection regimes and the EYFS seek to standardise practice and ensure consistency, democratic approaches emphasise diversity, flexibility, and responsiveness. Where managerial frameworks value certainty, predictability, and measurable outcomes, democratic practice values uncertainty, negotiation, and the recognition of multiple truths.

This contrast highlights the political nature of quality. Moss (2007) argues that discourses of quality are never neutral; they reflect broader ideological commitments. The managerialist discourse aligns with neoliberal priorities of efficiency, accountability, and economic return, while the democratic discourse aligns with values of citizenship, participation, and social justice. The choice between them is not merely technical but ethical and political.

3.7.2 Managerial Accountability and Performativity in ECEC

If Moss positions democratic practice as a dialogic, relational alternative to dominant constructions of quality, the prevailing reality in England is that ECEC is governed by managerial accountability. In the ECEC profession, managerialism is most visible in the introduction of statutory frameworks such as the EYFS and the central role of Ofsted inspections. These mechanisms embed quality within a regime of standards, targets, and accountability, (Albin-Clark and Archer, 2023a) providers are expected to demonstrate measurable progress against early learning goals, with inspection

grades functioning as high-stakes indicators of quality. Managerialism reconfigures ECEC as a system to be managed, audited, and controlled rather than a public space for experimentation and dialogue, (Cameron and Moss, 2020) with practitioners being required to document and evidence their work in ways that align with external accountability demands. In this sense, managerial discourse transforms pedagogy into a series of measurable outputs, reducing complex relational practices to data points.

3.7.3 EYTs at the Crossroads: Negotiating Democratic and Managerial Discourses

EYT's are positioned by policy as pivotal figures in raising quality across the ECEC sector and as graduate leaders, (Kay et al., 2025) they are expected to drive improvements in pedagogy, mentor colleagues, and ensure compliance with statutory frameworks such as the EYFS. Yet at the same time, many EYTs are motivated by relational, democratic pedagogies that prioritise care, play, and co-construction of meaning. According to Cooper (2023) this positions them at the crossroads of competing discourses: the managerial discourse of accountability and the democratic discourse of participation and dialogue.

3.7.3.1 Activist vs. Managerial Identities

Sachs' (2001) distinction between *activist* and *managerial* professional identities provides a useful framework for understanding these tensions. EYTs often identify with activist values, collaboration, advocacy for children and families, and a commitment to democratic pedagogy. However, the structures within which they work frequently demand managerial identities focused on efficiency, accountability, and outcomes. This brings in further ideas such as agency and resistance as despite systemic pressures, EYTs are not passive recipients of policy, Osgood (2012); Basford (2019) and Archer (2021) suggest that practitioners actively negotiate and reinterpret quality discourses in ways that align with their professional values Some engage in forms of *micro-resistance*, finding creative ways to balance compliance with relational pedagogy.

Examples from Albin-Clark and Archer (2024) include reframing inspection requirements to highlight relational interactions, embedding child-led play within the structure of EYFS outcomes, or prioritising reflective dialogue with colleagues even when managerial pressures demand efficiency. These micro-resistances illustrate

how EYTs can exercise agency, bending policy requirements to sustain democratic practices within the constraints of accountability but carry emotional and professional risks. Practitioners may fear being penalised in inspections or judged by managers if they do not prioritise measurable outcomes. As a result, resistance often takes subtle, everyday forms rather than overt challenges to the system (Albin-Clark and Archer, 2024).

3.7.4 Problematising Quality: Can Democratic Practice Thrive?

The tensions outlined above invite a fundamental question: can democratic practice, as envisioned by Moss, realistically flourish within the contemporary English ECEC system? While democratic approaches emphasise dialogue, participation, and plurality, the dominant managerialist discourse of accountability and outcomes appears to leave little room for such alternatives. Problematising the concept of quality itself exposes how deeply political and contested it remains.

3.7.4.1 Structural Constraints on Democratic Practice

Within an accountability environment, democratic practices, such as co-constructing curricula with children, experimenting with pedagogy, or prioritising play are easily overshadowed by the need to evidence compliance. As Moss (2016) argues, neoliberal systems leave little space for the uncertainty and plurality that democratic practice requires.

The structural inequalities such as chronic underfunding, workforce precarity, heavy workload and being undervalued, further constrain possibilities and create conditions where providers are primarily focused on survival (Flemons and Worth, 2025). Furthermore, according to Moss (2007) for practitioners struggling with low pay, high turnover, and inspection pressures, the scope to engage in democratic dialogue and experimentation is severely limited.

3.7.4.2 Spaces of Possibility

Yet, despite these constraints, examples of democratic practice do exist in England (Cowan et al., 2021). Research has documented instances where practitioners create spaces for dialogue and participation, even within the constraints of the EYFS. These may include child-led projects, pedagogical documentation used as a reflective rather than accountability tool, or collaborative relationships with parents that go beyond consumerist models of choice (Rinaldi, 2006; Lenz Taguchi, 2010).

Such practices suggest that democratic approaches can coexist with managerial frameworks, though often in fragile or marginal ways.

Practitioners also engage in acts of quiet resistance, finding ways to prioritise relational pedagogy alongside compliance (McNair et al., 2021). By reframing quality in terms of ethics of care and co-construction, some EYTs and their colleagues sustain alternative discourses, even if they are not fully recognised within accountability regimes. These micro-level acts indicate that while systemic transformation may be difficult, democratic practice can survive in pockets, sustained by practitioner agency and professional communities.

3.7.4.3 Critical Reflection

Ultimately, whether democratic practice can thrive depends on how quality is conceptualised at a systemic level. If quality continues to be equated with measurable outcomes and compliance, democratic approaches will remain marginalised. However, policymakers and practitioners are willing to embrace uncertainty, dialogue, and plurality, quality could be redefined in ways that create genuine space for democratic alternatives. This would require not only shifts in policy but also cultural changes in how society values early childhood, practitioners, and the relational work they do.

3.8. Chapter Summary

3.8.1 Restating the Central Thread: Quality as Contested Discourse

This literature review has taken *discourses of quality* as its central organising thread, tracing how the concept has shaped ECEC in England across global, national, and local contexts. What emerges consistently is that quality is not a neutral or objective descriptor but a contested and socially constructed discourse. Far from being a universally agreed standard, quality is deeply political, reflecting the values, assumptions, and priorities of those who define it.

Two dominant constructions have been identified. The first is an instrumental, managerial discourse that equates quality with measurable outcomes, accountability frameworks, and school readiness. This model has been institutionalised through

statutory frameworks such as the EYFS and Ofsted inspections, embedding performativity and datafication into the everyday realities of practice. The second is a relational and democratic discourse, championed by scholars such as Moss, which conceives quality as emerging through participation, dialogue, and ethics of care.

The tension between these discourses runs through the English ECEC system. It underpins workforce reforms, shapes the experiences of practitioners, particularly EYTs' and reveals the limits of policy approaches that reduce quality to technical compliance.

3.8.2 Synthesising the Tensions

Across the literature, a series of persistent tensions emerge that reveal the complexity of quality discourse in ECEC. These tensions are not incidental but structural, shaped by the ways in which quality has been defined and operationalised within policy, practice, and research.

The first tension lies between professionalisation and marketisation. Policies such as EYPS and EYT promised to raise quality by professionalising the workforce, yet these reforms were delivered through a marketised system. Graduate leaders were created without structural parity, leaving practitioners burdened with expectations but denied recognition. Professionalisation was framed as a quality intervention but embedded in a context of underfunding, low pay, and high turnover.

The second tension is between democratic values and managerial accountability. Relational and participatory visions of practice emphasise dialogue, plurality, and ethics of care, yet practitioners are constrained by inspection regimes, statutory frameworks, and the datafication of children's learning. Democratic practice requires openness to uncertainty and difference, but managerial accountability privileges certainty, measurement, and compliance.

The third tension reflects the gap between policy rhetoric and workforce realities. Policy documents celebrate high-quality provision and graduate leadership, yet the workforce, particularly in the PVI sector, faces chronic structural disadvantages. The Cinderella metaphor captures this contradiction: EYTs are cast as central to delivering quality but remain undervalued, underpaid, and marginalised.

Together, these tensions highlight the limits of dominant discourses of quality. They

reveal how quality functions as a governing discourse, shaping professional identities and practices while obscuring the structural inequities that constrain them. They also suggest the importance of alternative discourses such as Moss's democratic practice, that open up possibilities for more relational, ethical, and participatory understandings of quality.

3.8.3 Positioning the Study

This literature review has highlighted how discourses of quality operate as powerful yet contested forces within ECEC. Dominant managerialist definitions emphasise measurement, accountability, and outcomes, while alternative democratic perspectives emphasise participation, dialogue, and relational pedagogy. Workforce reforms, particularly the creation of EYT, have been positioned as central to raising quality but have delivered only partial professionalisation, leaving practitioners navigating systemic inequities. These dynamics are especially acute in the PVI sector, where most EYTs work under conditions of underfunding, low pay, and high accountability pressure.

Against this backdrop, the study is positioned to make an important contribution. By focusing on how EYTs make sense of, negotiate, and potentially resist discourses of quality in their professional lives, it addresses a critical gap in the literature. EYTs occupy a unique space: simultaneously positioned as leaders of quality and as members of a workforce structurally disadvantaged by gendered, classed, and marketised dynamics. Exploring their experiences provides a window into how policy discourses are internalised, contested, or reimagined in practice. In doing so, the research extends debates about professionalism, identity, and democratic practice within the English ECEC system.

The following chapter details the philosophical positioning, research approach and the data collection methods utilised for this study. The considerations that were necessary for conducting ethical research are also presented.

Chapter 4 Methodology

4.1. Introduction

4.1.1 The Research Focus

This study is concerned with illuminating how EYTs make sense of, negotiate, and potentially resist discourses of quality in their professional lives. EYTs occupy a distinctive space: simultaneously positioned as leaders of quality and as members of a workforce structurally disadvantaged by gendered, classed, and marketised dynamics. Exploring their workplace experiences provides a window into how policy discourses are internalised, contested, or reimagined in practice. This focus has led to the conception of the following research aim and questions detailed below.

Aim

To explore how workplace experiences, quality assurance mechanisms and policy discourses shape EYTs' pedagogy, professional relationships, and identity.

Objectives

1. To examine how Early Years Teachers understand, enact, and negotiate notions of "quality" within their everyday practice, with particular attention to the interplay between structural demands and relational work.
2. To analyse how developmental norms, gendered expectations, and policy discourses shape practitioners' micro-interactions with children, families, and colleagues through an ecological theoretical lens.
3. To explore how teacher narratives and my own positionality as a practitioner-researcher reveal tensions, contradictions, and embodied experiences of quality that are obscured or simplified within policy representations.

RQ1.

How does the quality agenda create challenges and opportunities for EYTs' agency in shaping practice and sustaining professional values?

RQ2.

How do EYTs perceive, negotiate, and respond to their role as graduate leaders within a quality-driven policy context?

RQ3.

How do tensions between external quality frameworks and relational, pedagogical understandings of quality influence EYT's professional identity and practice?

4.1.2 Chapter Outline

The following chapter outlines the methodological approach that underpins this study which explores how EYT's construct and make sense of their professional identities through their personal and professional narrative accounts. To illuminate the narrated nature of these experiences, a qualitative design informed by narrative inquiry with aspects of autoethnography was adopted. Narrative inquiry is particularly well suited to this research as according to Wei (2023), it foregrounds people's experiences as sources of knowledge and acknowledges that human beings make sense of their lives through narratives. Autoethnography is also employed due to my practitioner background, as Ellis (2004) suggests, it is important that I can share what I have in common with others as well as what is distinctly personal. Our accounts are shaped by temporal, social and contextual factors, reflecting how people construct their identities, values, and understandings of the world. This approach aligns with the study's interpretivist epistemological stance, which recognises multiple, socially constructed realities, and with its constructivist ontological positioning, which views experience as fluid, contextual and co-constructed, (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1994). Furthermore, Wei (2023) proposes that in narrative inquiry, all involved have voices and are enabled to express their narratives. Researchers listen closely becoming part of the accounts by bringing in their own experiences, making this a shared construction and reconstruction of narratives through inquiry. This approach informed my research process as early on; it became evident to me this was a collaborative process.

4.1.3 Structure Overview:

The chapter begins by discussing the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the study before detailing the research design, participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis procedures followed by my ethical considerations.

4.2. Research Philosophy and Approach

4.2.1 Philosophical Positioning and Interpretivism

I sought understanding of participants' realities through their experience of the workplace, acknowledging their realities may differ between them. Whilst they are shaped by individual historical or social perspectives, they may share some commonalities. A critical ecological perspective recognises interpretivist principles in that meanings are formed through interactions with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in an individual's lives (Creswell, 2024). As an interpretivist researcher, I recognised that my own background has been shaped by personal, cultural and historical experiences which then influenced how I interpreted the experiences I was being told, and how I then made sense of them. Interpretivism assumes that knowledge is situated, subjective and negotiated through social processes rather than discovered as objective fact (Crotty, 1998). In this study, the experiences of EYTs are not treated as static data points but as living narratives shaped by professional contexts, policy landscapes, and personal histories. As a researcher, I do not position myself as an objective observer but as a co-constructor of knowledge, collaborating with participants to make sense of their narrated experiences.

My ontological position is that there is no single reality or truth, as reality is created by individuals and groups. As stated above, my epistemological belief indicates that reality needs to be interpreted: the underlying meaning of events and activities uncovered via analysing individual accounts to explore phenomena (Crotty, 2003). Mulder (2012) offers that we do not really see the world as it is but that we interpret it through our senses. I needed to be consistently sensitive to my participants' experiences, histories and culture, acknowledging that they may not just view the world differently to one another and me, but they will have experienced it differently too.

The study sits within an interpretivist paradigm, as it is exploring phenomena from multiple perspectives utilising a lens through which to explore the world which concerns 'meaning making' (Lukenchuck, 2013:66) which is central to understanding phenomena and individuals. Interpretivist research has a number of characteristics. It is concerned with *understanding* (Cohen et al., 2020); is context specific (Pring,

2015); and allows the construction and recognition of multiple realities (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). An interpretative framework therefore guided this study to address the research problem.

The philosophical assumptions associated with the application of an interpretivist paradigm are now considered. Crotty (2003:10) defines ontology as the study of being, with Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggesting that ontological assumptions are those which respond to the question 'what is there that can be known?' This study uses ontology, which is that of a social world of meanings, with the assumption that the participants will have their own thoughts, interpretations and meanings around their job role and experiences. These will derive from their own experiences and may be different or similar to each other's experience and my own. A relativist ontological position therefore acknowledges that there may be several interpretations as opposed to a single truth of the phenomenon. Adopting an interpretivist perspective, allows researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied and its complexity in its unique context instead of trying to make generalisations (Creswell, 2024). The epistemological assumptions are stated by Crotty (2003:3) to be "a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know". Therefore, the position of an interpretivist framework is that I am not 'discovering' truth, I am interpreting meaning from my own and a range of participants' interactions with their worlds which does not fixate on one true or valid interpretation.

4.2.2. As a Narrative Researcher

My own experience of workforce reform had the potential to bias the research and frame the project in a deficit position which I needed to manage by ensuring reflexivity (see 3.2), to mitigate the risk of being misled by my own experiences and interpretations (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009). When I visualise my study, I envisage a ripple, a way of exploring my subject that felt like to and from, ebb and flow, looking in and looking out. As an education researcher studying the social world, an interpretivist approach not only allows me to explore my own assumptions about the phenomena but also to understand that this world consists of ideas of and negotiated meanings of which I am part.

4.3. Research Strategy and Design

4.3.1 Narrative Inquiry

For this study I draw on a narrative inquiry approach, which understands human experience as inherently “storied”. Narrative inquiry is concerned with how people make sense of events over time and within social contexts, and it treats these narratives as legitimate forms of knowledge (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2023). The aim is not simply to collect information but to explore how experiences are composed, interpreted and connected. In this sense, participants are encouraged to share their experiences offering accounts that unfold over time and highlight intentions, emotions and consequences. However, narrative inquiry does not require participants to produce neat, linear “stories”. Experiences may be expressed verbally, visually, or through artefacts and actions, and all of these are understood as “field texts” that can be analysed narratively (Riessman, 2005; Caine et al., 2023). For the purposes of this study, narratives were produced from conversations relating to how a typical workplace day unfolded.

What differentiates narrative inquiry from a conventional interview is both its stance and its analytic focus. Rather than working through a list of questions, a narrative approach seeks extended accounts and places emphasis on the relational, co-constructed nature of the conversation. The meaning is found not only in what participants say but also in how they organise and present their experiences (Riessman, 2005; Clandinin, 2023). This orientation shaped both the generation and interpretation of data in this study. For example, the starter question “talk me through a typical day” and the use of artefacts for a sandbox conversation (discussed in 5.2) was deliberately designed to invite reflection, sequencing and meaning making. I introduced the sandbox method as a way of supporting participants to express and organise their experiences visually and spatially. Although the full procedure is outlined later in the chapter, it is important to signal here that the sandbox activities produced rich, multimodal field texts that align closely with narrative inquiry’s concern for narrative accounts and their multiple forms.

Narrative inquiry is particularly appropriate when the research interest is bound in how individuals make sense of their experiences over time, and how these experiences are embedded in personal, social, cultural, and institutional contexts

(Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). In the context of EYTS, professional identities are not static; they are shaped by personal histories, relationships with children and families, interactions with colleagues, and evolving policy frameworks. Narrative inquiry allows this complex, evolving experiences to be examined holistically rather than fragmented into variables or categories.

Moreover, narrative inquiry privileges temporality, sociality, and place, the three key dimensions of experience identified by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), which provide a conceptual structure for examining practitioners' narratives in relation to time, personal and social conditions, and contextual settings. This orientation is particularly useful in ECEC, a profession characterised by relational practice, policy shifts, and diverse professional pathways and aligns to the theoretical framework of a critical ecology.

By adopting narrative inquiry, this study seeks not only to document practitioners' experiences but to engage with the meanings they attribute to those experiences. This approach is therefore both methodologically and philosophically coherent with the study's aims, allowing for a nuanced, in-depth exploration of professional identity as lived and told. Whilst engaging in data production I was mindful of the principles of conducting narrative research (outlined below Figure 4.1)

Principle	Application
The admission that the social world cannot be understood from the standpoint of an individual.	Multiple perspectives gathered via 2 data collection methods
The belief that realities are multiple and socially constructed.	I recognise that participant reality is constructed by individuals in their settings and will differ from participant to Participant
The acceptance that there is inevitable interaction between the researcher and his or her research participants.	I cannot extricate myself from the research as my own experiences are part of this study.
The acceptance that context is vital for knowledge and knowing.	As dictated by the theoretical framework, unique contexts need to be understood
The belief that knowledge is created by the findings; can be value laden and the values need to be made explicit.	This too is informed by my own background. A reflexive approach can address this

The belief that contextual factors need to be taken into consideration in any systematic pursuit of understanding	The chosen theoretical framework of a critical ecology recognises that unique contexts are fundamental in understanding experiences
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Figure 4.1 adapted from Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) suggesting principles are key features of an interpretivist approach and i have mapped my study against these to demonstrate the application to my study.

There is further relationality between narrative inquiry and a critical ecological framework due to three commonplaces, proposed by Clandinin and Huber (2010); temporality, sociality, and place (p.436). Attending to temporality encourages researchers to explore how people, places, events, and experiences are shaped across time, past, present, and future. The second dimension, sociality, requires narrative inquirers to consider the social conditions within which experiences unfold. These include the cultural, institutional, social, and linguistic narratives that influence how events are lived and understood. Sociality also encompasses personal conditions, referring to “the feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions” of both participants and researchers (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006: 480). The third commonplace, place, concerns “the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequences of places where the inquiry and events take place” (p.480). Central to this idea is the recognition that “all events take place in some place” (p.481). Our identities are therefore closely tied to the experiences we have in particular places and to the narratives we construct about those experiences. My own research context is that I was living through policy directives of professionalisation in ECEC by undertaking higher qualifications whilst working. This has led me to exploring how context and experiences matter and how they shape practitioners understanding of their roles and identity.

Through a focus on commonplaces, researchers can study the complexity of the relational composition of experiences. Cohen et al. (2020) suggest that certain features are evident in narrative approaches. The following is neither exhaustive nor essential, but I have highlighted these as they aligned clearly with my intent for the study and help justify my chosen approach. They include collaboration and co-construction of accounts between researcher and participant; that these are gathered through many forms of data; and that they tell of individual experiences which may shed light on how the individuals see themselves, eliciting ideas around

identity. Below is an illustration as to how the theoretical framework links to narrative inquiry in this study (Figure 4.2).

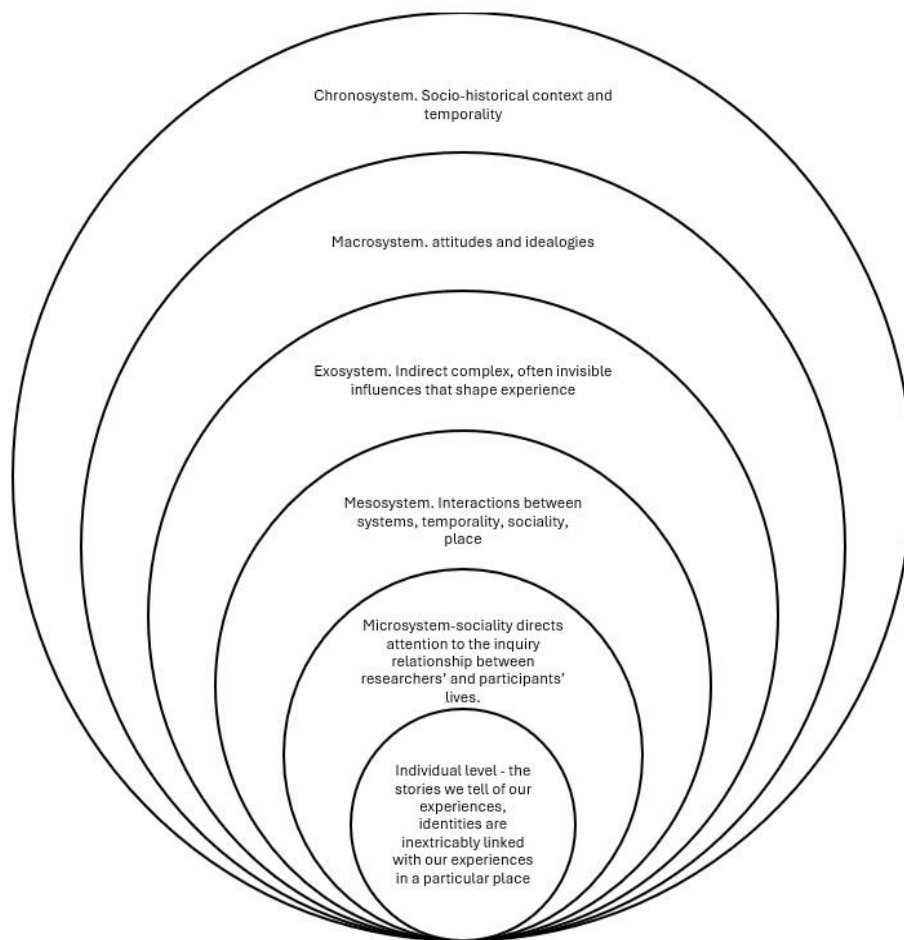


Figure 4.2 An adaptation of an ecological perspective to illustrate how narrative inquiry is utilised

Whilst narrative inquiry offers a rich and contextually grounded way to explore experience, several limitations of this methodological approach must be acknowledged. Narrative inquiry is inherently interpretive, meaning that the narratives shared and the interpretations developed are shaped by both the participants' and researcher's perspectives. My own professional background and positionality inevitably influenced the conversational dynamics and interpretive process. Although reflexivity and transparency were maintained throughout, subjectivity remains an inherent feature of narrative inquiry (Lincoln and Guba, 1985;

Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Moreover, because this study focused on a small number of EYTs, the findings are not statistically generalisable; instead, their value lies in the depth and transferability of insight rather than representativeness (Riessman, 2005).

4.3.2 Reflexivity and Positionality

A key aspect of narrative inquiry is the application of reflexivity (Etherington, 2004). In the case of this study, of most significance is the need to be aware of how the relationships and contexts between the researcher and the researched aid the co-construction of knowledge. Being a reflexive researcher means not just being self-aware, but I also needed to be creating a reciprocal process of interacting between myself, my participants and the data; reflexivity permeated every aspect of the research process, (Hertz, 1997: viii).

As a practitioner-researcher with experience in the early years sector, my positionality inevitably shaped how I approached, interpreted, and represented the narratives within this study. Occupying the dual role of insider and researcher required an ongoing reflexive stance to acknowledge my own assumptions, values, and emotional investments in the field (Yip, 2024). I maintained a reflexive research diary throughout the inquiry to document interpretive decisions, ethical dilemmas, and moments of resonance or tension with participants' accounts (extracts included in Figure 4.4) This reflective practice aimed to make visible my role in co-constructing meaning during data collection and analysis, while also supporting transparency and trustworthiness. By critically engaging with my own position, I sought to balance empathetic understanding with analytical rigour.

What can be ascertained from using a critical ecological perspective to frame reflexivity, is that the experiences of the individual are complex, relational and diverse. I consider that the movement within systems that the framework allows is vital for this study. It is not a rigid framework; it is malleable and boundaries between the systems are permeable enough to allow for the myriads of influences that an EYT can experience to merge. There is a feeling of fluidity and ebb and flow, with the individual having potential to influence within their social and cultural worlds.

Additionally, the study also aimed to reveal the factors that enable EYTs to influence their social and cultural world, looking in and looking out process. Etherington (2004) considers that reflexivity is a dynamic process of interaction within and between us and participants, and that through the mutual, sincere, collaborative reciprocal nature of narrative inquiry, each party educates the other whereby the researcher has full voice, but both voices are heard. Hertz (1997) further suggests that reflexive researchers are operating on different levels at the same time, not reporting 'truths' (facts) but they are actively building understandings of their own experiences in the field, and questioning how those came about. Below is how I understand my positionality within the study by mapping it to the critical ecological framework (Figure 4.3)

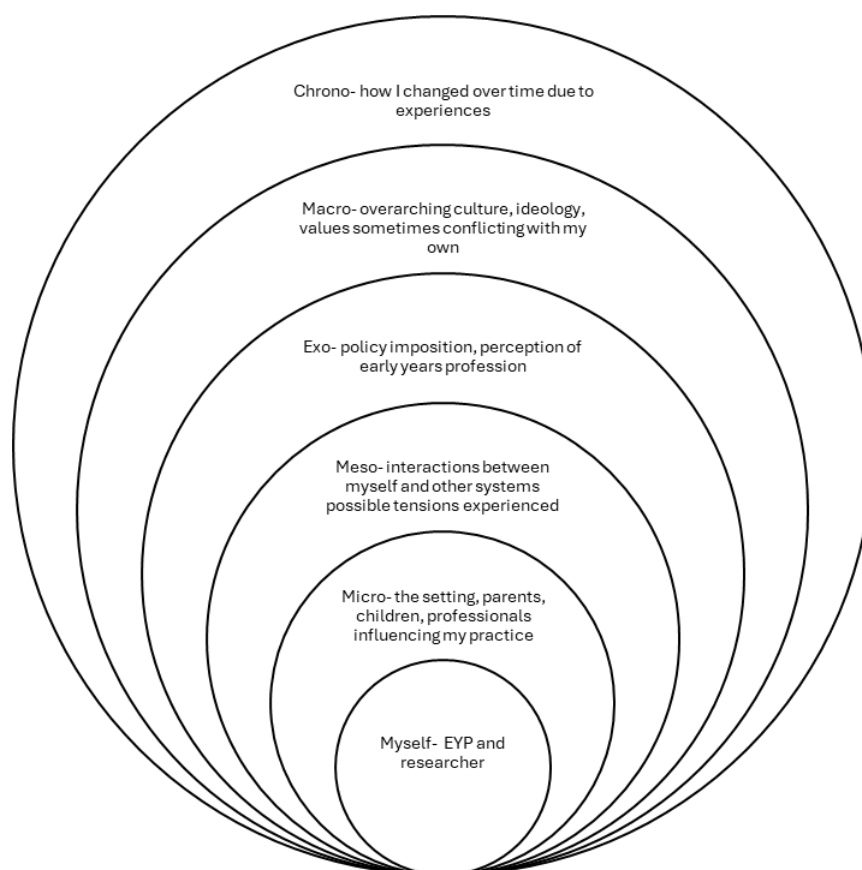


Figure 4.3 My positionality

Multiple truths can be articulated through reflexivity, which is linked to the researcher's ability to make and articulate morally difficult decision amongst the intricate job of generating data from the actual world that captures the complexities of participants' social practices and experiences (Finlay, 2002). In other words, the researcher's subjective viewpoint, or "bias," is inextricably linked to the methods of

qualitative research. This is an important element of my study, using my own experiences in the form of short accounts to begin to understand the experiences of others through talking about their working lives (see Appendix A). Hertz (1997) continues that to be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about experience whilst simultaneously living in the moment, being aware of what is influencing our internal and external responses but at the same time, being aware of what influences our relationship with the field and our participants.

Acknowledging the social nature of human life, while at the same time encouraging individuals to articulate their own narratives helps us to see the world and ourselves as rooted within 'historical and cultural stories beliefs and practices' (Etherington, 2004:46). This highlights the relationship between the theoretical framework and the reflexive nature of the study as according to Cunliffe (2004), reflexivity 'means examining critically the assumptions underlying our actions, (p.407). Furthermore, a critical ecological model highlights how the researcher's inner and outer worlds are shaped by multiple nested systems. These systems illustrate that researchers both influence, and are influenced by, their immediate relationships as well as the broader social, economic, and political contexts that surround them.

Consequently, as Gardner (2009) suggests, being critically reflexive involves actively questioning one's own assumptions, values, beliefs, and the way one's identity and behaviour are presented to others.

4.3.3 Application of Reflexivity to the Study

Being a reflexive researcher is a pertinent aspect to this study as my experiences are entwined with those shared by participants. One important consideration when undertaking the research was that of power dynamics. Whilst I may have once 'been' my participants I have since 'become' something else which may be viewed as a power imbalance. As Cloke et al. (2000) note, researchers need to remain sensitive to the rights, beliefs and cultural contexts of participants. I also needed to be sensitive to their shift from being held in a leadership role in work to their new positioning as a participant in the study, as well as ensuring transparency in the research process by engaging in dialogue about research decisions.

The reflexive process in this study involved, as Goldstein (2016) proposes, a conscious effort to consistently monitor expectations from the research based upon

my own experiences, remaining open to those that participants might share. I found reflexive processes occurred within the confines of my own mind, almost subconsciously usually when I was walking and I took to noting these upon my phone to reflect upon later. Embarking upon doctoral study provides opportunities for reflexivity, Woodfine and Warner (2022) state, that you come to know yourself differently, understanding who you are as both a researcher and a participant in the research. I often felt (and still feel) like a 'straddler', between roles, identities, and social class. These thoughts came to the fore during the writing of the research journal I kept throughout the doctoral journey. This documented aspects such as decisions made and their rationale, the generation of themes as I was reading literature from the field, epiphanies and also my thoughts after I had conducted conversations or scanned questionnaires for initial ideas, all provided a map of the journey throughout the years of research (for extracts see Figure 4.4)

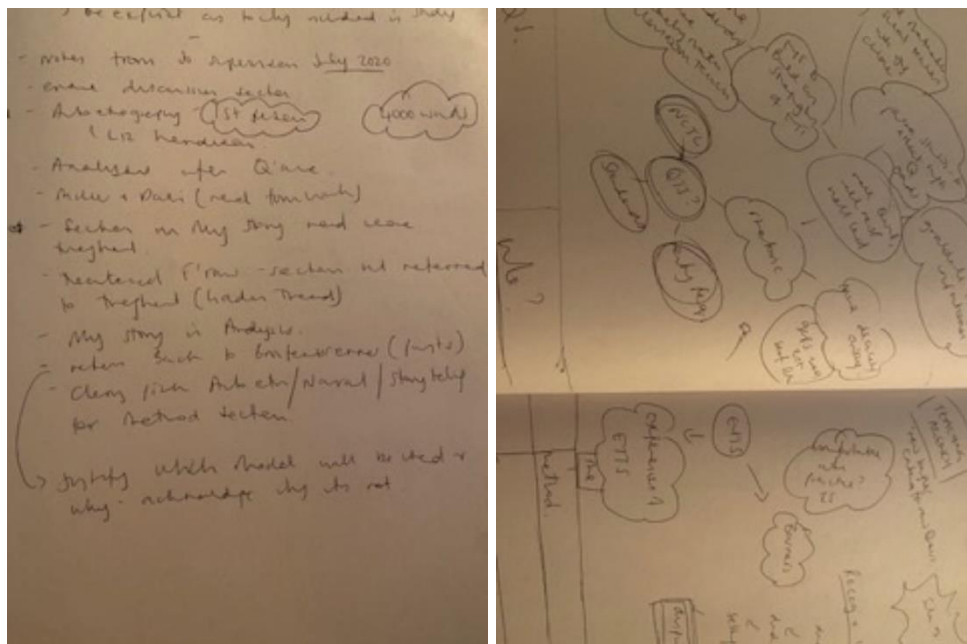


Figure 4.4 Extracts from research journal

4.3.4 Aspects of Autoethnography

Opening scene- two early years practitioners are having a conversation via video call as part of a research project. I am a doctoral researcher and the other a practitioner in a private day-care setting. Our conversation was the first of several planned conversations with EYTs over a 6-month period and the springboard question was 'tell me about a typical day in your setting.' This one question helped to elicit a dialogue between us whereby there appeared to be many shared experiences. I had expected this to occur between participants and to some extent myself but was surprised at the level of resonance I felt.

As she spoke, telling me about her day and the events that had remained with her from the past, I could hear myself agreeing with her and sharing experiences of my own. 'This isn't an interview,' I thought, 'It's more like a conversation'. As the minutes slipped by and the dialogue continued between us, I understood more about how the project might take shape. The accounts being articulated were my experiences too, I was them and they me. I could not extricate myself from this study as the significant experiences being shared had such resonance with me. I would use my experiences too. As I ended the call, I wrote an account of an experience of my own and sat to consider others which remained with me many years later, thinking deeply about 'why are these events significant?'

Why begin this section with this commentary? This was the first of the research conversations and what Denzin (2014:35) calls a 'turning point' moment in relation to my own place in the study and how I interacted with my participants. I realised that in order to give authentic accounts I could not remove myself from the study, I had narratives too. I thought about the experiences which had stayed with me and wrote these up in a research journal. These types of historical accounts should be viewed as meaningful data according to Masvawure (2025) because they often provide powerful insights that help to illuminate what is knowable about humans and their worlds.

The utilisation of my own narrative accounts was influenced by the work of Henderson (2017) in relation to her utilisation of first-hand author experiences to offer scholarly insight into the everyday issues faced by practitioners in ECEC

settings. The rationale for her autoethnographic approach was in seeking to express experiences from practice, emotional tensions, dreams, acts of resistance and loss of identity. In relation to my study Henderson proposes that autoethnography helps make sense of life by considering human experience from a new perspective.

Therefore, repositioning the role of the EYT is “helping to build counter-narratives to the louder, noisier discourses currently in circulation in education (Henderson 2017, p.xi)”. Employing some aspects of autoethnography in this way enabled me to express my own workplace experiences to make sense of my life and to express turning point moments (Denzin, 2014). These pedagogical histories (Warren, 2011) therefore have the potential to reveal how we have become the practitioners we are.

Henderson (2017) highlights the centrality of writer/researcher voice in that the accounts shared can be eclectic, providing some insight into working practices. My voice needed to be present as my experiences at the forefront of policy change were important in informing the purpose of the study. I did not wish my voice to be dominant and this once more foregrounds positionality. Accounting for my positionality in the research process I needed to be conscious of myself as the researcher, intentionally asking and writing about participants workplace experiences when I have a similar background. As a narrative researcher, my role is multifaceted, to collect and retell the experiences of others and to retell my own and to ensure that these are authentic. Using my accounts is a way to contextualise my own perspective within the social and cultural fabric of the study.

4.3.5 Giving Voice

As Hertz (1997) surmises, voice is considering how to simultaneously present both the researcher and the researched so that both voices are heard, whilst acknowledging the respondents voice is often streamed through the author’s account. This had significance for my project as the primary concern of the study is to ‘give voice’. I needed to make sure that the decisions made about participant quotes I used were justified in terms of meeting the research aim and questions. To make sense of this, I drew upon my own experiences in the field in the form of my own narratives so that the reader could situate me within the study, allowing them to understand my perspective (Hertz, 1997). These were chosen from decades of practice based upon what Henderson (2017) calls the “troubling stories that remain in my heart” (p.8). Whilst ‘giving voice’ is empowering those who might

remain unheard (Bogdan and Biklen, 2006) Henderson advocates that selection will mean others will remain unwritten and unheard which links back to earlier discussions concerning the realisation that some narratives are included whilst others are not. In relation to this relatively small-scale study, all participants narrative accounts were used, others from my own practice were not selected, but those chosen were the ‘troubling’ ones, those which I still think about now. Ashby (2011) raises a key point about the power of giving voice in that it has the capacity to disrupt dominant discourses and perceptions which surround individuals or a phenomenon and present a different construct.

This leads me to conclude, as a qualitative researcher and narrative enquirer, the purpose for which I am offering the narrative accounts of the EYT is to make visible the everyday experiences and how these shape their work lives. But why is that important? I intended that this study would illuminate the everyday work of those who spend their days with the under 5’s whereby the practice and pedagogy in settings is not well understood by those outside of the profession. It is useful at this point to refer again to the critical ecological theoretical framework (Miller et al., 2012) (Figure 5) to illustrate how I position myself, detailing the influences upon me from the time I was in practice as well as before and since. This is articulated more explicitly in my own narrative accounts which are presented alongside those of the participants in the findings chapter. The inclusion of these detail events and experiences within the *micro* and the *meso* systems yet also draw in the wider, indirect influence rippling in from the *exo*, *macro* and *chronosystems*.

4.4. Sampling Strategy and Participants

4.4.1. Sampling Strategy

Prior to the main study I had conducted a pilot for the purpose trialing my questionnaires, the approach to take to interviewing and sampling strategy. The key learning I took forward from this experience was to use online questionnaires distributed through social media platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn as response rates were really low when contacting settings directly and through my own limited contacts. I also determined to align my interviews to be conversations for reasons discussed in section 4.5.2. Participants were needed for phase 1 (online

questionnaires see blank copies Appendix C) and phase 2, (sandbox conversations) and had to meet the criterion of having gained EYTS via any study route. I did not specify the route as I wished to gather accounts from a diverse range of practitioner's working in differing contexts. The global pandemic forced a new way of thinking about recruitment of participants and data production. This proved to be positive for the study as it meant I had no established relationship with the EYTs thus minimising power imbalance, influence and bias

4.4.2 Sampling Methods.

I was concerned that accessing EYTs would be difficult, as they were potentially what Rodham and Gavin (2006) refer to as a 'hard to find population' due to the relatively short period of time the EYT programme had been running and the downturn in the number of practitioners who were gaining the status. Social media platforms were used to invite EYTs to participate in the study targeting specific groups which yielded benefits and limitations. I found that I was able to reach a greater number of the individuals who hold EYTS, and the procedure seemed to happen quickly and easily, snowballing as my virtual acquaintances could share my posts, thus increasing my reach. By including my short biography (Appendix A), I made my professional background transparent, though this may have encouraged participants to respond differently, offering more extensive or nuanced insights because they viewed me as an insider. It was part of documenting my reflexive processes and thinking about my positionality which prompted me to include this at the beginning of the sandbox conversations in phase 2. Figure 7 in the following section details their workplace, role, route taken to gain EYT and other relevant information.

4.4.3 The Participants.

The inclusion criteria to take part in the study was participants needed to be working in an ECEC setting and have gained EYTS via any route. The end sample size from the questionnaires was 40, and the sandbox conversation were 9. The conversations differed in duration lasting from 25 minutes to 90 minutes. The sampling method was appropriate as using social media meant a far wider reach and potentially increased participation. It also meant recruitment from geographical diversity, from a range of settings. Though the number of participants conversations were small, the

dialogue and interaction were rich and detailed giving authentic accounts of their day which naturally answered the research questions. The table below (Figure 4.5) details the characteristics of the participants in the conversations. All were women.

Pseudonym ID	Workplace	Role	Route	Notes
Amelia	PVI	Lead practitioner	UG	NSB doing an MA,
Carla	LA maintained nursery school	Teacher	EB	Doing QTS, NSB,
Caroline	Special school	Class teacher	PG	Has QTS,
Julie	PVI	Nursery owner	EB	SB, Has an MA, now has other roles,
Lisa	Maintained	Practitioner	EB	Range of other roles before,
Mary	LA Maintained (Nursery School)	Class teacher	EB	SB, QTS,
Sandy	PVI	Manager	EB	NSB
Sally	PVI	Manager	EB	NSB linked to a school (pay rent)
Sue	sessional pre-school PVI, voluntary, were charity led	Manager	EB	and I'm also trustee

Figure 4.5 Characteristics of conversation participants. (key- UG-undergraduate, EM- employer based, PG-postgraduate, SB- sandbox NSB- no sandbox, PVI-private, voluntary, independent and maintained)

4.5. Data Collection Methods

The naturalistic data collection tools drew out EYT's accounts asking them about their experiences in the workplace. In order to generate deep understanding of the

influences that shape their practice and identity, three data collection periods were identified: questionnaires (phase 1) sand box conversations (phase 2) with phase 3 being the selection and writing of my own narrative accounts. This aligned closely with the narrative approach I was taking and would remove the temporal issues of a lengthy study. I was able to gain greater depth of discussion with participants on a one-to-one basis which generated rich unique conversations. The chronology of how the whole process unfolded can be seen in figure 4.6. As a consequence of the data collection taking place during the Covid 19 pandemic, revised ethical approval was sought for questionnaires and sandbox conversations using creative and online methods. (see section 7.1) (approval documents in Appendix B)

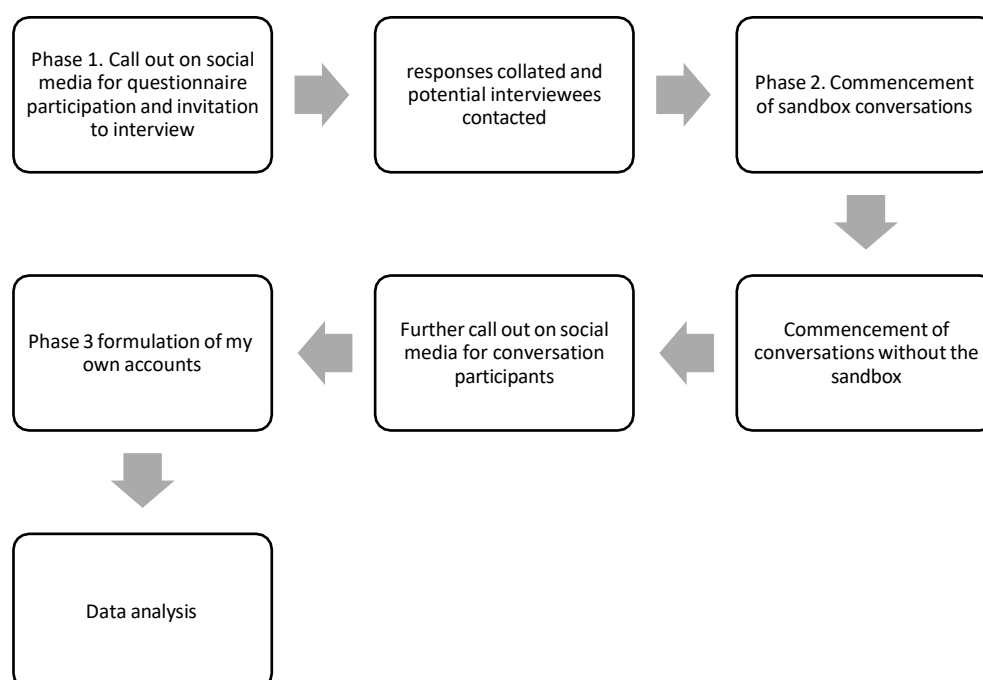


Figure 4.6 the chronological process of data production

4.5.1 Phase 1. Questionnaires.

Questionnaires were utilised as they provided the springboard for the collection of participant accounts in two ways. Firstly, they were a starting point to begin to identify themes which could be pursued in the conversations and secondly, a tool to identify those respondents who would be willing to engage in a sandbox conversation. The questionnaires were designed using Qualtrics and launched online via social media (Twitter, LinkedIn and closed Facebook groups). The British Psychological Society (2021) indicate that using the internet to undertake

educational research is becoming increasingly commonplace and with it a distinct set of ethical issues requiring consideration (discussed later in section 4.7). The questionnaires were a combination of closed and open questions guided by the theoretical framework, and the projects research aim and sub questions (see Appendix C). They were trialled amongst colleagues including one who specialises in designing online questionnaires. Those questions requiring a closed response were added to gain insight into participant demographic. The open questions asked them to consider the role of the EYT whilst also asking them to identify the significant individuals, experiences and events that have shaped them. I needed to be mindful that the open questions were not too onerous for participants as Denscombe (2014) notes, participants can suffer 'respondent fatigue' and that the topic being researched is of concern to them as this will have a more considered response than one they perceive to be irrelevant (p.172).

An information sheet and consent form were included at the beginning of the questionnaire for participants to fully understand the nature of the study and their involvement. The advantages of using this method were that they could be completed at the convenience of the respondent, using any device, were completely confidential, cost effective, environmentally friendly (paper free meaning that completed sheets would not go astray) and could cover a wide geographical distribution (Cohen et al., 2020). The response rate was relatively low (40) however the inclusion of open questions throughout generated some rich and useful detailed responses and within those, 12 participants added details to participate in the sandbox conversations.

Although the questionnaire was initially intended to provide a broad overview and support recruitment to the conversations, the open-text responses also formed a complementary source of empirical material. They extended the geographical and contextual range of the study and enabled patterns relating to professional identity, pedagogical values, recognition, leadership and the perceived purpose of the EYT role to be identified across a wider group of participants. These responses informed the areas explored in the subsequent conversations and were also drawn upon directly within the findings where they illuminated shared views, differences or tensions across participants' accounts. The questionnaires did not provide the depth or relational detail generated through the conversations, and were therefore not

treated as equivalent datasets; rather, they contributed breadth, helped sensitise the analysis to recurring concerns and provided a wider context within which the more detailed narratives could be interpreted.

After contacting those respondents, 3 sandbox conversations were held. After sending 2 emails and 1 reminder I did not press for involvement as I felt this may be considered a little demanding. I conducted a further social media shout out on LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook for participants to engage in a sandbox conversation, and this yielded more interest which eventually amounted to 6 more EYTs agreeing. These were arranged to take place via a virtual platform of the participants choice, either Microsoft Teams, Facetime and WhatsApp and recorded with their permission.

4.5.2 Phase 2. Conversations.

It would be worthwhile here to clarify why I want to call these conversations rather than interviews. My rationale lies in perception and was part of my reflexive processes to recognise my positionality in the research as a co-constructor with my participants. Using the term interviews, implies a role that individuals are 'given' and can contribute to a power imbalance, that I am somehow in a hierarchal position, whereas I wanted the process to feel far more collaborative. Central to any inquiry is asking questions. Swain and King (2022) identify advantages to having informal conversations as opposed to interviews that aligned to my study. For example, less formality and respondents feeling like they have time for a 'chat' as opposed to an interview. The number of questions may be less and the opportunities to 'give a little of oneself' feel more natural than in formal interview situations.

Furthermore, Swain and King (2022) talk about *participatory conversations* that involve a collaborative interchange between the researcher and another person or other people (participant/s), which is how the interactions evolved during this phase of my data production. Swain has utilised this approach in multiple studies including education contexts and proposes that participatory and informal conversations aid rich, authentic data generation in real-life settings which can enhance findings. Swain and King (2022) suggest that there is often less participant performativity, so researchers may gain better understanding of individuals' experiences, ideas and thoughts. This approach can reduce imbalances of power between the researcher and those being researched, yet there still could be issue of power relationships as

the plan is generally set and controlled by the researcher, so one can think about them as 'conversations with a motive' (Swain and King, 2022, p9), but this approach was my 'best fit' and it is important to acknowledge it will not be perfect (Creswell, 2024). To address the issues, motive in my study I provided participants with information forms (Appendix B) which detailed my reasons for the research and in my introductory commentary to our conversations, I also took the opportunity to provide participants details about my practitioner background.

4.5.2.1 Using the Sandbox as a Stimulus

I had purposely exposed myself to creative methodologies during my doctoral journey, attending conferences, forums, and in my reading, as I was interested in less formal data collection methods, using visual techniques and participatory approaches. Creative research methods have been employed in previous ECEC studies. Clark and Moss (2001) developed the mosaic approach to researching with young children in 2001 which utilised a multi-modal approach to capturing the voices of their participants, for listening to, and consulting children on their perspectives with regard to their daily lives and school experience. Children's own photographs, tours and maps hoped to gain deeper understanding of children's perspectives when traditional data collection tools would not be useful or appropriate. The 'A day in the life of an early years practitioner project' (Miller et al., 2012) was a study conducted internationally exploring the complex realities of practitioners working with children and families in a range of roles and settings. The data collection tools were video observations and case notes alongside discussions with practitioners about their perceptions of their role.

I employed a creative method which involved a sand tray containing characters to recreate events and experiences to stimulate initial conversation. This approach has its roots in therapy and has been used in education research (see Mannay, 2015). Sand tray work is differentiated from sand play therapy by focusing on expression not therapy (Bradway and McCoard, 1997). The technique involved the use of self-chosen figures in a sand tray which participants used to recreate scenes (their working day for this study) to elicit conversations and talking points. Mannay (2015), suggests that this method affords participants space to "show and narrate their experiences and lives" (p.71). Discussions around the created scenes and events then followed.

ECEC research which utilises the sand tray is limited. A study by Linzmayer et al. (2013) utilises the method to document children's experiences with nature and they highlight some key benefits which they apply to research with children, which I argue would equally apply to adults. These include reduced pressure to perform or produce and the capacity to elicit rich narratives. It was important to heed Barry's (1996) advice and be mindful that such an approach could be "intrusive, time consuming, resistance prone, confusing, frustrating, and dependent on the skills of the researcher" (p.413). For this study, the aim was to gain a deeper insight into the participants individual accounts and significant experiences using creative methods to stimulate discussion

4.5.2.2. Unanticipated Challenges

Due to the pandemic, the sandbox conversations had to take place online. This was an unanticipated adjustment. Sand had been restricted in many settings due to cross contamination concerns, so it was difficult for participants to gain access. However, two conversations were conducted online from the EYTs' home as they had resources available there and one from a setting where the participant removed herself from the children's presence to use the fresh sand and figures. Prior to the pandemic I had intended to use a wide range of miniature fantasy, realistic and play figures which I had selected on the basis of their differences to each other. I was interested which figures the participants would select and why. Mannay (2015) advises that the researcher should not attempt interpretation of the figures (nor indeed the scenes) but wait for meaning to be identified and ascribed by the individual. As the participants were now selecting their own resources, fortuitously, any tendency to ascribe my own interpretations was reduced, thus creating a more authentic experience to the one I had planned.

4.5.1.1 Sandbox Conversation Process

The interaction between myself and the participant always started with some informal exchange. I introduced myself to participants as a doctoral researcher but then gave an overview of my working life in ECEC, including the qualifications I had gained along the way. I also gave a verbal rationale for the study, all of which were intended to give them a sense of who I am and why I wanted to undertake the research. I would then ask them about their setting, their role, how long they had worked there and inevitably, the impact of the pandemic upon themselves, colleagues' children and families. The intended outcome of this was to build trust

through familiarity and recognition of some shared connections between us (Hertz, 1997).

The next part of the conversation then utilised a semi-structured approach, with just one opening comment from me, “talk me through your day using your sand tray...”. This proved to be an effective springboard for the participants. The use of the figures provided an opportunity for attention to be focused upon the sand tray activity, a “projective tool” (Hutton, 2004), averting some attention directly from the EYTs. Whilst they were talking through their day, we often naturally digressed slightly and were able to discuss other significant topics together which offered further insight into their experiences. All the conversations were recorded on Teams, WhatsApp or FaceTime which the participants could access.

The other 6 participants elected not to use the sand tray, for logistical and personal preference reasons and we had more traditional conversations online, using the same prompt “Talk me through your day...”. Again, these were recorded to be transcribed later. These all took place at a convenient time for the participants and in their preferred location.

The sand tray interviews also suggest potential value for future early years research. By giving participants something tangible to arrange, point to and move while speaking, the method appeared to support recollection and enabled complex relationships, routines and workplace dynamics to be represented without relying entirely upon direct questioning. The tray shifted some of the focus away from the conventional researcher-participant exchange and allowed participants to determine which people, spaces and events were foregrounded in their accounts. According to Gauntlett, (2007), Bagnoli, (2009) and Mannay, (2016), creative elicitation methods can similarly produce forms of knowledge that may remain less visible within standard verbal interviews, particularly where experiences are relational, spatial or difficult to articulate immediately. However, the decision of six participants not to use the tray demonstrates that such approaches are not universally preferred or logistically accessible. Future researchers might therefore offer sand tray work as an optional method, examine how it shapes the kinds of narratives produced, and consider how material or visual elicitation could be adapted for online research without assuming that the objects possess meanings beyond those attributed to them by participants.

4.5.2.3 A Key Turning Point

I watched the first video back, using my journal to record some initial thoughts and was concerned at how often I heard my own voice in the recording. However, I reflected and considered the resonance I felt when hearing someone else's accounts and thought about significant experiences of my own and how these relate to what I was hearing. Initially I thought that this level of involvement from me during the discussion was an intrusion and that I could be leading the conversation. Mindful of Barry's (1996) cautionary advice about ascribing my own meaning to the participants' narratives, I always made sure to ask for clarification of interpretations. After listening several times, I was satisfied that the participants were all equally involved and had been able to raise and talk through points freely.

This was the point at which I recorded the first of my narratives, relating to shared experiences we had discussed. I undertook this activity when further conversations made me recall a similar experience. The participant had spoken about feeling undermined and not valued by colleagues in the primary sector which triggered a memory. A positive aspect of using an online platform to undertake our conversations was that I was able to observe body language and hear responses with renewed focus and clarity. Other advantages included convenience for the participant (after work); their geographical distance not being a barrier, and capturing experiences from a diverse range of practitioners in a wide range of locations and settings

4.5.2.4 Limitations of the Methods

While the online questionnaire complemented the narrative inquiry component of this study by enabling participation from a broader range of early childhood practitioners, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. The use of both open- and closed-ended questions allowed for the collection of both descriptive and interpretive data; however, the depth of insight was inevitably more limited than that generated through narrative or conversational methods. Open-ended responses were often concise, reflecting participants' varying levels of engagement, time constraints, and differing levels of confidence in written expression. In contrast to the relational and dialogic nature of sandbox conversations, the questionnaire format did not allow for probing, clarification, or the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant.

The absence of non-verbal cues, such as tone, gesture, and emotional inflection, further constrained the interpretive possibilities of the data. As responses were written rather than spoken, they reflected participants' self-edited accounts of experience rather than spontaneous narrative expression. In addition, the online format carries inherent sampling and accessibility limitations. Participation was self-selecting, potentially attracting those who were more comfortable with technology or motivated to share their perspectives.

Despite these limitations, the online questionnaire provided valuable contextual insights that supported and extended the narrative inquiry findings. The inclusion of both open- and closed-ended questions enabled the identification of broader patterns and points of contrast, enriching the interpretive landscape of the study while maintaining coherence with its qualitative, interpretivist orientation.

The use of online conversations did prove to have limitations, the most significant being my desire to utilise the sandbox and figures as stimulus for discussion. A significant barrier to the sand box method appeared to be that this unfamiliar approach did not appeal to respondents who stated that they would prefer a more traditional interview. One further barrier was the actual logistics of being able to record the participants using the sandbox and their faces at the same time (only one interview did this successfully). Therefore, the outcome of these limitations was that three of the nine participants used a sandbox. Of those 3 I could only see one of their hands (Jill), Lisa used the sandbox differently in that she wanted to demonstrate the curiosity approach the setting favoured and her box was filled with natural objects and open-ended resources which she played with while we spoke. Finally, Molly was able to angle her camera so that I could see her and the box as she talked through her day.

Lastly, reflecting on the narrative accounts elicited during sandbox conversations are reconstructions of experience. Participants' narratives are influenced by memory, context, and ongoing identity construction, revealing how practitioners make sense of their professional lives at a particular point in time (Bruner, 1990). The creative, embodied nature of sandbox conversations also introduces interpretive complexity: symbolic representations and spatial arrangements are open to multiple readings, and participants varied in their comfort and fluency with this expressive method.

Additionally, the relational and collaborative nature of narrative inquiry requires careful ethical consideration; despite efforts to preserve participants' authentic voices, my role in shaping and representing their narratives cannot be fully neutralised (Clandinin, 2006).

Recognising these limitations does not undermine the study's credibility but rather demonstrates methodological integrity, acknowledging that narrative inquiry privileges depth, complexity, and co-construction over objectivity and generalisation.

4.5.3 Phase 3. Autoethnographic Accounts from my own Practice

Many children, families, events and experiences stay with us long after our interactions with them. The inclusion of my own narratives in the study (see full versions in Appendix A) posed methodological and ethical dilemmas for the study. I needed to explore what value these added to the study and justify their inclusion. The experiences that I selected were the ones that created the biggest ruptures and turning points in my professional life, whether it was practice from a child's perspective, the imposition of policy from 'outsiders' or ideas around hierarchy and schoolification. The use of my own experiences in the research process can establish my credibility as 'insider status' and are of value to this study as I have worked in the ECEC and achieved a similar qualification to my participants.

Reflecting on one's positionality is also a form of knowledge production (Massoud, 2022), suggesting that sharing life experiences can help academics build a community *among* researchers and *between* researchers and their research subjects, particularly pertinent for this thesis as we identify as members of under-represented or minoritised groups. I consider that sharing aspects of my professional life within conversation with participants, where I acknowledged similar experiences and thoughts with enabled open discussions, about how privilege, interactions, experiences and power have shaped our practice and identity.

4.6. Data Analysis

4.6.1. Analysing the Questionnaires.

A logical starting point was the first sweep of data collection which was the online questionnaires. Though responses were low, it allowed the identification of some

preliminary themes which could then be used as a starting point for the analysis of the conversations (Appendix D). Braun and Clarkes' (2022) framework was used at each stage of the process for this data set however this was adapted slightly. The initial analysis of the questionnaire responses comprised of adding the five open questions to a table to identify phrases and words of interest, (see figure 9). Braun and Clarke (2022) term this as inductive thematic analysis as I was drawing out ideas. Stage 2 involved looking at common phrases and words. Stage 3 involved grouping together codes ideas and themes and stage 4 was looking at how those themes could then be further understood through the lens of the theoretical framework (see appendix J). The table below (Figure 4.7) shows the entire process in more detail.

Phase	Activity	Research notes
1.	Examination of open comments in questionnaire responses	Searching for significant words or phrases, pre-coding, thinking about the research questions, links to the themes in the literature review (LR) and the Theoretical Framework (TF)
2.	Identifying the codes	Looking at commonalities thinking about links to the RQ's, LR and TF
3.	Identifying the themes	Identifying where groups of codes can be themed, thinking about links to RQ's, LR and TF

4.	Examination of the conversation transcripts for themes	Searching for new significant words and phrases, looking for the themes from the questionnaires, thinking about links to RQ's, LR and TF,
5	Identification of themes and links to my narratives established	Group these now with the questionnaire responses
6	Links to TF established	Present findings under the generated themes

Figure 4.7 Braun and Clarkes (2022) Adapted thematic analysis framework

4.6.2. Analysing the Conversations

The conversations were individually transcribed using the manual technique of listening to the recording and typing the conversation (Appendix F). I then organised these into two separate sections, the first was to use the contextual data to build a pen portrait of the EYT to make her feel like a person rather than a participant and the second was to search through the transcripts for themes. The second step was to turn her recollection of the day into a short narrative. The purpose of this was a further commitment to the approach of narrative inquiry with the use of participants accounts about their work. This involved mostly using each participants words verbatim but also a level of editing in relation to coherence and chronology with the addition of some new words for the accounts to flow more fluently. This is in line with Wade et al.'s (2009,) approach of preserving 'many of the participants 'actual words' (p.43). This process of a type of 'fictionalisation' builds on work by Clough (2002) who suggests that fictionalising education experience offers a way to both protect anonymity but more importantly, uncover narratives which may not otherwise be told 'importing fragments of data from real events (which can) speak to the heart' (p.8). Furthermore, Tipper and Gilman (2024) propose a relationship between scholarly writing and narrative writing in that they help us make sense of the world around us as they share some qualities such as truth telling and truth revealing. The authors acknowledge there is no 'right way' to connect research and fiction (p.4), that there are a range of possibilities. For this study, I have restructured

the empirical data to flow like a narrative account and less like a conversation to engage the reader. Fictionalising narrative has been utilised in a similar way by Mifsud (2016) who describes her approach as dramatisations using a semi-fictionalised narrative to illuminate emerging concepts. Forrester et al. (2021) also used fictionalisation to create scenarios and in similarity to my study created pen portraits which were 'real' as they summarise and faithfully reflect participants' accounts and have their roots in fact (Campbell and Kane, 1998, 3).

Finally, I searched through the transcripts for themes (see appendix G). This entailed using both deductive and inductive analysis, deductive as I was searching for priori themes from the questionnaires and inductive as I began searching for meanings and patterns in the conversations to create a new, second series of themes. According to Swain (2018) utilising both inductive and deductive methods ("hybrid" p2) to thematically analyse data is a flexible framework, for qualitative studies. A further element of this being a deductive process is having in my mind how these themes link to the theoretical framework, and the research aims and questions. Whilst I was exploring the data I was also highlighting phrases and words to use later in the findings section which would illustrate a point or argument I might want to make.

4.6.3 Justifying the Process

Manual transcription enabled me to familiarise myself once more with the responses and is the first (and essential phase) of Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis framework. Braun and Clarke's analysis framework also enabled the capture of complex, messy and contradictory relationships (Sakata et al., 2019). The themes identified in the questionnaire provided a starting point, so this part of the process of getting to grips with the narrative accounts approach was a little more deductive as I was searching for those initial themes, but by being reflexive throughout I allowed further themes to be generated. I used several comb throughs to try to ensure that I was not seeing what was not there but also being open to what was. I also needed to avoid falling into a 'swamp', wherein meanings become muddled by excessive layers of analysis (Finlay, 2002) As Goldstein (2016) notes, it may seem unnatural when attempting to ensure reflexivity to stop the analysis process, but this insular introspection can cause distance from the study. To address this, I ensured I

regularly re-read my notes, deciding when I had gone far enough.

Lastly, I followed the same process to analyse my own narrative accounts, looking for the themes identified in the participant data and letting new ones be generated from my own accounts (Appendix H). Furthermore, I used the lens of my critical ecological theoretical framework in the back of my mind whilst teasing through the data. This searching, identifying, sorting and categorising of themes enabled me to put the theoretical framework to work, to organise ideas in relation to this (Appendix I). Critical ecology looks at the relationships between the systems and whilst I was categorising responses I was actively exploring these relationships as well as exploring what happens at the intersection of the structures. Therefore, the framework in this instance also served as an effective measure to ensure focus.

4.7. Ethical Considerations

4.7.1 Approval Process.

Due to the significant changes that had been made to the study in response to the pandemic and data production, a new ethical approval process in the Higher Education Institute needed to be undertaken (See Appendix B) and I needed to reconsider all aspects of my study from revised, reflexive ethical perspectives. The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) (2019) concur suggesting that the constant attention to ethics in methods counters the idea that the ethical procedure is a 'tick box' and a hindrance to research but rather produces better designed projects. Starting from how the data would be produced which was now going to be completed via the internet, I considered the ethical challenges that may arise, seeking guidance from the British Psychological Society's (2021) guidelines for conducting internet research.

Ethical conduct in educational research required me to re-examine my practice for using online platforms. In conventional research, privacy, vulnerability, potential harm, anonymity, confidentiality, non-maleficence and promotion of beneficence are 'regular' considerations (British Educational Research Association (BERA) 2024). However, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) (2019) suggest the field is far wider than this. Pertinent to this study it includes the necessity to protect myself, considering any conflicts of interest such as my participation on internet groups. Further considerations identified by the AoIR were the participants right to withdraw, the use of public domains to ask for participation (and respondent validation) and the

ethics of using social media.

4.7.2 Ethical Procedures

I attempted to protect participants as the link to the questionnaires was embedded in the tweet/post and no-one would know that they had clicked the link. Protection was offered in the interview shout out on social media as I asked for direct messages rather than responding in public if they thought they could be involved in the project, but not everyone did this unfortunately. Therefore, I contacted them and ensured they understood the implications of responding publicly rather than privately.

The questionnaires did not yield any traceable personal data other than their broad location at the time of completion which only I could see. The questions on the form were not leading or sensitive though asking participants to reveal significant events, experiences or individuals may open old wounds. There was no pressure to complete these questions (I did not choose a 'force answer' option on the Qualtrics software) and it was made clear on the information sheet why I was asking the question and how their information would be used (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). I also ensured that I adhered to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) legislation which again was detailed in the information form. I included a consent form which detailed their right to withdraw from the study. Their confidentiality was assured as I was not sharing their responses with anyone but my supervisory team using only the code name I have given them which assured their anonymity. Any identifying features that they may have let slip during conversations or written responses was edited out of the final comments.

The conversations posed further ethical dilemmas such as the use of social media for research, recording and storage of the interview and privacy of location for the conversations. Cohen et al. (2020) term these issues as broadly public and private matters. The issue of using social media for the call out for participation for research was multi-layered, as Hudson and Bruckman (2005) suggest individuals can often feel as though an online public platform is private. I also needed to consider my identity here too, as I am part of a range of online groups within the sector where I had previously shared opinions and commentary. However, I reconciled this with the fact that the respondents would have a good picture of my beliefs and stance, I was an open book, with no hidden agenda. One dilemma that I did trouble over was where the recorded conversations took place. If they happened in the workplace

there was the possibility of our conversation being overheard which may compromise the participants. Yet having them talk through work related topics could also be unsettling as this was their home and I might be perceived as an intruder or stranger they are effectively inviting into their safe space. Chiumento et al. (2018) concur, offering sound advice to encourage participants to use earphones, whilst recognising that it is possible participants may still self-censor their responses for fear of saying something “wrong” in front of others. To try to alleviate this, I followed the authors’ advice and suggested earphones, and I kept notes about my observations of what was happening in the participants’ environment to record the potential role of their surroundings. I also made sure to ask periodically if it was ok to continue.

Establishing a rapport with the participants which may have been more difficult online did not feel to be an issue, I think our similar backgrounds may have helped this as we quickly fell into easy conversation about practice. There were wider issues to consider though, as identified by Keen et al. (2022), such as potential concerns over data confidentiality and interview safety from cyber-interruption. I mitigated against these by following guidelines from the AoIR (2019) which suggested that I needed to use a situational ethics approach, where professional discretion and self-reflexivity were dynamic throughout. Additionally, video interviewing participants in their home settings risked them being distracted from issues such as childcare and pets as well as email/phone notifications (Rahman et al., 2021), to mitigate this is consistently checked in with EYTs to ensure they were happy to continue whilst keeping an eye out to what was occurring in the background.

4.8. Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework underpinning this study, which explored how EYTs construct and make sense of their professional identities through workplace experience. Grounded in an interpretivist epistemology and constructivist ontology, a narrative inquiry approach was selected to privilege participants’ voices and recognise experience as relational, temporal, and situated. The use of sandbox conversations as a creative and dialogic form of data generation enabled rich, embodied narratives that captured the complexity of practitioners’ professional lives.

The chapter has detailed the philosophical foundations, research design, participant

recruitment, data collection and analysis procedures, and ethical considerations that guided the inquiry. Attention was also given to reflexivity; while acknowledging the inherent subjectivity and contextual specificity of narrative inquiry, the approach provided the depth and interpretive richness necessary to illuminate participants' meaning making and identity construction.

The following chapter presents the findings that were generated from participants' narratives, exploring how their narrative accounts reveal the interplay between personal experience, professional identity, and the wider policy and practice contexts of ECEC.

Chapter 5. Findings and Analysis. Quality in Practice: Narratives, Tensions and Experiences in ECEC.

5.1 Introduction

The following chapter will present and analyse the findings from the data collection. The first section features a pen portrait of the participants taken from contextual data within our conversations. In keeping with narrative inquiry's commitment to relational, contextualised accounts of experience, the pen portraits are presented as researcher-constructed, data-derived summaries that help readers "place" each participant within the three commonplaces of temporality, sociality and place. Their purpose is to offer an orienting sense of each EYT's work life in relation to the study rather than producing participant-verified biographies. Narrative Inquiry recognises the researcher's active, reflexive presence in composing research texts and invites transparency about how field texts are shaped into interim and final texts (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004). In this tradition, the portraits function as part of that reflexive composition process and trustworthiness is supported through reflexive practice and clear explication of interpretive decisions (Riessman, 2005).

The subsequent sections analyse their narratives in relation to the conceptual anchor of quality, presented in the themes which the data generated. I include my own narratives because as a researcher, formerly a practitioner, my own accounts offer important insights into the workplace experiences of 'quality' in ECEC. Short sections of these are included alongside participant narratives to deepen interpretation. This approach aligns with the discussion, where I argue that quality in ECEC is experienced through everyday interactions and workplace cultures. Including my own narratives supports this by making visible the interpretive lens through which I understand these experiences. Qualitative methodologists emphasise that researcher reflexivity is a core marker of rigorous interpretation (Sibbald et al., 2025) and that a researcher's biography shapes how they understand the social world (Gurr et al., 2024). By positioning my practitioner experience alongside participant accounts, I follow calls to make subjectivity explicit within qualitative analysis (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023), thereby deepening and contextualising the interpretation. Links will be established to the theoretical framework throughout, for relevant reference points, alongside key literature from the field.

The findings from all data collection methods will respond to the aim and research questions of the study thus.

Aim.

To explore how workplace experiences, quality assurance mechanisms and policy discourses shape EYT's pedagogy, professional relationships and identity.

RQ1.

How does the quality agenda create challenges and opportunities for EYT's agency in shaping practice and sustaining professional values?

RQ2.

How do EYT's perceive, negotiate, and respond to their role as graduate leaders within a quality-driven policy context?

RQ3.

How do tensions between external quality frameworks and relational, pedagogical understandings of quality influence EYT's professional identity and practice

Using the analytical methods described in Chapter 4, the four themes which the data from the questionnaires and conversations generated are: Beliefs and Values, Relationships, Identity and Structural Processes and these themes are presented as subheadings. This in turn will provide participant insight into the workplace experiences of EYT's, illuminating how they make sense of, negotiate, and potentially resist discourses of quality in their professional lives. The findings expose how EYT's occupy a unique space, positioned as leaders of quality yet also as members of a workforce structurally disadvantaged by gendered, classed, and marketised dynamics.

Exploring their narratives provides a window into how policy discourses are internalised, contested, or reimagined in practice. In doing so, the research extends debates about professionalism, identity, and democratic practice within the English ECEC system. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, influences operating at the exosystem and macrosystem levels, while seemingly distant from individual

practitioners, were evident within participants' accounts as moments of cultural dissonance and professional tension. Bronfenbrenner (1989) suggests that misalignments can occur between systems which Zhang (2018) states can give rise to experiences of 'culture shock' a concept that resonates strongly with EYT's narratives of working within settings shaped by school-based norms and accountability structures.

Participants described feeling positioned between competing pedagogical cultures: one grounded in relational, play-based early childhood practice, and another driven by formalised expectations of readiness, performance and measurable outcomes. This dissonance was evident in accounts of having to justify play, defend relational approaches, or adapt language and documentation to align with dominant school discourses. Such experiences reflect how ECEC, as a distinct pedagogical practice, remains poorly understood beyond the profession (Dahlberg and Moss, 2008), resulting in EYT's experiencing their expertise as simultaneously essential and marginalised.

Importantly, these moments of cultural dissonance did not simply disrupt practice; they shaped how quality was enacted and protected. In response, EYT's engaged in acts of negotiation and subversion, complying with structural expectations while reworking them to preserve process quality within their immediate microsystems. The analysis, therefore, suggests that subversive practice emerges not as opposition, but as a necessary professional response to ecological misalignment, enabling EYT's to sustain developmentally appropriate pedagogy in contexts where early years values are not institutionally prioritised.

5.2. Participant Pen Portraits and Narratives

To orient the reader, I first introduce each participant through concise pen portraits that situate their experiences across temporality, sociality and place. These vignettes are interpretive sketches rather than biographies; they foreground how context threads through the analysis that follows.

Amelia

Amelia is the youngest of the participants, (mid-twenties), and the only one to gain EYT's through the fulltime UG route alongside an Early Childhood Studies degree.

She is working as a lead practitioner in a brand-new purpose built PVI setting in the North Midlands. The manager also holds EYTS. She chose to engage in a traditional conversation rather than utilising the sandbox. In relation to qualifications, she has undertaken further study in the form of a PCET teaching qualification and was at the time studying part time for an MA in Education. Previously to being employed in her current setting, she taught in a local FE college. She was asked to talk about her typical day.

Amelias Narrative.

Our day starts when before the children come in and this is where my main responsibilities begin too, these are administration duties, paperwork, plans and reviews of the children. This is also the staff's responsibility there's no hierarchy in the setting. We welcome the children in, we have routines for the day, story time, In the Moment Planning (ITMP), and learning outdoors, as well as specific targeted interventions for children such as speech and language. Our provision is completely free flow to the outdoor area, all rooms are completely free flow play with each room having access to a different area, the babies sleep outdoors and all of the practitioners are forest school trained.

My role is now quite broad with responsibilities such as improving communication with parents and carers, I recently initiated implementing a weekly newsletter and developing activity sheets for parents to do with the children at home. We need to trust parents and I think we are a support for parents to help their children develop. I think it's important to network with other professionals for new ideas as I know people in the sector outside of the workplace, some are really well-known for their practice within the ECEC community. Sometimes staff are resistant to change to what we do but it's important to change to enhance practice so for example how we record observations now using the iPad.

I am now also a mentor for people doing EYTS, I had not looked at the standards for a very long time though! Doing EYTS was the best thing I ever did, I think it gave me specialist knowledge, a deep foundational understanding around child development and the importance of children's interests. The placement part where we had prolonged periods in different settings was really good as it put a different slant on things a different way of looking at things and different ideas and different practice

with children across the EYFS. EYTS has given me increased confidence in my own practice, more so than those around me. EYTS has taught to think about things differently, use a range of perspectives to think more deeply. But we face battles in getting recognition and parity with QTS.

Sally

Sally is the manager of a committee led, sessional care, PVI setting situated in an affluent area in the Northwest which is linked to a school. They hire a room and pay rent to the school and are their wrap around provision so at certain points in the day they can have a broad age range of children. She is mid-forties and started out with a degree in primary education but dropped the QTS aspect, she then worked part time in early years settings whilst raising a family. She also completed a level 3 childcare qualification whilst working. She completed EYTS via the graduate employer-based route. Sally did not use the sandbox for her conversation.

Sally's Narrative

I am currently the only EYT in the setting, but we are all highly qualified members of staff and experienced, we all work part time as we have families, so we use a reflective log, it's a communication and planning tool that we use between us. This is something I initiated and implemented after a bit of a lightbulb moment, the level 3s don't fill it in as much. I think that's a difference the depth of inquiry, why is that happening? We reflect on the emotional and physical environment for children's learning and development needs. We are a small team, but we all work together, the previous manager had worked here for 17 years so we had a lot of restrictive practice, we have changed everything.

Our children just tend to get on with it! They are independent learners we have a good relationship with the school reception class, and we do some phonics from Phase 1 letters and sounds but we do question our practice so asking, 'do they need circle time?' We recognise the importance of social skills and independence as well as routines, but we try to balance this with children's needs. Outdoor learning is really important here and we have a specific time for the outdoor area as we share with school. When we do phonics, we used to separate the children but now they are

all together, this tended to be more formal under the old manager. You potentially have a two-year-old sitting for some time which goes against everything we stand for, your heart wants to do but your head has to do.

EYTS has given me underpinning knowledge and to think about the importance of theory, recognising theory, that's the bit that speaks to me that's my personal pedagogy. I am also in the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) and that ignited a passion for quality and what does quality look like? We do have a few children that are pupil premium, but most tend to be from stable working families, and we have low levels of diversity of ethnicity so a lot of this 'closing the gap' isn't always relevant, we are doing this because we know it's right for our children and families.

Caroline

Caroline is working in a special school in the Midlands as the class teacher, she has QTS and NNEB. She has been working in early years for five years and in SEN schools for 20 years she has an autism specialism. In her classroom she has 6 children with complex needs and with 3 members of staff, she is the only EYT in the setting and has whole responsibility for her room but works alongside a QTS. Her journey to EYTS was the FD route, followed by the Top up degree, she worked as a support to SLT whilst studying. It was her UG dissertation which spiked her interest in EY. The head of the school suggested she gain QTS too.

Caroline's Narrative

A typical day consists of six children usually wanting to be naked with some pockets of excellent work! We wanted support for this but the Ed Psych, was not helpful. He didn't suggest anything we hadn't already tried or were trying, we have children with a huge range of complex needs. I am responsible for all the staff in my room, and I think we offer consistency for the children, and they do better in our small groups. During lockdown and the deployment of staff I think managements and other colleagues' eyes were opened to what we do and I now feel able to influence colleagues and practice, people are beginning to recognise that if we get it right in our classroom this then influences what happens in theirs. We try to pass on info to the children's next classroom, but I had the response that 'I don't need that - I like to see children as a blank canvas!' we have seen some regression in children because

of this approach, I still feel a responsibility to the children even when they have moved on. Sometimes it feels like there's little value placed on our opinion as its 'only' early years, but some colleagues recognise our work.

EYTS was relevant to me as I enjoyed the placements and looking at mainstream provision in the reception class. It made me think about knowing development milestones as our children all have spiky profiles so they might be way ahead with their fine and gross motor skills. I would recommend EYT to anyone but not if you want to be the teacher at the end of it, I think that's why there's dwindling numbers. There could be more leadership training on the programme though which is why I was recommended to do QTS as well as me being 'not qualified'.

Carla

The setting is a sessional provision and is the last LA maintained nursery school in the County. She has an NNEB and gained her degree via the FD followed by the Top up and completed EYTS through the GEB route, she is now doing QTS assessment only route as a teacher is needed onsite for when the Head and the teacher are not there. She has been a childminder in the past as well as range of other roles such as working in admin for a while. She believes this wider skills set is important particularly in relation to managing people.

Carla's Narrative

We start setting up the indoor and outdoor provision doing the risk assessment and checking staff and child registers, we greet the parents at the door and sing hello to the children! The children then do their self-registration and go into their key worker groups for welcome activities. Sometimes we do phonics if its applicable. We plan to use In the Moment Planning, (ITMP) free flow play and some Adult Focused Activities (AFA) too, we are attuned to children's learning and their interests, we engage in dialogic teaching and vocabulary extending. All staff are L3 and above. The afternoon session is the same routine but with a different registration routine which we tweak accordingly. I check in on colleagues and make sure they are having their PPA time. Our children have a high level of independence, which is recognised by primary colleagues, they are independent learners already, they are ready to go, and schools need to be ready for our nursery children!

We're still fighting our corner! There is a possibility of the setting becoming an associate member of an academy trust, which might secure our future in terms of longevity, structure and finance, but this might then transition into us becoming affiliated with a school. In our ideal world we know what we would like but it's whether that works financially, we've got a group vision shared between all stakeholders. We have a history in this location, parents have attended, and they all fall in love with it, we are known in our community and the governors are the same. We want to continue to do what we do well for as long as we can before becoming too schoolified. We run a range of community activities too and go out to other settings to run 'stay and play' sessions.

EYTS has given me resistance to schoolification, it made me want to be more EY! There is pressure and I have seen activities with children that are not DAP, it makes me want to preserve so much of what I believe in in terms of good practice. I know it's going to be hard; I'm not trying to start a revolution by any chance but I'm certainly going to fight my corner for what I'd like to do and I'm not afraid of that

I have noticed things kind of go in a ten-year cycle, so if you look at Family Hubs, they are like Sure Start and ITMP we used to call retrospective planning! Then you have curriculum changes. I am influenced by people like Anna Ephgrave, Alistair Bryce-Clark, knowing about free choice and integrating resources but also the older writers such as Mary Sheridan, I still use birth to 5. I think you can tell who has NNEB too as there's that balance of practice and theory.

Mary

Mary is currently the class teacher in a Local Authority Maintained (Nursery School) which is the last one in the Northeast of England, situated in a city with high levels of deprivation for children aged two-four years. She holds an NNEB she studied for the FD and Top-up then achieved EYTS through the GEB route and has been in EY for 30 years. She has also just completed QTS and is in her ECT phase and teaches part time. She had her interview from home and chose to use the sandbox. She used it to talk about the routines of the day. The head of the school is also head for another school in the area.

Mary's Narrative

At the start of the day, I am involved some admin processes such as RA, registers, checking ratios, emails from parents and staff. The children arrive and we have the same person at the gate each day who is full time and communicates any info to colleagues. We have our different areas of provision, and we are child led, child choice and we do ITMP. We have a special interest area, and we also do a lot of SEN interventions. I am now teaching properly as a qualified teacher.

My role is a balance of leadership and management and teaching. I take a lot of paperwork home to do in my own time but I'm not bitter about that or anything I just realise that I love being with the children so much that I don't really want to be taking my time away from the children its precious and its only 2.5 days a week. That's where you see the progress and see where you need to put in interventions, you're noting those wow moments. There are different dynamics each day, we encourage the children to see what's on offer, they're comfortable, and you the child recognise their individual needs and preferences. We get some really difficult families, it's so hard to unpick the problems and the generational issues. I've been here so long that I am looking after their grandchildren now. Some issues re-occurring over the generations.

The children are outside all morning, and I think it's so important. I risk assess it they all have wellies and waterproofs here, there's no excuse! We have a woodwork shed with real tools, some children have low dexterity and manipulation, and we teach the children to use the tools safely. We have A frames and a dome for physical development and give differing levels of support, and we celebrate achievements which we relay to key workers. Children are learning about choices, negotiation, and managing conflict. We make links to literacy, maps, we explore the properties of sand, water, we have role play. We've got a beautiful apple tree that the children are able to climb. We let them we are aware of the importance of our own reactions and attitudes to experiences, there's positive links to later life in school, neuroscience. We do anything to support learning in a range of contexts, and we have the confidence to do this.

EYTS gave me an extra level of knowledge and understanding and how theory relates to practice and child development, foundational knowledge, underpinning that passion for knowing what children need, very, very young children, what's going on

behind the scenes. Also, that ability to step back, reflect then act. I recognise that change must be right for the children. I think we have an uphill struggle, particularly in our area as they just want children to achieve, achieve, achieve, but often they are coming in at very low levels, when some come in they don't know how to walk, hold a knife and fork, chew, talk...so all of it has got to be about care, that's the most important thing for me for starters. We have routines but we don't want to tear them away from their play if it's something really important, rich learning, organic learning, they're good at self-regulating, we balance us being immersed with the but also having oversight of what's going on.

Lisa

Lisa is the pre-school room leader in a maintained provision in a sessional nursery class of a primary school in an area classed as deprived in the north of England. She gained EYTS through the GEB route. Before she became practitioner, she held a range of other roles in retail and hospitality. She used the sand tray throughout our conversation, utilising it to show some aspects of her practice that she felt important such as loose parts, while we spoke, she played with the objects in the sand.

Lisa's Narrative

We let the children in, and they come into continuous provision, we let them find themselves and decide what their day is going to look like. We make decisions based on the children's needs; empathy is important we limit stopping play and let it flow as much as we can. We have free flow outdoor play. That outdoor area is shared with reception, but they don't use it as much, they don't do free flow, there isn't a direct door outside. I've spent a lot of time developing that area for their gross motor skills, bushes, a hill, a tunnel, we've got small world out there, reading book, loads!

My degree is not related to early years, but I think that made me creative, open minded and open to change. You can get staid in your ways, stick to routines and plans, but that doesn't happen, does it? You need to think on your feet, build rapport, trust with children and all kinds of people. I think better practitioners have experience in different fields; you need an ability to get all types of parents to work with you which is so important. You need to see beyond the actual moment, see the bigger picture.

I'm not actually the class teacher because we are a mainstream school, I can't actually teach that class because I've not got QTS, I've only got EYTS. There's a teacher who obviously isn't trained in EYFS, only KS1 and KS2, it's left me with sleepless nights many a time, as the teacher she takes the pre-schoolers for phase 1 phonics or Storytime to a separate room and for more focussed activities and more support for the less able children. We can then focus on the twos and the two-year-old play, as sometimes I think they can get a bit lost and forgotten, especially in mainstream where there isn't that understanding of two-year-old play. There isn't the understanding of threes, the teacher really struggles with the twos she'll leave it to me, she's quite nice. I'll spend my time in continuous provision, building those early skills, attention, exploration. We're so focussed on 'school ready' (and that term sticks in my throat!) we are losing so much that we can learn from them. Why are we adapting children to fit school? When it should be practice and provision in school that needs to be adapted? It's been great to show the school how able nursery children are, comments from others and their surprise.

We use tapestry for our observations and some ITMP, but Senior Leadership Team (SLT) aren't fully on board with that or fully understand. They like the idea of it and the actual practice of it. The head teacher attended the training, made all the right noises but didn't want to implement or was scared of implementing it; she said, 'but how do you know you've covered all the areas?' That's the difference between people who are EY trained specific and those who are National Curriculum trained, it's the development side of it, it's the 'why' side of it that's not taught on QTS. So how I work isn't a whole school approach, I follow the curiosity approach, loose parts and open-ended activity. Until you understand child development and children's brains and children's bodies and don't think we'll move from where we are now until it's included in training. 'Sit down sit with your legs crossed, sit nicely' and I think 'does it matter?' they're not meant to sit like that there's research that says it harms them. If they're listening let them lie on their tummy's, let them fiddle, they are doing it in two-year-old ways, let's learn from them.

It's the play side of it too, teachers ask 'why would you just let them play, what are they getting from that?' If you don't understand what that play is bringing, what they are learning while they are playing then... if you have the confidence to say actually they are not just playing, it's the fear of Ofsted, if you can explain what you do and

why, it's that observing that interfering or interacting, I get it that they feel like they are doing nothing but you make a conscious decision not to interfere, I think that having the confidence to do that is something EYTS has given me and having the confidence to tell others its ok too, it takes time to understand and just sit next to a child and watch and listen, I really struggled at first. Children look when they need you 'I suppose I had better ask her for help!' so be brave enough not to do anything but there's often no time to pass on this knowledge or ethos.

EYTS has given me that knowledge of children and young children, how children develop, how they work, how they think and how we as practitioners can facilitate that learning and experience holistically that's a big difference between EYTS and QTS, it's the child development and the care side of it as well? In school that's like 'not my job' but it's part of EY and should be part of school as well to be honest, physical contact is a need. EYTS opens you up to other practitioners and specialists and I mention them to QTS colleagues, and they don't know who I am talking about! So, I think 'you are working in Early Years, and you don't know who X, Y and Z are?'

Julie

Julie is the owner of a PVI nursery in a rural area in the Midlands. She gained EYTS through the GEB route, and she has completed an MA in education. She has undertaken a range of other roles since qualifying. She chose to use the sand tray and small world figures and objects for our conversation and used a sticker to identify herself apart from the other figures who she described as the staff she supports in the setting. She describes her role as responsibility for the quality of the setting and practice, recruitment of new staff and supervision sessions with 80% of her time being leadership and management and 20% teaching (modelling teaching rather than with the children). She has a responsibility for safeguarding issues and liaises with other professionals so is sometimes out but is am happy to leave the staff to it. As an EYT she has oversight of everything.

Julie's narrative

I start my day by going to the office, talking to the manager and the site manager then visiting all of the rooms in the setting, I talk to the staff, and I then check our

outdoor area. We are a Forest School nursery, and we also have a nursery dog. Then I do admin duties. Some days I might be doing some staff observations of practice where I watch, listen, make notes and offer feedback. Other days I might be giving some training. I check the staff are distributed evenly across the areas of learning and that children are busy in each area and being supported. On other days I could be looking at changing the learning environment. My background is SEND.

One thing I have found is that staff were planning too far ahead so I have introduced some elements of ITMP, but we still have a paper trail for Ofsted, how are we showing planning, meeting needs, what is it feeding into, so I looked at next steps. Some practitioners don't see the overall setting so I end to move them around sometimes so they can see how what they do supports the next room, it gives them a holistic view of the children and more of a teamwork ethos. I am led by them though as I am not in all the time. I do get some resistance to change sometimes that's straight away 'that's not going to work' unless they have got a good reason why not but otherwise, I want you to try it, but if it doesn't work then I am quite happy to hold my hands up and say we tried. For example, outdoor learning some staff complained of not having the right clothes, but we all have jackets etc now. I think staff just need the confidence to work independently so I model practice a lot and show them that I am prepared to do it.

We have developed a sensory room which I initiated as well as the Forest school and we are a flagship IT nursery. Some of that comes from being an EYT but also from having a passion for outdoor learning. These provide rich learning experiences as I feel a responsibility to parents. The children take ownership of their environment so outdoors they have their own veg patch! Because I have EYT I have detailed knowledge of the child development aspect but on a professional level I think it gives me kudos and respect, especially from parents who want to take children to school at three, as its teachers led, I say 'we're teacher led as well', and I say where in QTS or the NC does it look at children under four?' I see some practice that in schools where needs are not being met, the academic side is good but...EYTS aligns more closely to the EYFS there is such a difference between the two curriculums its completely alien. I think people look at us differently more so parents than professionals it was an important qualification for me to do.

Sandy

Sandy is the nursery manager of an 80 place PVI nursery in London, taking children from ages 1-5. She took the GEB route to EYT and describes her role as 'overseeing'

Sandy's Narrative

I start my day by opening the nursery, I check emails and calls for any staff or children's absences to be able to check our ratios for the day. I am at the door when children arrive to greet the parents and children. The children start their day with a carpet session so it might be phonics, numbers or stories. We use tapestry to record observations; this is new, but I made sure that staff were on board and confident to use the iPads. I wanted them to feel part of the change rather than the change being done to them, if it gets too overwhelming, I always ask for suggestions, so they feel part of decisions not overlooked.

We are free flow, so I look at the deployment of the staff, where are the children's key workers etc. We do a baseline of new children, and we then group them within 4 weeks of them starting based on their needs. A lot of our children are English as an Additional Language (EAL) so might need interventions, so I work with the SLT or another Multi-Agency Worker (MAW)

I support the staff with planning and check children are meeting milestones, I am the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO), so I also check the needs of children are identified and then being met, supporting them with any interventions, this has become so much more difficult since Covid. I also lead on Continuous Professional Development (CPD) and training, that's a big part of my role but there is limited funding now.

I didn't have the confidence before EYT, having it has boosted it, going into schools, going into other settings has broadened my experience and knowledge than where I was with my Level 3. While my experience has grown, the expectation of the setting has grown with me, my expectation of the children, of the practice, my own practice, I have developed phonics systems! I feel I can fulfil my role I have the full backing of the director, and I am left to it. There is that trust, maybe if I was in a different place with different aged children school age children it might be different. I

haven't felt any tension from outside the setting, play based learning is key and the Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL) is so important it will set them up for life. Pressure is there though in terms of school like writing and numbers making sure children are secure.

Sue

Sue is the manager of a sessional voluntary, pack-away preschool in a village hall which is charity led she is also a trustee and gained EYTS via the GEB route. She had a previous career in retail but just started helping out, then gained her L3 and fell into doing the Foundation degree in Arts (early childhood), followed by the top up degree in early childhood. The setting was in a once affluent area of the North of England. They rely heavily on grants and funding to sustain the provision. There are two EYTs in the setting including Sue. They have mixed age children in the same room. She works with the local school as the setting provides their wrap around care.

Sue's Narrative

Firstly, I have admin duties when I come in, risk assessments, registers and emails then we set up for the children. The enhancements come from the planning, but they are familiar, only an early years person would get that, familiar but different! We are like a well-oiled machine people just crack on the current team are really good. We give each other the nod! The children are dropped off, contact with parents is so important and we were anxious after Covid, but the children have coped with coming in independently. The children then do their self-registration and have their free play, find their favourite spots. We do separate the children for some of the time so for SL interventions, listening and attention, we have small groups for basic maths and phonics and adult-led activities. We do singing and action songs. You can tell the children who don't have much adult interaction at home, they will be sitting on my lap joining in and you just think 'this is what we do', I don't make them all sit down, it's a bit much for some two-year-olds but when we get started get interested and come over anyway, so you don't have to enforce it I've seen some practitioners saying you all need to sit down! I'll be doing forward rolls with them!

I feel able to leave the staff as we all plan together, where do we want the children to be, what are our steps towards that? We have regular staff meetings where we reflect, look at issues, worries, safeguarding, we bring all our info together.

I spend the rest of my time with the children who are more demanding; the ones that don't fit in the box. We are getting more diverse communities due to the new housing, so more safeguarding, first time young single parents needing support. So we are managing all the feelings at the door. During Covid zoom calls replaced our home visits which are very valuable. There are some children that we know are waiting for snack, these are probably the ones that we've got an eye on, they go first, you can tell by their behaviour. We tend to have small groups so that conversations can be held. We are a community, we have interactions with the children over meals, this encourages friendship bonding and everyone mingles in together.

Our outside area is like a secret garden! It's you know, not pretty! Even team members that aren't outdoorsy are encouraged to go out. It's evident that there's a lack of outdoor experiences in many children. There's no need for any resources; we use what's available in the natural environment. You can see the impact being outside has on children's development.

My lead practitioner is an ex-primary school teacher but came to us as she wanted the freedom of practice to be able to do what she knew children needed, so we have a collaboration of knowledge. Doing EYTS made it all slot into place, it brought it all together, the theory, that I'd done over the past years. It made it all make sense, filled in the gaps and made me realise how much I had learned, it isn't until you reflect that you have a breadth of depth of reading, but the connections you make with children can't be taught. I produced a reflective portfolio which brought it all together I do a lot of coaching and mentoring, I mentor other EYTs. It underpins what you do with the why and the theory, which I cascade to the team, I think my leadership experience in retail has really supported me as I was in senior leadership roles then, I have experience of managing people, transferrable skills. I really feel for NQT's that don't have this.

I network regularly and I've seen a school that's trying to feed a more EY approach to teaching throughout the school, so trust the teacher and not hide behind rigid plans, you can feel the energy in the room, too rigid. I go to a range of schools and there is a lack of awareness in some about the importance of EY and getting it right, happy confident and ready to learn, what do we want that child to look like who is coming to school.

5.3 The Themes

This section synthesises insights across questionnaires and conversations and is organised into four interconnected themes, Beliefs and Values; Relationships; Identity; and Structural Processes. Each theme contributes to answering the research questions by showing how EYTs interpret, negotiate and at times resist the quality agenda in practice.

I use critical ecology as an interpretive lens rather than as a set of separate categories. Analysis began with participants' accounts of everyday practice and relationships within the microsystem, before tracing how these were shaped through connections between settings, families, schools and other professionals in the mesosystem. I then examined the influence of organisational, regulatory and policy structures in the exosystem, and situated these within macrosystem discourses concerning quality, school readiness, professionalism, gender and neoliberal accountability. The chronosystem was used to identify how policy reforms, the Covid-19 pandemic, professional trajectories and changes over time altered these relationships. The critical dimension of the framework directed attention to power; whose knowledge was privileged, where inequalities were reproduced, and how EYTs complied with, negotiated or resisted dominant expectations. These systems are treated as overlapping and mutually influencing rather than as discrete layers.

5.3.1 Beliefs and values.

Throughout our conversations, EYTs radiated a sense of pride about what they do; they spoke about how their provision and how the activities they undertake support their interactions with children and their development. This theme relates to the 'process' quality discourse. They spoke with authority and conviction about the strategies they use to work with diverse groups of parents and carers and the positive relationships that develop thereafter. Importance also surrounds the age of the children that they work with, as they are eager to clarify that it is with the very youngest, **"children under 5...very young children..."** [questionnaire response], even though working with babies and young children does not appear important to the wider education profession. EYTs are well positioned to build relationships with families according to McGillivray (2008), yet Hargreaves and Hopper (2006) propose this could prove to be a significant barrier to wider professional recognition, as a feature of a 'high status' profession is the distance between practitioner and client,

which adds a further layer of duality to the EYT role. This first section unpicks some of the responses in relation to their beliefs and values and is organised into the following sub-themes: pedagogical beliefs, play and school readiness.

Before attending to specific practices, I clarify how participants articulate their pedagogical principles and the rationales that underpin daily decisions.

5.3.1.1 Pedagogical beliefs

Without exception, all of the interview participants spoke about their provision, specifically referring to routines, play (in particular free flow play), and outdoor learning. For example, Amelia placed emphasis on everybody in the setting recognising the importance of outdoor learning opportunities and that **“all staff are now Forest School trained...the babies now even sleep outside!”**. International pedagogies also manifest in wider ideas about provision, with many responses from the conversations and the questionnaires citing ***‘in the moment planning’ (ITMP)*** and ***‘loose parts play’*** as well as the ***‘curiosity approach’*** all of which have their foundations in Reggio Emilia principles. Multiple EYTs articulated some aspects of their practice using the specific language from the EYFS, such as ***‘adult focussed activities, Free flow play, continuous provision,’*** and Sally further articulates her ideas about the ***“importance of enabling environments, the emotional environment as well as the physical environment”***. Practitioners’ knowledge and understanding have clearly moved on from more foundational ideas as they cited many new researchers, writers and ideas which now underpin their practice. With reference to in the moment planning, one questionnaire respondent suggested that:

“Moving to an In the Moment Planning (ITMP) setting has really changed how I view the importance of children leading the learning and owning their space (although it has been quite an adjustment after all the planning of the course).”

Building directly on these beliefs, participants consistently positioned play as the organising principle of quality rather than an optional add-on.

From the responses above it appears that EYTs have the knowledge and experience which enables important critique around their unique work contexts. According to Urban (2012), critiquing practice and unpacking histories is part of thinking about ECEC as a critical ecological framework, examining what we do and why we do it at

every level. This is demonstrated in the shared conversations, for example, Sally offers her reflections on the necessity and relevance of some long-held beliefs: ***“Do they need circle time?”*** and Carla recognised the need for contextual specificity of practice, and also that the setting had, ***“a group led vision”*** but also was aware of the constraints they faced: ***“In our ideal world we know what we would like its whether that works financially...”*** Sally echoed with ***“Your heart wants to do but your head has to do...”*** Meanwhile, Mary notes the ***“different dynamics in each session...knowing what children need, very, very young children, needing to step back, reflect then act...”*** Lisa also placed importance on ***“flexible routines”*** This is an interesting recognition of the value of reflecting in the moment which requires confidence and a willingness to be flexible and responsive. Reflective practice is articulated in the EYITT standards (NCTL, 2013) in relation to, ***“the effectiveness of teaching activities and educational programmes to support the continuous improvement of provision”*** and to: ***“Reflect on and evaluate the effectiveness of provision, and shape and support good practice.”*** Reflection can be a mechanistic process, however the respondents undertake this organically and authentically to inform reflexive practice and more importantly appear to have the autonomy and confidence to do so.

The ECEC profession requires a knowledgeable, reflexive highly qualified and articulate workforce that can advocate what their own professionalism entails, since the ability to evaluate and develop policy and practice within settings is fundamental to its claim to professionalism Brock, 2012; Moloney, 2015; Campbell-Barr, 2017). This is detailed in my own story, ‘The Road Barriers’ (Appendix A) where I offer a narrative describing an occasion where I determined, after careful consideration and evaluation along with our team, that an approach to implementing policy was not appropriate for the children who attended our setting. I recall an occasion where a Quality Liaison contact from the local authority took myself and a colleague to see how another pack away provision had organised a space for their two-year-olds which they felt met with provider criteria for ‘Think 2’ funding. ‘Road Barriers’ experienced by my participants are around the lack of understanding from policy makers about the complexities of working with children and families. For example: ***“...They just want them to achieve, achieve but often they are coming in at very low levels...don’t know how to walk, hold a fork, chew, talk...”*** [Mary] However, the ‘low levels’ may sometimes be developmentally appropriate and it may

be the pre-occupation of achieving that is inappropriate in terms of children progressing to the next developmental level. Lisa recalls discussions with the School Management Team around implementing ITMP: ***“The Headteacher attended the training with me, made all the right noises but didn’t want to do it...how do you know until you’ve tried...?”*** Thinking about my narrative ‘The Road Barriers’, I felt able to challenge directives based on my knowledge of our children and families but also how I interpreted the policy as a result of undertaking EYPS. The knowledge I gained had increased my confidence and sense of ***“being very secure in how we did things, always with the children and families at the heart, and that practice is contextually specific”*** [Me, The Road Barriers]

This account can be read across the ecological levels: participants’ reflective decisions with children and colleagues are located in the microsystem; negotiations with headteachers and local-authority advisers occur through the mesosystem; funding requirements, standards and quality directives operate through the exosystem; and the privileging of measurable, technicist versions of quality reflects macrosystem ideology. The chronosystem is visible in the way qualifications and accumulated professional experience increase participants’ confidence to challenge established practice. The analysis shows how power travels across these levels, but also where EYT agency interrupts it.

5.3.1.2 The Centrality of Play

A core principle of ECEC is the fundamental importance of play, acknowledged as crucial to children’s wellbeing, learning, and development, and necessitating informed support in all its forms from skilled practitioners throughout childhood (Nutbrown, 2013). Yet within the EYTS teaching standards, play is not mentioned at all, despite this widespread recognition. This may be linked to the wider quality agenda which places importance upon maths, literacy and preparedness for school (discussed in the next section). The focus of EYT training appears to be on ‘teaching’ and because of policy turns, practitioners may be striving to achieve aims, aspirations and a status that Kay et al. (2019), suggest may conflict with long held values and beliefs within the ECEC profession. As Carla articulates: ***“We want to continue to do what we do well, as long as possible before becoming too ‘schoolified’”***, whilst Caroline’s response demonstrates professional love and emotional labour: ***“I feel a sense of responsibility for children (even though they have moved on...”***). This adds a further layer of complexity in relation to the notion

of the weight of emotional labour involved in caring and educating young children, and is something often disregarded in favour of the more government driven notions of quality and technocratic practice (Fairchild and Mikuska, 2021) yet is highly demanding, as identified in the Chapter 3.

This centrality of play as a fundamental aspect of practice and participant identity features heavily from all EYTs. For example, the careful consideration given to learning resources available to children is evident:

“Tool shed...real tools, equipment...wood...A frames...domes...key worker system, different levels of support and celebrate achievements...immersed in our activities with the child but still having an oversight of all that’s going on”
[Mary]

“I’ve spent a lot of time developing the outdoor area, for gross motor, bikes, a hill, a tunnel, small world area, books... we have an Early Years area outside which we share with reception, its free flow straight out, reception don’t use it as much, they don’t do free flow, there isn’t a direct door outside...” [Lisa]

Furthermore, Carla demonstrates her knowledge around how play is inextricably linked to learning and development: ***“Routines, self-registration, phonics if appropriate, free flow, Adult Focused Activities from ITMP, children’s interests drive it so we add enhancements, attuned to children’s individual learning, vocabulary extending”*** and Julie acknowledges the importance of children’s agency: ***“Rich learning experience, children take ownership of the nursery, grow their own veg!”***

A wider recognition of the benefits of play-based pedagogy is articulated by Sue:

“My lead practitioner is an ex primary teacher, but came out to us as she wanted the freedom of practice, to be able to do what she knew children needed...and I visited a school where they are trying to feed a more Early Years approach to teaching through the school, trust the teacher not to hide behind rigid plans and just feel the energy in the room...”

The stance Sue articulates resonates with me in relation to providing a stimulating environment for the children, which to some, may not be regarded as learning. Two of my narratives which exemplify this are ‘The Running Tap’ and ‘The Frog Brush’. Firstly, ‘The Running Tap’ tells of an interaction with a Reception Class teacher:

“During a transition visit, a reception class lead from a local school was puzzled by the behaviour of D, a three-year-old boy due to start in the school nursery class the following September.

D was an active child; he had varied interests many of which involved water and paint. I watched her looking at him and asked her what she was thinking. She asked if he was SEN, and I replied no, we have no concerns, why?

“Why is he doing that with the water and the paint all the time? Running the tap and watching the water and the same paint strokes over again?”

These were 2 of D’s favourite activities, running the cold tap in the child height sink and watch the water run through his fingers at different angles as he moved them. He liked to paint lines on paper always top to bottom in a range of colours working quickly and with intent often until the paper became so sodden it ripped. He has a trajectory schema at the moment,” I replied. “His mum never gets a picture home in one piece!”

She looked at me, “Sorry what did you say?”

It transpired that she, nor any of the reception team understood schematic behaviour which evoked several feelings in our setting, most predominantly, concern about how play and early learning was enabled and supported by those working in the next phase of the education system. Similarly, in the ‘The Frog Brush’ I articulate our pedagogical approach and team ethos to child choice and free flow play:

“We would try to engage him in many activities in the setting such as the adult led activities he would participate for a period of time however his eyes would always drift back to his beloved train track. He would often have snack at his constructions and train track, not being able to tear himself away and we would never force him to. He wanted to always leave whatever he’d made that day on the carpet so that he could show grandma when she came to collect him. He didn’t really enjoy any of the extra stuff that we did in the setting, such as forest school. Again, we don’t know exactly why he didn’t enjoy forest school whether it was the puddle suits, the wellies, being outside, the mud, we never did understand why he

found it so unappealing.”

Thinking back to the quality agenda, play can get lost in compulsory school education (CSE) in favour of activities that provide more measurable indicators of development and progress. This can be problematic for some teachers, who feel it necessary to ensure that learning covers a scheme of learning or a set of objectives (Rolls et al., 2024). This is recognised by those working in formal schooling with Crittenden and Day (2024), suggesting the barriers to adapting a play-based pedagogy may include pressure and expectations from the education system, a lack of knowledge around play in schools, curriculum and timetable pressure, lack of funding and resources and lack of outdoor access. Yet play links closely to traditional theory (such as Montessori and Froebel) in ECEC and significantly, has been recently recognised by the National Literacy Trust (2024) as being fundamental to speech language and literacy as well as wellbeing. The value of play in relation to social development is evident in responses from all the participants but from Sue. She talked about daily routines that recognise children leading learning, opportunities for children to find their ***“favourite spots”*** and roam in ***their “secret garden...it’s not pretty!”*** which indicates the space is not curated and left wild for children to explore. Furthermore, she states that practitioners do not provide resources out there as ***“we use what’s available in the natural environment”***.

Lisa articulates her beliefs of children’s right to play:

“The decisions I make are based on children’s needs not what’s on the plans, I limit stopping play and let it flow as much as I can... they come in and look around then they decide what their day is going to look like...how I work isn’t a whole school approach, I follow the curiosity approach, loose parts, open ended resources...”

Practitioner beliefs surrounding the children and childhood are inherently linked to their identity as and is manifest in responses that illuminate working practices, enhanced knowledge and beliefs about the importance of play:

“Play based learning is key, Characteristics of Effective Learning is so important it sets them up for life...pressure is there in terms of school, writing, numbers, making sure the children are safe and secure” [Sandy]

This strong commitment to play comes under pressure when it meets expectations of 'school readiness'. The next subsection traces how participants navigate this interface:

“We don’t invade play, we should stay, watch, wait for them to signal to you ‘I suppose I’d better ask them for help!’ there’s no time or opportunity though to pass on knowledge or ethos” [Lisa]

“Some children have had limited adult interaction, you can tell, they are sitting on my lap, joining in and you just think ‘this is what we do’... I don’t make them all sit down, it’s a bit much for some two-year-olds but when we get started, they get interested and come over anyway, so you don’t need to enforce it” [Sue]

At the microsystem level, play is enacted through daily interactions, environments and practitioner judgement. At the mesosystem level, tensions become visible when early-years settings interact with Reception classes and other school colleagues. Exosystem pressures arise through inspection, curriculum and accountability expectations, while macrosystem ideas of schoolification and measurable progress shape what is recognised as legitimate learning. The chronosystem draws attention to the changing status of play over time. A critical lens therefore exposes whose definition of learning is privileged and how participants defend child-led pedagogy.

5.3.1.3 School readiness

Striking any kind of balance between child-led, play-based learning opportunities and adult-led activity is possibly more problematic to achieve in England due to policy and curricular pressures (Nicholson, 2019) and the school readiness agenda. This is recognised by Carla who states:

“(Schools) you need to be ready for our nursery children! There’s pressure, and I’ve seen activities with children that are not developmentally appropriate practice, not what I believe to be good practice.”

Sandy however appears to recognise the agenda differently as she talks about adapted practice (more structured as children get older):

“Carpet session based on ability, (phonics and numbers, stories), we do a base level for new children then they are grouped within 4 weeks of starting, we do English as an Additional Language (EAL) intervention, so we are Multi-

Agency Working, and work closely with Senior Leadership Team.”

Many ECEC practitioners do not see a division in play-based and adult-led however, as different pedagogical approaches exist, and practitioners do not consider their time with children as being either teacher-led or child-initiated (Fisher, 2022) and find the distinctive terminology unhelpful and they talk about their work differently. For example, Amelia advocates her knowledge of children and working with their interests: ***“Specialised knowledge...mentoring others for this, deep foundational development knowledge and children’s interests”*** and Sue talks about the ***“benefits of a mixed age setting”*** which indicate the unique opportunities in ECEC for different teaching practices and provision.

In my story ‘The Dressing Up Box’ the conflict between my pedagogical beliefs around play and the ever-present school readiness agenda is evident. J’s mum had decided to keep her at our preschool an extra term, having been born so close to the cut off period to start school the following school year:

“The reception teacher paid a visit to the preschool to see J in the July before we broke up. She insisted to know why mum had arrived at her decision, and she stayed to watch J play (who was busy racing around the hall dressed as a rabbit!) before telling me she ‘needed’ school and that she would be ‘fine’. I pushed, ‘why?’ ‘Otherwise, she will be left behind.’ ‘How so?’ ‘She would not be ready for what year one involved.’ ‘She will still be in EYFS you shouldn’t be doing anything different to us?’”

Whilst the practice within the PVI and maintained sector should be alike, Basford (2019) suggests ‘notions of hierarchical power’ within the field which indicates differences in approaches which leave EYTs in the PVI sector constrained and effectively positioned as the poor relation to their counterparts in schools which can impact working relationships. This tension is evident in many conversations with participants but most explicitly from Lisa:

“We’re so focused on ‘school ready’ (and that term sticks in my throat) ...we’re losing so much that we can learn from them, why are we adapting children to fit into school when it should be practice and

provision in school that needs to be adapted”

This exemplifies Hargreaves and Hopper’s (2006) point around professional recognition never being realised as status appears to elevate the older a child gets. Yet participants in both the questionnaires and the conversations were quite clear that their role related very specifically to young children stating ***“children up to 5”*** [questionnaire respondent] and ***“the youngest children”*** [questionnaire respondent]. The significance of this is that participants identifying the youngest children as their area of expertise indicates it as a distinct aspect of their identity. This is seen in responses that recognise the unique age phase and tuning in to the learning and development needs of early childhood. Lisa describes some aspects of her practice as ***“spending time in continuous provision, building those early skills such as attention and exploration”*** and Julie expresses how ***“children have ownership of their learning... I’ve seen practice in schools that’s QTS led where under Fives needs are not being met...”*** Again, the importance of play is emphasised as a vehicle for learning as Lisa recalls conversations with Primary colleagues: ***“Why would you just let children play? What are they getting from that?”***

As previously discussed in Chapter 3, quality is routinely framed by policy makers as a driver to reach pre-determined goals, Early et al (2007) propose that the interest in children’s outcomes and ‘school readiness’, generates an accepted way of thinking, suggesting the EYFS may be illustrative of the policy technologies through which specific forms of curriculum control are constructed. EYTs do demonstrate resistance to this, the Mesosystem is where subversion occurs, and agency is enacted, as heard explicitly from Lisa: ***“(I’m) not trying to start a revolution by any stretch but I am going to fight my corner for what I’d like to do and I am not afraid of that...”*** and: ***“resistance to schoolification made me want to be more Early Years!”*** From the conversations with EYTs, the linear, technician approach to understanding and planning for development raises some interesting responses; for example, Mary talks about a wide range of skills she feels children need and how she facilitates that:

“Choice, independence, negotiation, managing conflict and physical skills, balance manipulation and dexterity ...rich organic learning...we make and use maps, talk about the properties of mud, we climb the

apple tree!” adding that “...We have the ability to support learning in a range of contexts.”

This recognition of the importance of ‘rich organic learning’ in the face of policy directives links to wider concerns raised with the ECEC community which include a narrowing of the early learning goals to ‘ready’ young children for success in primary schools (school readiness) (Kay, 2023) which may then narrow enhancements and learning opportunities for children. Sue suggested that completing the EYTS qualification supported her reflections upon practice in the face of competing agendas: ***“Producing the portfolio pulled everything together, heightened the quality of the practice...theory underpinning what we do and why...”***

The following subsections move from the ethical stance that infuses everyday interactions, to outward-facing work with families and professionals, to the frictions that sometimes arise, and finally to examples of constructive influence.

Linked to the previous debate about formal learning, the cruciality of play for young children holds a significant presence in participant responses throughout the study. They talk about play in all its forms, where it happens and their provision that ensures children have endless opportunities to engage in play. They articulate the importance of play being child-led and the outdoor environment. Yet increasingly the status of play in ECEC is becoming sidelined (Cameron and Moss, 2020), despite it being featured as a child’s right in international treaties such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, (United Nations, 1989). Therefore, practitioners understandably feel anxiety about play when it is set against the dominant discourse of school readiness and neo-liberalist agendas. Play, with its spontaneity, intrinsic motivation, enjoyment and exploration is a slow pedagogy (Clark, 2022) that is habitually now constrained and controlled by adult measurements and adult-led interference (Fisher, 2024), and its omission from the EYITT teaching standards is, I would argue, the school readiness agenda manifest, but is not reflected in my participants pedagogy or beliefs. However, how they articulate these is often poorly understood by those outside of the profession, so they are in the position of justifying and persuading others of their importance to practice and children’s learning and development. Lisa stated that the headteacher was nervous as to the view of Ofsted as they could not see the ***‘evidence’***. (of planning, learning and development), This Mesosystem of conflicting practice and competing

ideas has left the EYTs as Lisa put it: ***“Trying to preserve what I know to be good practice and that’s hard...it’s an uphill struggle”*** as they are often faced with practice which compromises their beliefs such as ***“children on carpets.”***[Lisa] School readiness illustrates the interaction of all five levels: children’s play and practitioners’ decisions in the microsystem are affected by nursery-school and practitioner-parent relationships in the mesosystem; these are shaped by Ofsted, curriculum and policy expectations in the exosystem; and by macrosystem assumptions about readiness, progress and the relative status of age phases. Across the chronosystem, participants describe schoolification as an intensifying pressure. Their resistance is therefore not simply an individual preference, but a critical response to power operating across the ecology.

5.3.2 Relationships.

This section looks at relationships that form part of the fabric of the day-to-day work lives of participants. This is sectioned into discussion around; ethics of care; working with families and other professionals; territorial fights; and relationships and positive influence. This section again relates to the process quality discourse.

5.3.2.1 Ethics of care

Earlier discussions around play and how provision and planning is organised exemplify that barriers exist in relation to understanding ECEC, whilst this section will look at the importance practitioners place on care in their work. Tensions are evident between the construct of a caring, maternal workforce and an educated profession (Dahlberg and Moss, 2008), but young children do need to be cared for, as it is from this secure foundation that engaging and exploring the world can begin. The respondents recognised that their role has important maternal and caring elements to it, they talked about their professional love and care, for example, Lisa states:

“That’s the big difference between EYTS and QTS, it’s the child development side...and the care ... they’ll (QTS) say ‘it’s not my job’ care is part of EY and should be part of all school to be honest...physical contact is a need”

Birth to Three Matters (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2001), first highlighted the importance of having informed knowledge of this young age group. Evaluative research by David et al., (2003) found many key messages, most

pertinent to this study are that young children are primed for warmth and need care, emotional and social development seems to form the bedrock of other areas. *Birth to Three Matters* was mentioned by several questionnaire respondents as being highly influential to their practice, as one questionnaire respondent put it; ***“The child centred nature of the programme was tailored towards children’s individuality”***. This appears important in the current policy context with the current Starmer Administration directions of earlier funding and childcare expansion. The role of the EYT in relation to this will be explored later in the section.

Care and nurture as a core belief in ECEC is also discussed by Sue, who details a local school who are ***“feeding a more EY approach to teaching through the school”*** but she also recognised that being able to connect with children “can’t be taught”. As reflected in the literature, care is a key component in the toolkit of EYTs’ and ECEC practitioners. One of the fundamental problems in ECEC is the place of care. Ailwood (2007) suggests that this is a problem that has to be looked at, examined, and spoken of, as the “right care at the right moment requires a responsiveness and sensitivity that should be recognised as serious professional work” (p.307); it involves networks of relationships with everyone in the setting caring about each other and their environment. When positive relationships and pedagogical interactions happen, they are likely to be centred in caring relationships. Bath (2013) argues that an ethical understanding of listening brings adults and children together in democratic care practices which disrupt ideas of childhood and reconnect notions of care and education. This is reflected in conversation responses such as this from Lisa: ***“physical contact is a need...”*** Whilst Sue outlines practice relating to warm ***“interactions “lunchtime friendship bonding...everyone mingles together...knowing the parents is so important”***. Attention to the importance of care in ECEC is political, resisting what Connell (2013) sees as the ‘neoliberal cascade’ in education, where care is reduced and rather than viewing education as an interaction between connected, complex beings, the emphasis is on people who are independent and logical citizens and workers.

Here, I consider how participants build trust with families and collaborate across professional boundaries, alongside the limitations that hamper multi-agency work.

Utilising the theoretical framework of critical ecology, the conflicts that practitioners navigate as they attempt to negotiate competing discourses alongside their own

beliefs and values is explored in this section. Counter-discourses can lead to a dichotomy (Osgood, 2010) between the attributes practitioners feel compose their practice and dominant discourses that favour rationalism and technicism which have constrained space for displays of emotion. This conflict is important because the values identified by Sevenhuijsen's (1998) 'feminist ethics of care' such as empathy, intuition, compassion, love, relationality and commitment, are evident in EYT responses. Words used in responses are presented below (figure 5.1) as a word cloud and feature significantly throughout questionnaires and conversations.



Figure 5.1 Key words from responses

Carla talks about her setting being part of the fabric of the community: ***“The setting has a history in the location, parents used to attend and they fell in love with it, it’s known in the community, staff and governors are the same...”***. The notion of being woven in the fabric of the community is also evident from Mary, who stated that their presence was longstanding in their town, their work involved ‘difficult’ families: ***“It’s really hard to unpick the problems and the generational issues, the same issues reoccurring over the generations.”*** Furthermore, Mary recognises the way that the cost of living crisis and related austerity policy has impacted many families as she points out: ***“There are some children that we know will be waiting for snack, those are probably the ones we have our eye on, they’ll go first you can tell by their behaviour”*** whilst a questionnaire respondent stated: ***“When things get tough reminding yourself what it was like to be three years old and holding this at the heart of your practice.”*** These responses indicate relationality and empathy and commitment. However, other characteristics like "detachment," "demarcation of private from professional self," and "conformity to externally prescribed standards" are highlighted by Osgood (2010) and seem to demonstrate the difficulty ECEC practitioners face in navigating hegemonic policy

discourses and collective professional subjectivities in their work contexts. Osgood, (2006), suggests professional subjectivities can and do have significant impact within the microsystem level where counter-narratives emerge that can represent a challenge to neo-liberal technicism and opposing concepts of quality.

Thus, ECEC practitioners frequently discover that these professional convictions conflict with neo-liberal ideologies that emphasise individualism, standardisation, and publicly accountable methods of ensuring efficacy and quality (Osgood, 2010).

Care is experienced in the microsystem through embodied, responsive relationships with children and families, but its meaning is produced across wider levels.

Mesosystem relationships connect settings, homes and communities; exosystem conditions such as funding, service provision and austerity shape the resources available for care; and macrosystem constructions of care as feminised, natural or less professional affect its status. The chronosystem is evident in intergenerational family experiences and changing policy contexts. The critical ecological lens makes visible how relational work is simultaneously essential and structurally undervalued.

5.3.2.2 Working with families and other professionals

EYTs are ideally placed to gain insights and build relationships with families which would allow public recognition of their role (McGillivray, 2008). This key aspect of their practice is reflected in responses throughout the questionnaires and the conversations. For example, Amelia details the strategies she employs to build and maintain relationships: ***“newsletters...activities for parents to do at home...support for parents in understanding children’s development.”*** Yet as Hargreaves and Hopper (2006) previously indicated, a feature of a high-status profession is having distance between themselves and their clients. Amelia suggests there is a ***“battle getting recognition and parity.”*** Referring back to J in my account entitled ‘The Dressing up Box’, the teacher coming to our setting to observe her and then commenting that, ***“she needs school”*** and, ***“she will soon settle down”*** with the parent being made to feel like she was ***“holding her back”*** all signals a hierarchy within education in that ECEC, PVI in particular, is not sufficient for young children.

Evident in existing literature is the growing importance of services working together to support children and families. The last Conservative government's vision for family hubs and giving families one or more key contact(s) in the Start for Life period (HM Government, 2025) appears to be continuing under the current Labour administration. A further measure introduced to meet the childcare expansion is the use of empty classrooms in schools (Crerar, 2024) aiming to set up more than 3,300 nurseries in existing primary schools in England for children from nine months old. Key to these initiatives is a well-qualified, professional ECEC profession with the potential to transform young lives; especially those of children coming from disadvantaged home backgrounds, something recognised by Mary when she describes some of her work involves ***“some really difficult families...generations...”***. Further recent changes in UK Government policy such as reduced ratios and the recruitment and retention crisis are however exacerbating the strain on quality across the profession rather than alleviating the problems of parents and children most in need of help (Prasad, 2024).

Participants indicated the ways in which they work across networks, for example, Amelia stated that she has ***“opportunities to meet other EYTs, increase my professional networks and discussions”*** and Sally said: ***“I’m a member of the National Day Nurseries Association, supporting a quality provision and thinking about what quality looks like”***. Julie identifies the importance of child protection and ***“safeguarding issues, liaising with other professionals”***. A significant challenge was detailed by Caroline from her context: ***“Working with someone high up like an Ed Psych (sic), often it’s just not helpful, we have tried everything”*** which could indicate that sometimes working with outside agencies can be difficult. In my accounts ‘*The Road Barriers*’, ‘*The Running Tap*’ and ‘*The Dressing Up Box*’ I narrate occasions where colleagues and I had encountered issues relating to hierarchy, lack of professional understanding and increased workload. These ‘tensions and contradictions’ are recognised by Feinstein et al., (2023) who suggest that lack of shared understandings and confusion surrounding information sharing are also prevalent issues.

Recognising diversity in childhood is apparent in some questionnaire responses. Participants seem undeterred by tensions in multi-agency working, knowing the

relationships they build are important. Two responses from the questionnaires exemplify this:

“Working with children from disadvantaged backgrounds makes you realise how vulnerable children are” and ***“Reflecting. Wanting to understand situations, why didn’t that work, what could I do and why?”*** with Sally adding: ***“We are doing this because we know what’s right for our children and families”***

Data collection for this study took place throughout the Covid 19 pandemic and featured in the conversations, as EYT’s talked about how restrictions and subsequent changes to practice diluted the quality interactions that they placed so much value upon, for example, parents not entering the setting but dropping off and picking up at the front door. Whilst some parents may have found daily transitions easier, it also meant they had less knowledge and involvement with the nursery day. Furthermore, responses seem that it was not only children that required an increased focus on emotional and social well-being, but families needed extra support from the educators too, as Amelia indicates saying that ***“open dialogue with parents, not on tablet, care needs for example are important and need to be discussed...”***. As parents trust that quality ECEC is provided, it was important to maintain this partnership and viewpoint.

Many of the respondents cited the challenges of maintaining ongoing dialogue with parents and fostering close relationships during the pandemic restrictions. Clare talked about managing transitions ***“adapted to meeting parents and children via zoom!”*** replacing home visits and face to face sessions and attempting to ***“manage feelings (parents/carers and children) at the door”***, whilst Carla recalled that ***“valuable community sessions such as stay and play”*** had also been put on hold. Amelia noted ***“limits to two-way conversations”*** and that ***“we have become a ‘society of online comms”***. Carla indicated that transitions in her special school were ***“managed sensitively but children still struggled”***. Sally offered a positive aspect however in that the children in her setting were able to ***“build relationships within their feeder school as they joined the school children for lunch”***, something echoed by Carla, who stated that the level of independence from the children was recognised by primary colleagues, whilst other interview responses

indicated that children ***“demonstrated independence”*** (Lisa) and ***“just got on with it”*** (Sally); they were ***“independent learners already, they are ready to go!”*** (Carla)

The Covid-19 period is a clear chronosystem disruption: changes over time altered everyday microsystem interactions and weakened mesosystem connections between settings, families and schools. Public-health restrictions and organisational responses operated through the exosystem, while wider assumptions about digital communication, parental involvement and ‘readiness’ shaped responses at the macrosystem level. This shows that the quality of relationships cannot be understood only as an individual practitioner skill; it is enabled or constrained by changes across the wider ecology.

Where values and accountabilities collide, tensions surface as ‘territorial fights’ over space, methods and authority. The examples below illuminate how such frictions are managed day-to-day.

Cultural differences and beliefs regarding parents and educator relationships can make it near impossible for practitioners to engage with some communities being described as ‘impenetrable’, Crozier and Davies, (2007:296) suggest the fault may be policy makers for their failure to recognise the diversity of the parent body. This was identified by Sue, who offered the Socio-Economic Status of the setting, stating it has once been affluent but due to the development of a large housing estate, the area was home to more diverse communities. This brought to the setting more ***“safeguarding concerns, more first-time parents often single all needing support”*** which led her to be used within the team ***“spending her time with the children who are more demanding, the ones that don’t fit in the box”***.

Despite these frictions, participants offered many instances where relational work changed practice for the better, often through small, sustained acts of influence.

Linking back to the critical ecological framework, the importance of recognising individual contexts is reflected in extracts from our conversations and indicates a deep understanding from EYTs of their microsystem and the people within them. Sally demonstrates her frustration at policy which does not recognise this ***“lack of recognition for context. We are an affluent area and a lot of the ‘covid catch-up’***

isn't relevant for our families and children." Many EYTs talked about the shared understandings woven throughout their relationships within their own setting. Firstly, Sue refers to subtle body language, saying that they ***"give each other the nod!"*** and Mary talks about how they share a common language which may be ***"familiar but different, only an EY person would understand that!"***. Whilst Sally suggests that outside of the setting, understanding the complexities of context specific may be lost with ***"families not realising what the children 'do' on a day-to-day basis"***

Within the EYTs microsystem tensions can occur, one common theme related to working relationships was the reluctance that sometimes comes with making changes to practice. Amelia mentioned ***"some resistance to changes such as tablets rather than paperwork"*** and Julie cited ***"resistance to change from some staff, as sometimes its straightaway-'that's not going to work' but you know let's try it... some practitioners don't see overall setting, move them each term, teamwork ethos, what they do supports the next room, I am led by them though as I am not in their rooms all of the time"***. Sally indicated that this may sometimes come from leaders and managers: ***"the old manager was there for 17 years, [which manifested as] a lot of restrictive practice"***

Many responses indicated strong working relationships and further shared understandings. Sally reflected on practice: ***"lightbulb moment, reflecting in the moment...we are a small team and we pull together"***, and from Carla: ***"group led vision all stakeholders have a say"***. Julie states: ***"(I do) staff observations of practice and offer feedback, training sessions, overview of everything...staff deployment...they all work in all the rooms so they can get other people's perspective..."*** Sue said: ***"We are like a well-oiled machine! People just crack on current team are really good...staff meetings, we bring all our info together, the team plan together where do we want the child to be, what are our steps towards that..."***

How EYTs feel about leading practice appears to be conflicted though, as Caroline states she had ***"no leadership training"*** but Sue feels confident in aspects of leadership but related that to previous non-teaching roles: ***"I do mentor and coaching, I mentor another EYT. Cascading learning to the wider team, I think my previous career in retail management helped, leadership experience, experience of managing people the skills are transferrable, and I am confident"***

networking.” This last point was interesting as many of those involved in the conversations talked about their trajectory to EYTS and commonalities in pathways included previous employment in the service profession such as hospitality and retail. Most respondents had also gained their degrees via the sector endorsed foundation degree followed by the L6 top up degree. This reflects the perception that often ECEC is not part of a career plan but is an embodiment of the highly gendered ECEC workforce (Cooke and Lawton, 2008; Bonetti, 2019 and Social Mobility Commission, 2020), and is linked to women's broader responsibilities as wives, mothers, and daughters, contributing a secondary source of income, where choosing ECEC is frequently viewed as a compromise because it “fits in”. Examples of tensions in relationships within workplace microsystems which arise from the mesosystem can be seen in Amelia’s experience of **“resistance to changes such as tablets rather than paperwork”** as well as Julie’s account of staff responding to new ideas with: **“that’s not going to work”**. Sally also describes historic experiences of working with established manager whose leadership resulted in: **“a lot of restrictive practice.”** These tensions occur between colleagues, managers and EYTs within the same workplace setting. They are therefore primarily located in the microsystem, because they concern the participant’s immediate, everyday working environment.

5.3.2.3 Territorial fights

The previous discussion can be likened to what Miller et al., (2012) term ‘*territorial fights*’ which refers to what is happening in workplaces between different practitioner roles, hierarchy, and the value placed on EYTS knowledge. A ‘territorial fight’ between colleagues in the same setting may sit primarily in the microsystem; it becomes mesosystem analysis when the conflict crosses contextual boundaries. The territorial fight is over who has influence, whose knowledge is valued and who can introduce changes to practice. This relates to the Mesosystem, and this is where subversion occurs, and agency is enacted, as seen explicitly from Lisa in her earlier statement about starting a revolution in the beliefs and values theme. A mesosystem example from the data can be seen in my narrative “The Dressing Up Box.” The Reception teacher visits the preschool, says that J **“needs school”** and suggests that she will be **“left behind.”** The parent is also made to feel that she is holding her child back. This involves interaction between several immediate contexts: the PVI preschool, the transition school and the family. The territorial fight is no longer only between colleagues inside one setting. It crosses the boundary between early years

provision, compulsory schooling and the child's home. It is therefore a mesosystem tension, particularly because the school teacher's knowledge appears to be given greater status than the knowledge of the EYT, the preschool and the parent.

The territorial fights identified in the data operate across different ecological levels.

Resistance from colleagues and managers within participants' own settings, such as resistance to changes in planning or practice, is located primarily within the workplace microsystem. However, territorial tensions become mesosystemic when EYTs' knowledge comes into conflict with that of schools, families or external professionals.

This is illustrated in 'The Dressing Up Box', where the interaction between the preschool, the receiving school and the family reveals a hierarchy in which school-based knowledge is privileged over ECEC expertise.

Schoolification is a significant place of resistance in the work lives of the participants and provides a strong explanation of how these micro- and mesosystem tensions are also influenced by exosystem policy pressures and wider macrosystem assumptions about the superior status of formal schooling. EYTs are faced with policy trickling down to practice from the Exosystem which pushes an ever pervasive and persuasive rhetoric of children being ready to learn, thus "school readiness" has become the dominant ideology (Wood, 2020) and development must lead learning. Furthermore, children must be 'properly prepared' for Compulsory School Education, with more didactic educational approaches becoming the

standard. Yet the participants argued for something more, something better and recognition for contextual specificity. Uniform standards and curriculum, the emphasis on reaching milestones of neurotypical development is in direct contradiction with what the participants articulated; that practice and provision are messy, children are individuals and there is never a one-size-fits-all (Moss, 2007).

These 'territorial fights' are especially important to the critical dimension of the framework. They show how authority and professional knowledge are unevenly distributed across mesosystem relationships, while exosystem policy pressures and macrosystem hierarchies between ECEC and compulsory schooling shape whose expertise is heard. Participants' acts of negotiation and subversion demonstrate agency within, rather than outside, these structural constraints.

5.3.2.4 Relationships and positive influence

Within their microsystems building and maintaining close and positive relationships

with children, families and colleagues is important to EYTs. According to Cliffe and Solvason (2022), interpersonal relationships and connections should be the practice, policy and theory cornerstone within ECEC. The importance of relationships is also a feature in the EYITT teaching standards:

“They forge positive professional relationships and work with parents and/or carers in the best interests of babies and children.” (NCTL, 2013; p.2)

The data illuminated participants’ perceptions around the influence that they feel they have in their microsystems in relation to practice, provision and improving children's outcomes. They describe how they feel able to change and drive practice, and of shared values and the positive impact they have on practice, encouraging reflection in the moment as authentic practice. For example, Sally shares her thoughts: **“Take a step back and look at what’s going on, adapt; do we really need circle time for example...”**. This is in contradiction with the dominant perception of the profession; one which is low paid, low status and low qualified. Indeed, low pay does not feature in any responses from any data collection method which indicates practitioners are not motivated by financial incentives, rather they do their job because they recognise its value and importance which may be a consequence of internalising notions of ECEC as women’s work, as discussed in the literature review.

5.3.3 Identity

The construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of professional identity is an ongoing feature of practitioners’ career trajectories. In the context of the EYT, this identity work is further complicated by higher education qualification routes, which have intensified debates around the perceived parity, or lack thereof, between EYTS and QTS (Wingrave and McMahon, 2016). Such tensions expose deeper structural and pedagogical concerns relating to the current remodelling of the ECEC workforce. As Basford (2019) suggests, EYTs question their own value within their respective contexts, and whether their desires to be agents of change, as dictated in the EYTS teacher standards (NCTL, 2013) are only ever aspirational, with uncertainty in relation to their position (for example managerial with greater power and say in decision making). However, some responses yield some interesting beliefs that do not reflect those notions of feeling marginalised, such as being **“change agents, the gold standard”**, **“change maker, advocate for children”** and also aiming to

“improve the setting from the existing place” [questionnaire responses]

Uncertainties surrounding a teacher modelled role were found by Traunter (2019) partly due to misleading terminology in the MGC document (Truss, 2013) around ‘teacher’ which adds confusion for EYTs attempting to construct a professional identity. However, from the questionnaire responses it appears that EYTs have constructed their own ideas about their role which go further than merely teaching, they aimed to: ***“Model and support practice”, “Promote learning through play and exploring”*** and saw themselves as a ***“Jack of all trades master of some!”***

[questionnaire response]

Nutbrown (2013) agrees that ‘qualified teacher’ is a term widely understood in society and therefore holds respect and status. Furthermore, this lack of parity actively impedes understanding of the qualification in the profession and disrupts emerging professional identity and confidence in the profession (Traunter, 2019). However, questionnaire responses appear to indicate that despite the dichotomy reflected in the literature, EYTs have a sense of pride and security in the identity, for instance many used ***“Teacher”; “Specialist’ and ‘Leader”; “Specialised teacher for early years education”; “Specialists in early childhood development, with very young children up to 5”; “To teach, nurture and care for children in the early years”; “A teacher to those children under 7”; “Leaders in pedagogy and learning within settings”*** [Questionnaire responses]

Uncertainty of identity is reflected in my pen portrait ‘*The Suit*’ where I articulate how I was the only graduate practitioner and as such I often felt like a ‘straddler’, not a ‘regular’ practitioner but not a teacher in the usual understanding of the role either. Despite my academic background I identified as just another member of the team, something I relay in my story ‘*The Suit*’ when the owner tried to outwardly classify me as the manager by way of wearing a suit, as opposed to our uniform.

“It felt like a barrier, from communications with the rest of my colleagues the relationships with children and families and actually physically interacting with the children. A tunic arrived the next week. I was always a manager that was in ratios therefore I was always interacting with the children. A suit is no garment for a job in which you need to roll around the floor in with two-year-olds.”

5.3.3.1 *Traditional constructions of practitioners and women's work*

The global perception that ECEC is 'women's work' is evident, both in the demographic of participants and their comments. Only one male responded to the questionnaires and there were none involved in the conversations. This belief has contributed significantly to the persistent underrepresentation of men in the field worldwide (Bhana et al., 2020). A couple of the participants had noted that they were **"lucky"** to have male practitioners in the setting but this did little to dispel the gender roles within the setting, Mary spoke about a willingness of her male colleague to **"get outside, get mucky whatever the weather, let them burn off some energy with the children, whilst the other practitioners (female) would want to stay indoors"**. This appears to indicate this practitioner's perspective of the male practitioner is somewhat stereotypical, despite them having the academic background which should challenge assumptions. Campbell-Barr (2017) notes that the belief that early childhood education and care (ECEC) is primarily the responsibility of women who are frequently viewed as surrogate mothers serves to reinforce the idea that ECEC is simple, "natural," and "anyone can do it" with minimal training or expertise.

The previously discussed features of the gendered workforce as discussed in 5.3.2.2, mirrors comments made from some of the interview respondents, particularly Carla, Lisa and Sue who had worked in other professions before and, as Carla articulated, **"fell into this job."** Furthermore, those working directly with young children have historically been relatively young in age (Bonetti, 2019), and this too can be linked to wider factors. Firstly, there is the ongoing issue of low pay, teenage girls and young women in the workforce are a cheap resource in terms of wage floors in an already poorly paid profession (Bonetti, 2019). They often have heavy housekeeping duties such as washing floors and cleaning windows (Social Mobility Commission, 2020) which further embeds the notion of traditional women's work and a role requiring little professional knowledge. ECEC is historically a profession which tends to attract white women from predominantly working-class backgrounds (London School of Economics, 2020; Musgrave, 2010), facing severe and enduring disadvantage in the ECEC workplace with a range of lower quality characteristics such as low wages and little opportunity to use their skills.

This can lead to lack of understanding about ECEC provision, practice and its importance within the wider education system which is evident in literature. This

relates to knowledge value and specialist knowledge. Practitioners are dealt an injustice in this respect as the perception from outside the profession is that this is a job which comes naturally and that anyone can do. As Campbell-Barr (2017) suggests, this indicates a significant issue due to the work of the ECEC practitioner and a major limitation to obtaining professional recognition. McGillivray (2008) proposes this may affect identity, in that it can be done by anyone who is caring, maternal and with a “liking for children” (p.250). Responses from multiple participants appear to resonate with these ideas:

Sue: ***“Lack of awareness in some schools about the importance of Early Years, getting it right, [children] happy confident and ready to learn”***

Caroline: ***“COVID opened management’s eyes to what we do, and I now feel able to influence practice further up the school...but there is still little value placed on our opinions as we are only Early Years”***

This links to previous discussions about emotional labour, which is bound in the gendered nature of the workforce as ECEC practitioners’ emotional investment in day-to-day practice has been taken for granted due to the highly feminised nature of the industry (Osgood, 2012). From participant responses, though not explicitly stated, emotional investment and professional love is evident. A questionnaire response mentions that ***“a lecturer at UoN was so passionate about the 0-5 age group, she filled my head (and my heart) with wanting to learn, to put into practice, to question, to consider and to love working in Early Years”***.

Professional identity is formed in the microsystem through participants’ daily roles and recognition by colleagues and families, but it is also shaped by employment structures in the exosystem and by macrosystem assumptions that ECEC is women’s work. The chronosystem highlights the historical persistence of these gendered constructions and the changing impact of qualification reforms and Covid-19 on recognition. A critical ecological interpretation therefore connects personal identity to wider distributions of status, pay, authority and opportunity.

5.3.3.2 Specialist knowledge

Multiple participants stated that gaining the EYT qualification gave them an enhanced understanding of child development and allowed them to make links

between theoretical perspectives and their practice. Amelia noted that she felt a ***“deeper thinking...and different perspectives”*** which enabled her to support others including ***“first time parents, support them in their child’s development”***. This is echoed in comments by Sally as she states EYT has given her ***“underpinning knowledge, the importance of theory recognising theory, that’s the bit that speaks to me, that’s my personal pedagogy”***, whilst Sue detailed ***“EYT brought everything together that I had done over the years, made it all make sense...filled in the gaps...”***

Knowledge, skills, and attitudes are arguably related to the theoretical, experiential, and foregrounding of ethics in ECEC, providing a multifaceted ECEC knowledge base, (Campbell-Barr, 2017). This is represented in responses from participants in both data sets, the questionnaire responses include:

“The specialist knowledge I have of early child development is essential in enabling me to teach the children”

Yes, absolutely EYTS is the best qualification for a nursery teacher in a school-based nursery as we have the particular knowledge and understanding of best practice in early years teaching.

Power disparities that support policymakers' “know and fix” mentality and stifle the opinions and experiences of ECEC practitioners are shown by modernist conceptions of professionalism (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Osgood, 2010; Van Laere et al., 2012). Exposing the dynamics of knowledge, including that which can be shared and described but is highly context dependent (Bernstein, 2000) and that which is derived from practice is therefore challenging to share and evaluate.

The concept of “relationality” makes it easier to have a conversation about the legitimacy of knowledge and its relationship to the knower. For example, Julie links her knowledge directly to being an EYT ***“because I’m an EYT, I have detailed knowledge of the development aspect”***, whilst Lisa credits EYTS for giving her an enhanced understanding, a deep knowledge: ***“It’s the why side of it that’s not taught on QTS...until you understand children’s brains and bodies I don’t think we will move from where we are now until its included in the training”***. Part of the value that EYTs place on their knowledge has links to be reflective and adaptive. For example, Mary comments upon how reflecting on theory supports her practice, having the ***“ability to step back, reflect then act, recognise that change must be***

right for the children; what goes on behind the scenes; that theoretical knowledge". Lisa comments on the ways in which you need to be flexible for children's needs and interests, which takes confidence on the part of the practitioner and may not always be the case for all practitioners as she recalls experiences of working with others who may be ***"stuck in their ways, stick to routines and plans, but it just doesn't happen does it!"***, echoed by Sally who mentions the importance reflection and flexibility ***"lightbulb moments, reflecting in the moment... Importance of routines...but balanced with children's needs...reflection on emotional and physical environment...especially for children with language and development needs"***. Mary concludes that all this starts with the deep relationships fostered with children and understanding the unique child: ***"We encourage them to see what's on offer, comfortable, knowing your child"***.

Confidence in knowledge and practice presents as a strong theme in other responses too. For example, in playful pedagogical approaches Sue details ***"doing forward rolls with the children!"*** and Lisa indicates that her knowledge enables her to work more effectively with children who need the most support: ***"I feel able to support the less able children"***, and that this expert knowledge is reflected in perceptions of them as professionals. Julie says: ***"People look at us differently, more so parents than professionals - it was an important qualification for me to do"***. Thus, practitioners are reflexive and consider themselves and their understanding of the frameworks within which they understand children. Drummond (2012) refers to as this as 'self-knowledge', and this internal critique can be understood through a critical ecological lens as Urban (2012) states we examine practice through every layer of the system. Alongside reflection upon ECEC knowledge, Moloney (2010) raises the question of whether all practitioners within a profession are required to share the same body of knowledge, or whether variation should be accepted. Professional knowledge and practice are typically guided by principles that acknowledge the impracticality of prescribing a single, standardised way of working. Monbiot (2017) similarly argues that professionalism is inseparable from the capacity to exercise discretionary judgement. In this context, Papatheodorou (2009) suggests that expertise in ECEC involves practitioners drawing on their knowledge, skills, and understanding to create a pedagogy focused on learning processes and children's thinking, rather than on predetermined

outcomes or profiling. Evidence of this approach is evident within the data from this study. Questionnaire responses appear to indicate that despite the dichotomy reflected in the literature, EYTs have a sense of pride and security in the identity, for instance many used the specific terms to describe their roles, as outlined at the beginning of this section (5.3.3).

These accounts can be interpreted as reflecting aspects of gradueness.

Participants described the value of graduate-level study not simply as the acquisition of additional knowledge or a professional credential, but as developing the capacity to think more deeply, connect theory with practice, consider alternative perspectives and articulate the rationale underpinning professional decisions.

Gradueness was therefore evident in participants' accounts as a critical and reflective orientation towards practice. However, these attributes cannot be assumed to arise automatically from holding EYTS, nor should they be understood as exclusive to graduate practitioners, since experienced colleagues may also demonstrate considerable criticality, relational knowledge and practical wisdom.

5.3.3.3 Thinking for ourselves

The lexicon used by participants relates to a body of knowledge shared by the profession, the EYTs all used the same words to describe and convey aspects of their practice which indicated a shared knowledge and understanding, often not entirely understood or used by those 'outside.' The terms had emerged from curriculum guidance, theory and research. Within this there were also references to body language and gestures that were understood by those in the setting and who worked closely together. For example, Sue talked about giving one another ***“the nod”*** and Mary talked about the continuous provision being ***“different but familiar, only an early year's person would understand that!”***. This further embeds the notion of the distinct contexts which EYTs worked where shared understandings of their microsystem and “shared vision” not only imply a profession working together, but also moving forward, as Miller et al., (2012) state, a profession growing up and thinking for itself. Yet despite this there is what some believe to be a knowledge hierarchy with little value placed on the voices of those working in ECEC. Jeffries (2024) proposes that the voice of educators is seldom heard despite the possibilities of their embodied and practical knowledge to add to the knowledge base. This can be seen in the data, one example being from Lisa who talks about a Primary colleague's approach to early years pedagogy: ***“She'll leave it to me... and take***

the older children, the two-year-olds get lost in mainstream”. This also implies ECEC is not important, and the real learning happens in reception upwards.

The shared language of EYTs is a microsystem resource that supports collective judgement and confidence. However, when this knowledge moves across mesosystem boundaries into schools, management or multi-agency work, it can be discounted. This reflects exosystem arrangements governing roles and qualifications and macrosystem hierarchies about what counts as legitimate educational knowledge, participants’ ‘thinking for ourselves’ can be read as both professional identity work and resistance to those hierarchies.

5.3.4 Structural processes

Decades of policy initiatives in the ECEC exosystem have pushed the profession to the forefront of political agendas in the United Kingdom, however this is due to economic issues rather than recognition of the importance of early education (Moss and Mitchell, 2024). Research around issues in the profession are centred on structural quality such as improving qualifications and curriculum rather than pedagogy (Lloyd and Hallett, 2010 and Roberts-Holmes, 2012). Referring to the ‘iron triangle’ discussed in Chapter 3, this section will present responses which relate to the structural discourse of quality, exploring how EYTs internalise and enact ‘quality’ and the related concepts of accountability, qualifications and leadership. Zooming out to the exo- and macro-systems, I can trace how structural levers such as accountability, qualifications and leadership, shape what can be enacted locally.

5.3.4.1 Quality

Responses from EYTs demonstrate their understanding of the duality of their practice, ensuring what is considered high quality, whilst promoting learning and development progress for children. This is particularly evident in the responses from Julie, stating that ensuring high quality is a key part of her role:

“My role is an oversight role, quality, of the setting and practice...I visit all the rooms and the outdoor areas...how are we showing development progress? Planning, meeting needs, how are you engaging children what is it feeding into, next steps...?”

In early intervention discourse, a ‘high quality’ ECEC workforce is presented as a key component. This can be seen in initiatives such as the Early Education Funding

(EEF) (GOV.UK, 2012), which introduced the funding for eligible two-year-olds, and was mentioned in the shared conversations, by Carla, but more so by Lisa who stated that the class teacher would take pre-school children to do phonics and:

“...Then we can focus on the two’s and the two-year-old play as sometimes I think they can get a bit lost...forgotten...especially in mainstream where there isn’t that understanding of two-year-old play, there isn’t that understanding of three’s...our teacher there is primary and she really struggles with the two’s....she’ll leave it to me...those early skills...exploration...”

Some respondents demonstrated an awareness of their situatedness in terms of being part of political agendas. For example, Carla talked about the way things come round and ***“a ten-year cycle”*** and a questionnaire respondent stated ***“ever changing government decisions...”***. Carla also discussed the setting’s precarious financial position saying that they were at: ***“Maintained nursery school, last in the county, we’re still fighting our corner, not sure of our long-term future in terms of longevity and finance in our ideal world we know what we’d like it’s just whether it works financially”***.

5.3.4.2 Accountability

The EYFS replaced the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (Qualifications Curriculum Authority (QCA) 2000) and Birth to 3 Matters (Department for Education and Skills (DfES) 2001), which Moylett and Stewart (2020) propose was problematic, as the EYFS shifted focus from developmental processes toward learning outcomes as the foundation for creating curriculum. The policy focus on literacy and numeracy is envisaged as a part of the ‘accountability culture’ in ECEC according to Early Education (EE) (2021), along with the phonics screening check in year 1. Further debate from The Association for Professional Development in Early Years (TACTYC) (2017) suggests that a primary schools’ test-based culture and inappropriate pedagogy for young children, have cascaded down into ECEC in the form of ‘school readiness’. These issues are intensified by the Ofsted inspection framework that inspects practice and provision with a reductionist and datafied school readiness ‘outcomes’ agenda, leading to a narrowing of the

curriculum, 'ability' grouping at ever earlier ages, and 'gaming' the required outcomes (Bradbury et al. 2018).

These types of tensions are reflected in my story '*The Clipboard*' in relation to how we used planning to support children's individual interests and needs, as opposed to meeting externally set criteria and developmental outcomes.

"Following a successful Ofsted which commended our effective planning processes, the owner of the nursey chain asked me to give a training session for the practitioners in other settings. I was reluctant as I believe that there is no 'one size fits all' and our approach may not work elsewhere as we had developed it as a team over a period of time.

However, I agreed, and found myself in one of the rooms in one of the settings surrounded by colleagues, who were attending after work for 'CPD' unpaid. I began by describing how our setting went about planning for children's learning and development, interests and needs. I paused and asked for any questions, instead of questions I had a myriad of reasons why practitioners thought it would not work for them. I understood and recognised all of the reasons, and I also recognised that practice was a balancing act between the expectations of the owner (and their desire to get the best Ofsted rating as this may boost enrolment figures), and the specificity of practice in individual settings".

Furthermore, being the manager of a PVI setting often resulted in relationships becoming strained as I tried to satisfy multiple demands between parents, children, colleagues, outside agencies and owners. This expectation of meeting multiple responsibilities is highlighted by Miller et al., (2012) who suggest that this illuminates the complexity of graduate roles within the setting, demanding roles requiring high levels of knowledge and professionalism but little time to reflect during the working day. Although participants' accounts suggested that graduate education had strengthened their critical reflection and professional confidence, their capacity to exercise these attributes remained dependent upon workplace relationships and organisational conditions. Graduateness could provide a resource through which EYTs questioned established practice and articulated alternative approaches, but it did not automatically confer authority or ensure that their professional judgements were recognised by colleagues and managers. These issues relate to the critical

ecological framework, as the mesosystem illuminates the way in which different systems may work with (or against) each other in an individual's life. Research shows that the relationships and interactions between different microsystems can significantly influence individuals (Crawford, 2020), as can the wider role of neighbourhoods and communities as drivers of change.

EYTs are aware of the drive to demonstrate 'competence' throughout their practice, but this is often led by their principal beliefs in an 'ethic of care' performed through emotional labour (Osgood, 2010) habitually applying varying degrees of scepticism to ideology that is situated within an 'audit culture'. Whilst outwardly they may appear to comply with demands, (particularly during inspections), practitioners engage in micro acts of subversion (Archer, 2021) This tension is evident in many conversations with participants but most explicitly again from Lisa:

"If you have the confidence to say actually they're not just playing...it's the fear of Ofsted, if you can explain what you do and why...it's that observing, interfering or interacting, you make a conscious decision not to interfere, just sit, watch and listen."

One further argument indicates reduced opportunities for children to engage in free play as well as more teacher-directed pedagogies and increased attention to academic content (OECD, 2017). Again, responses from EYTs indicate that they are dealing with pressures to conform to these ideas as Lisa states: ***"The head attended ITMP but didn't want to implement as she said, 'how do you know you've covered all areas?'"*** and Julie recognises the need to fulfil Ofsted requirements in that ***"...(staff) planning too far ahead, so we introduced some elements of ITMP, but we still do have a paper trail for Ofsted..."***

The idea of working days being composed of meaningful episodes was used by Karila and Kinoshita (2012) in Miller et al., (2012) within which the previously discussed 'territorial fights' may occur, relating to constant negotiations between actors within the same space. Differing ideology and expertise have resulted in some voices not being heard. These challenges are reflected in many responses, for example,

Lisa: ***"Sit down... sit with your legs crossed, sit nicely and I think, 'does it matter?' they are not meant to sit like that, there's research that says it harms them, if they're listening, let them lie on their tummy's, let them fiddle, they are***

doing it in a two-year-old way, let's learn from them... (the class teacher) has left me with sleepless nights many a time... ”

Ofsted regulate the profession to ensure compliance with the Department for Education's agenda that ECEC is providing *“the right foundation for good future progress through school and life”* (2023:5, my emphasis). Regulatory compliance and the quality agenda are mentioned by EYTs, who recognise the 'fear' but also suggest they can demonstrate that they have the confidence to justify their approaches. The policy push which positions ECEC as silver bullet, (Ball, 2003; Urban, 2012; and Moss 2020), that it will cure societal ills and agenda's firmly position it within an economic plan.

Accountability demonstrates a downward and upward movement across the ecology. Exosystem instruments such as Ofsted frameworks, curriculum requirements and documentation expectations carry macrosystem beliefs about measurable quality into mesosystem negotiations between managers, teachers and practitioners, and ultimately into microsystem decisions about play, observation and planning. Participants' explanations, selective compliance and 'micro acts of subversion' show how policy is not simply implemented but interpreted and contested in practice. The chronosystem enables these responses to be understood against successive waves of reform.

5.3.4.3 Qualifications

Competing discourses around the purpose of ECEC is evident in responses which infer the school readiness agenda, but also hint at the inequity between EYTS and QTS, for example Caroline appears to value her qualification but articulates the limitations that it holds:

“I'd recommend EYT to everybody, though not if you want to teach at the end of it...there's not many of us...just as people are beginning to recognise us and if we get it right that influences what happens after”

Something also echoed by Lisa, who identifies the value of the qualification which is not recognised by the wider workforce and policy makers:

“I'm only the room leader I can't teach the class as I've not got QTS, only EYTS... the class teacher isn't trained in EYFS”

Whilst Julie continues:

“On a professional level, I think the knowledge I have gets me respect especially from parents who want to put children in school at three, as its teacher led, so I say ‘we’re teacher led as well, where in QTS or National Curriculum does it look at children under four? I see some practice in schools where needs aren’t met, the academic side is good but...EYTS aligns more closely to EYFS such a difference between the two curriculums...its completely alien...”

None of the EYTs refer to the teaching standards in relation to informing their work, and it may be more of a case of EYTS giving them autonomy as opposed to any type of guidance, the autonomy to embed or resist measures and that they may engage in micro acts of subversion. Prior to state mandated guidelines being introduced, working in ECEC did allow for professional autonomy (Oberheumer, 2005), yet with guidance came more control by policymakers which could contradict ideologies regarding play, learning and care. This dichotomy is evident in my narrative ‘*The Road Barriers*’ where I felt able to explicitly exercise my professional judgement to an advisor attempting to change our provision:

“The QL contacted me to gather our thoughts which I happily disclosed. I stated the reasons why I did not think it would work in our setting and how my colleague felt the same. So, I replied:

“Our families choose us, as siblings can play together in the vast hall, able to play freely in a range of ways with resources they have chosen. They like that different ages of children can interact and something we believe fosters caring in older children but promotes the younger children’s development in all areas.”

The QL asked me to try setting the room into sections-

“With what?” I asked, she replied, “The chairs from around the room?”

So, I set up a square using some chairs and asked her to get inside

“Now get down on your hands and knees” “What?!” “You’re the height of one of the babies here, on your hands and knees, what do you see?”

“Chair legs ...”

“Is that a suitable stimulating environment for a baby or child? I also do not want any child ever to think that any part of this space is not for them” ...

...As I saw her in the square of chairs however she had given me a really good idea for den building, so every cloud...”

In relation to opportunities, gaining graduate status and higher qualifications has been welcomed by some along with the greater professionalism that they afforded, (Hordern, 2012), whilst Davis and Barry (2013) suggest an enthusiastic, motivated workforce. This is apparent in the data as one response from the questionnaires detailed how EYT had driven her practice:

“A practitioner at my daughter’s nursery influenced me to open my own provision... From a theorist/practitioner perspective I am heavily influenced by Anna Craft and her creative approach to early years...has given me the confidence to use creative strategies to help children to engage with areas of the curriculum they may find difficult.”

A shared route to gaining EYTS emerged from responses which involved studying the profession endorsed Foundation Degree, followed by a ‘Top up’ (level 6 degree) and then EYTS, but then there was suggestion from Caroline, Sue and Carla? that QTS was still needed and from the questionnaires: ***“I felt like I could not progress without a teaching qualification”***. Yet that was not the case for all, as some recognised the EYT qualification as important in its own right for a range of reasons such as:

Confidence - “EYT has boosted my confidence, part of the training was going into schools, and other settings definitely broadened my experience and knowledge, and this has grown my expectation of the setting my expectation of the children,” [Sally] “best thing I ever did!” [Ameilia] “I think we are all highly qualified members of staff and experienced... in the setting” [Sally]

Knowledge – “Given me underpinning knowledge... the importance of theory, recognising theory, that’s the bit that speaks to me, that’s me personal pedagogy” [Sally]: “EYTS given me that knowledge of children young children how they develop, how they work and how they think, and how we as practitioners

can facilitate that, learning and experience best.” [Lisa] “I have look at detail, different way of looking at things, perspective, deeper thinking for child development, placement in different settings was invaluable, I know a lot of people now respected for their practice” [Amelia] “I help parents with activities with their children at home...working with parents I reflect on that, I think that’s the EYTS you need to trust parents” [Amelia] “There might be differences in the depth of enquiry why is that happening, the L3 don’t use it as much...” [Sally] “EYTS opens you up to other practitioners and specialists, I refer to them in professional conversation’s with QTS colleagues...they’ve never heard of them...” [Lisa]

Gaining academic qualifications was a turning point for me, as I articulate in my story ‘*The Dummy*’, as in connection with the participants, it gave me confidence and a voice,

“I was asked to present at that year’s conference. My research was well received, and it was at this point that something shifted (ruptured) I felt like I had a voice now and that I could contribute meaningfully with an informed opinion about things I felt strongly about and could more effectively advocate for children and families. Following my degree I then proceeded to do my Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) the forerunner to EYTS. It has only recently occurred to me how I have lived successive policy initiatives to professionalise the workforce, I have been at the chalk face whilst these attempts have been implemented.”

The qualification narratives make the chronosystem particularly visible. Participants’ professional identities have developed through successive reforms from EYPS to EYTS, changing career opportunities and accumulated experience. These temporal shifts interact with exosystem qualification policy, macrosystem debates about parity and professionalism, and microsystem confidence and practice. The critical question is whether professionalisation redistributes authority and opportunity or merely adds responsibility without equivalent status and reward.

Yet ultimately this did result in me leaving practice. This is an unintended consequence of practitioners gaining higher qualifications, which can be due to pay and conditions (Bonetti, 2019), but for me I think it was the realisation that I could be a more effective change agent elsewhere; from ‘*The Dummy*’ again:

“It was time to put my money where my mouth was and step up to help build and shape practitioners into the competent, confident advocates for children, families, their colleagues and themselves they needed to be in order to change perceptions of our workforce.”

5.3.4.4 Leadership

A further element which comprises the identity of the EYT is that of fulfilling wider responsibilities of leadership and management, as stated in the EYITT teaching standards (8.3. 8.4 and 8.5). Whilst this is evident in the data collected for this study, other aspects of leading and managing are apparent and discussed below. Wider tasks that comprise management responsibilities of practitioners are discussed by Thorpe (2023): Wong et al (2015) Wong et al (2024) and Harrison et al (2023) and can be seen in participant comments. Sue, for example, recognises this as part of the job but not her sole responsibility: ***“I have admin duties but I do feel like I can leave my staff to it, I do things like risk assessments but then I spend the rest of the time with the children who are more demanding...we are a sessional preschool, PVI charity led. I am also a trustee, we are a pack away nursery in a village hall, so we rely on some grants and funding”***, something echoed by Amelia: ***“Part of my role is paperwork, such as checking the premises, where staff are, children’s paperwork; all staff have responsibilities though, there’s no hierarchy”***. EYTs however, often face issues trying to find time to work more collaboratively with their teams due to the (unpaid) demands of administrative duties that account for significant periods of the time for practitioners especially those in management roles. This contrasts with leaders in the school and maintained profession who according to Aubrey (2013) are allocated time for such duties outside the classroom. Conflict between admin duties and being with children are recognised by Hjelt et al. (2023) who discuss broader understandings of temporality in ECEC settings whilst Wang (2019), uses the term ‘temporal capital’ to explore the sense of agency practitioners have over their own time in their workplaces.

5.3.4.5. Leadership in respective contexts

A significant recurring response was leading practice and provision in their workplaces. This also involved mentoring colleagues and in some cases trainee EYTs. Questionnaire responses reflect this: ***“I feel confident leading others based on my EYTS qualification”*** and: ***“I train other EYT’s”*** and from the conversations, Sandy said: ***“I support staff with planning etc, so children meet their***

milestones” whilst Julie recognises how her time is split between being with children and management responsibilities with **“80% Leading and Management, 20% teaching (mainly modelling teaching than with the children”**. However, others do not feel as confident carrying out that aspect of leadership: ***“I am still learning how best to lead/support other staff (something I feel could have been covered better in the course”***, [questionnaire response] and Caroline states:

“(EYTS) training not adequate no leadership training...some progression missed as I wasn’t ‘qualified, you need to do QTS...” .Financial responsibilities also featured a couple of times; Sandy: ***“I lead CPD training, a big part of my role, with limited funding though...I ask for suggestions I make sure staff are on board, confident, part of the change, rather than the change done to them...it gets too overwhelming...”*** and: ***“We are a large inner city setting with large numbers, budgets are tight so I am also part of the leadership team”***

It would appear from some responses that EYTs are positioned in some settings in a middle management type role, being part of senior management but also working with children, families and practitioners. This could potentially create further tensions between the different expectations of stakeholders. A couple of respondents mentioned ‘resistance’. For example, Julie said there was ***“resistance to Outdoor Learning, staff need the confidence to work independently, modelling if you are prepared to do it, for staff and children”***

Whilst others appear to want to develop strategies for developing practice and strengthening relationships:

“I am currently a manager so continually teaching my practitioners how to extend and develop children’s experiences” [Questionnaire respondent]

“I am a senior manager but aspire to support my team” [Questionnaire respondent]

“I developed the reflective diary, a communication tool between us, a kind of planning support tool, I initiated that and implemented it ” [Sally]

“My role as an EYT is more of an oversight and I have the full backing of the director...I’m left to it ... I feel able to fulfil my role” [Sandy]

Responses appear to indicate that EYTs take on the principles of both social and

pedagogical leadership approaches such as building on values which support children's social, physical, and emotional wellbeing (Fonsen et al., 2022) which is viewed as a shared responsibility along with the implementation of high-quality pedagogy. Responses indicate how the unique context of the setting influences the philosophy of pedagogical leadership in relation to what it looks like, how policy is interpreted and applied, the structure of the setting, and the overall cultural and societal contexts. This is discussed by both Hujala (2004) and Nivala, (1998). From a social leadership perspective, many of the urgent needs previously discussed facing the ECEC profession, can be addressed by EYT's. Crowther and Sakr's (2021) call for the development of an ECEC specific model of leadership to encompass all that is unique and important about working in the profession, including understanding relationships between social work, education and healthcare, as well as the importance of close relationships with families and the wider community.

Furthermore, developing 'collaborativeness' (Fairchild et al., 2022) as an approach in leadership can be perceived as progressive, and as such is one which disrupts norms, gives space to differing traditions and attitudes which include reflect contemporary childhood, their upbringing, relationships between individuals and society. Throughout the telling of my narratives, I illuminate aspects I felt important in relation to my experience of being a leader and a manager, particularly around our team working practices and my preferred leadership approach. Firstly in '*The Suit*' I describe my unease at being asked to wear a suit, visually setting me apart from the rest of the team, (see 5.4)

Across this chapter, participants demonstrated how quality is not a fixed checklist, but a situated achievement produced through relationships, judgement and contextual knowledge. While they competently 'do' the managerial work required by policy, they experience and perform quality primarily through everyday interactions with children, families and colleagues.

Synthesising the themes shows persistent tensions between instrumental and relational views of quality; professionalisation and marketisation; and policy rhetoric and workforce realities. Placing these findings within an ecological frame clarifies that what appears as an individual practitioner issue is often the product of exo- and macro-level forces that are negotiated, sometimes resisted, within microsystems.

Finally, I also reflect upon how I saw my role within the team in '*The Clipboard*':

“Our method (of planning) worked for us as we were a small team who were all on board with the process and were not overwhelmed by having lots of key children. All of the team made observations and put them on my clipboard for the plans I also took the plans home to complete on a Friday evening based upon my colleagues notes from the week (something that often caused tension in my home life) but an activity I enjoyed doing as it gave me a sense of the coming week but also one I had no time to do whilst in the setting as I was always included in ratios (again something I enjoyed, parents paid precious money to have me be with their children). This is not something everyone is willing to do as they are already receiving low pay, why do something unpaid? As the manager of my setting, I felt more able to lead and support my team, but I fully understood the implications of coming to this training as an outsider with good ideas.”

The critical ecological framework can be seen at play in this section as myself and the participants articulate how we juggled the pressures from the wider systems such as policy, local needs, children’s needs, parents’ expectation and accountability measures and attempt to make them work within respective microsystems. The following discussion section will explore how the study’s findings meet its overarching aim.

5.3.4.6 A new type of leader?

The findings indicate that there are conditions within the workplace microsystems that either limit or enable Early Years Teachers to be their version of the role. A key enabler is that of being seen a leader and being able to provide children with rich learning experiences. This relies on both the support of the leadership and management team (referred to in the responses at SLT or SMT and which many are members of) as well as the colleagues in their teaching team. Reference is made to mentoring and supporting colleagues with the outcome of improving practice and provision as detailed in the EYITT standards (NCTL, 2013). Within their contexts, many are fulfilling both leadership and managerial duties which is evident in existing studies by Harrison et al (2023) and Wong et al (2015).

The impact this has on their role is that, whilst they identify as leaders of pedagogy, they also know they have a key role in the overall running of the setting, and they

understand the complexity and duality of their position. Whilst this is an enabler, it can also be a limiter depending upon the nature of the relationship between them and their senior leadership teams who may have one agenda and their teaching colleagues who may have another; a space where conflict can arise. Recent research by Jeffries (2024) echoes this and positions the ECEC profession as trying to navigate through 'stormy seas', the turbulent currents of which are neoliberal agenda's, schoolification, the status of play and the fragmented workforce. Furthermore, Jeffries (ibid) discusses the non-negotiable elements of individual pedagogy and how stating an explicit pedagogical vision can prepare practitioners to drive it forward in a rough sea state in the face of opposition which will come when the pursuit of knowledge, measurable and measured, is not the goal.

The EYT's' knowledge of local needs has been built over significant periods of time, in some cases decades, with conversation participants in the study teaching generations from the same families. Becoming part of the fabric of a community and fostering close relationships is an important part of their role as they become the 'experts' in their unique microsystem contexts, allowing for temporal changes. Within this space, professional love, respectful relationships and meeting diverse needs of children and families can be achieved. As the study's data revealed, EYT's refer to their practice with such terms as secure, care, emotional environment, comfortable and right for the children. This is echoed in research from Page (2018) and Sevenhuijsen's (1998) 'feminist ethics of care' as empathy, intuition, compassion, love, relationality and commitment. This too may be a limitation, as Campbell Barr (2017) suggests a dichotomy between an ethic of care and technocratic models meaning that the two approaches appear to reject one another, the latter being a place where subversion and resistance seem to take place.

Evident in the data are examples from EYT's where they have either resisted, subverted or conformed to top-down initiatives where they feel it has not resonated with their values or beliefs, interestingly, many participants gave a sense of déjà-vu with one talking about a '**10-year cycle**', indicating that to some extent, ideas and policy come and go, and the constants are relationships between children, families and practitioners. In relation to this, Albin-Clark and Archer (2023b, p52) talk of 'hopeful and flourishing pedagogies' of practitioners as having two key features: a sense of agency and a belief that they can provide alternative ways of being and

working with young children. ECEC as a relational activity links to the notion of women's work and emotional labour which is evident in the chronosystem of the profession. All participants in the study were female which is part of a wider global debate around the nature and perception of the role.

Across the four themes, the findings show that the systems are interdependent. Microsystem practices are produced through mesosystem relationships; these are enabled and constrained by exosystem policy, funding and regulation; and all are situated within macrosystem discourses of quality, school readiness, gender and professionalism. The chronosystem reveals how these relations shift through policy cycles, Covid-19, qualification reforms and participants' career histories. The critical ecological perspective therefore moves the analysis beyond locating problems within individual practitioners and instead makes visible the power relations, inequalities and possibilities for agency operating across the whole ecology.

5.4 Chapter Summary

The findings in this chapter demonstrate that participants understand and enact their roles across both structural and process-oriented dimensions of quality. While they competently "do" the managerial and technician requirements as necessary enactments of policy, their accounts reveal that relational work is where their professional identity and passion lie. Relational quality emerges as the heart of their practice, even though it features far less prominently in policy frameworks. The chapter found synthesis across the themes, identifying further tensions between the discourses of instrumental quality and relational quality, professionalisation and marketisation, democratic values and managerial accountability, and lastly the gap between policy rhetoric and workforce realities.

The findings indicate that participants' specialist knowledge was accompanied by attributes associated with gradueness, including critical reflection, theoretical engagement and the confidence to articulate professional judgements. However, the enactment and recognition of these capacities were shaped by relationships, professional hierarchies and wider structural conditions.

Across the analysis, it becomes clear that quality in ECEC is not a singular or stable concept, but a complex ecology shaped by multiple, overlapping forces. The themes highlight how relational labour is gendered, how developmental norms continue to shape expectations of readiness, and how policy discourse permeates even the

smallest micro-interactions. Both the participants' narratives and my own researcher-practitioner accounts reveal the inherent messiness of quality as it is experienced in real settings, dynamic, negotiated, and deeply context-dependent.

In aligning these findings with the ecological and theoretical frameworks guiding this study, quality emerges not simply as a set of standards to be complied with, but as something relational, political, emotional, and embodied. The narratives expose surface tensions that remain largely invisible in policy documents: participants are positioned as leaders of quality through structural mechanisms, yet they experience and perform quality primarily through relationships.

My positionality, particularly my background as a practitioner, enabled a deeper engagement with these tensions and informed the interpretations presented here. This chapter therefore not only illuminates how quality is enacted by those working in ECEC but also exposes the gaps between policy expectations and day to day work. Having established this complex and situated understanding of quality, the next chapter turns to the implications and recommendations, considering how these insights might inform policy, leadership, and future practice in the sector.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

This final chapter brings together the methodological, analytical and theoretical threads of the study. It is structured into four interrelated sections. First, I revisit and evaluate the research approach, reflecting on how my methodological decisions supported the investigation of EYT's experiences and identities within a complex policy environment. Second, I synthesise the significance of the findings and position them within existing debates, with particular attention to the relationship between structural and process quality and the role of the EYT. Third, I revisit the research aim and questions in relations to the findings. Finally, I outline recommendations for practice, policy and future research, followed by a concluding reflection that draws together the thesis.

Systems theory, conceptualised through a critical ecological lens, has been used throughout as the explanatory framework for understanding how EYT's live, enact and interpret quality across interconnected layers of the early years system. This final chapter continues to draw on this framework to demonstrate how professional identity, quality discourses and policy enactments are shaped within dynamic, living systems of relationships.

6.1 Consideration of Research Approach

The impetus for this study emerged from my own professional experience as an EYP. Working within a qualification that was neither fully recognised nor understood, I experienced tensions around status, identity and expertise and competing discourses of quality. These experiences generated the central research aim: To explore how workplace experiences, quality assurance mechanisms and policy discourses shape EYT's pedagogy, professional relationships and identity.

Narrative enquiry, situated within an interpretivist paradigm, was selected as the methodological approach because it centres people's experiences and foregrounds meaning making. This aligned with the study's aims and the theoretical commitment to understanding professional identity as shaped within interconnected ecological systems. Following a pilot, an online questionnaire and one-to-one online conversations were chosen as data collection methods. The questionnaire provided

a broad overview of themes, while the conversational interviews produced rich, detailed narratives about participants' roles, values, pedagogy, challenges and workplace interactions.

Although the sample size was small, participants' depth of experience and the openness of the conversations enabled nuanced insights into how EYTs work across structural and process dimensions of quality. My own practitioner background supported rapport-building and, in line with Elliot's (2005) argument that people "like telling stories". The conversational method was effective in eliciting detailed accounts of practice, identity and policy negotiation.

Limitations include the small, but experienced sample and my position as a novice researcher. However, the study generated data that illuminate tensions within the profession that warrant further examination. Reflecting on this process has strengthened my research capability and provided direction for future inquiry.

6.2 Significance of Findings

The findings make an original contribution to knowledge about the role, identity and positioning of the EYT by revealing how they actively negotiate dominant discourses of quality within a shifting and sometimes contradictory policy landscape. Central to this contribution is the interplay between structural and process quality: while EYTs are required to enact structural expectations, the quality they value most, and the quality that shapes children's experiences, is fundamentally relational, emotional and process driven.

Viewed within the current early years policy landscape, the findings suggest that EYTs' work is increasingly characterised by what might be understood as subversive enactments of quality. These enactments are not oppositional in a traditional sense, but are embedded, relational and often invisible forms of professional agency through which EYTs seek to protect process quality within structurally dominated systems. Rather than rejecting policy outright, participants described practices of reinterpretation, translation and quiet resistance that allowed developmentally appropriate pedagogy to be sustained at the microsystem level.

However, this study also problematises the assumption that such subversion is either sustainable or universally available. The capacity to negotiate, (re)interpret and soften

structural demands relied on conditions including professional confidence, supportive leadership, time for reflection and a coherent sense of ECEC identity. As these conditions become increasingly precarious within a fragmented and expanding system, the burden of sustaining quality is displaced onto individual practitioners. This raises critical questions about the long-term viability of a system that relies on EYTs' hidden labour to reconcile policy contradictions while claiming to prioritise "quality".

The critical ecological analysis shows that these negotiations are produced through interaction across ecological levels. At the microsystem level, EYTs enact relational and play-based quality through everyday work with children, families and colleagues. At the mesosystem level, this work is shaped by relationships between settings, schools, families, leadership teams and external professionals. Exosystem influences, including inspection, funding, qualification structures and organisational decisions, affect practice even where EYTs have limited control over them, while macrosystem discourses of school readiness, performativity, professionalism and gender shape which forms of knowledge and quality are valued. The chronosystem draws attention to the ways these relationships have been reconfigured through policy reform, qualification change, the Covid-19 pandemic and the expansion of provision. The critical dimension of the framework makes visible how power and responsibility move through these levels, often locating the work of resolving systemic contradictions within the everyday labour of individual EYTs.

6.3 Key contributions.

6.3.1 Reframing the School Readiness Agenda through Structural Process Quality

The readiness and schoolification discourses operate primarily at the structural level: teacher standards, accountability frameworks, curriculum expectations and pedagogical directives. Participants' narratives highlight how these structural demands increasingly shape practice with younger children, often in ways that contradict EYTs' deep developmental knowledge. Their accounts show that EYTs draw on specialist early years expertise rooted in process quality (attunement, interaction, play, responsiveness), yet frequently find this expertise marginalised within school hierarchies dominated by structural authority (QTS, senior leadership, performance measures).

This tension becomes particularly significant considering government plans to

expand early years provision into schools. While EYTs are the most qualified group to lead pedagogy for babies and young children, their voices and knowledge are often overruled by practitioners with less specialised understanding. Thus, this study reframes current debates by showing that schoolification is not only shaping children's experiences but also reconfiguring the ecology of professional authority. EYTs find themselves performing structural expectations while protecting process quality, revealing their critical role as mediators between policy and pedagogy. Ecologically, school readiness is not confined to a single level. Macrosystem assumptions about the purpose of education are translated through exosystem instruments such as standards, inspection and curriculum policy; these are negotiated through mesosystem relationships between early years settings, schools and leadership teams; and they become visible in the microsystem through decisions about play, routines, interaction and adult-led activity. The chronosystem shows how the increasing reach of school-readiness discourse over successive reforms has altered both children's experiences and the authority accorded to EYTs. A critical reading therefore identifies schoolification as a movement of power across the ecology, rather than simply a matter of individual pedagogical choice.

6.3.2 Making Visible the Unintended Consequences of Policy Fragmentation

The findings also expose how EYTs manage the cumulative consequences of fragmented early years policy. The ambiguous status of EYTs, "a teacher but not a teacher", creates structural inconsistencies around pay, expectations and legitimacy. These structural ambiguities have profound process consequences: reduced influence in decision-making, diminished professional recognition, and undermining of pedagogical leadership. Participants' experiences reveal that structural devaluation leads directly to constraints on delivering developmentally appropriate practice, tensions with colleagues holding QTS, pressure to adopt pedagogies misaligned with early years principles and a need to continuously justify the importance of play, relationships and child-led learning.

New policy developments, such as the proposed Level 6 apprenticeship route, risk further complicating this landscape. While presented as expanding the workforce, such initiatives may dilute the depth of child development and relational pedagogy that underpin EYTs' process expertise. This study therefore makes visible how structural instability erodes process quality, despite policy rhetoric emphasising

“quality improvement”. EYTs are shown to be essential actors who stabilise and humanise practice amidst these systemic contradictions.

The consequences of policy fragmentation can similarly be traced across the ecological system. At the macrosystem level, assumptions about teacher status and professional worth privilege QTS and formal schooling. Exosystem arrangements concerning qualifications, pay, funding and accountability institutionalise this hierarchy, while mesosystem interactions with managers, school colleagues, parents and external agencies may reproduce or contest it. The microsystem consequences are experienced in reduced influence over everyday pedagogical decisions and the repeated need to justify specialist practice. The chronosystem highlights the cumulative effects of successive reconfigurations from EYP to EYTS and the emergence of new qualification routes. Critically, this exposes the contradiction of a system that relies on EYT expertise while withholding equivalent authority and recognition.

6.3.3 Repositioning the EYT: A Conceptual Contribution

Across the findings, a reconceptualisation of the EYT emerges. The EYT should not be understood merely as a technician enacting structural requirements. Rather, the study positions the EYT as a relational leader, a critical interpreter of policy, a custodian of early years pedagogy and a microsystem leader who sustains process quality through everyday interactions. This positions the EYT as central to safeguarding the pedagogical distinctiveness and integrity of early childhood education in England, particularly within a policy climate that increasingly privileges structural indicators. This is the key contribution of the thesis: EYTs occupy a vital but under-recognised role in maintaining quality as relational, embodied and context dependent. Their expertise is indispensable precisely because it sits in the process domain where quality *happens*. Importantly, this repositioning also reveals the limits of individual agency. While EYTs act as critical mediators of quality, their capacity to do so is contingent upon ecological conditions beyond their control. Subversion, in this sense, becomes both a marker of professional expertise and a symptom of systemic failure. The need for EYTs to continuously negotiate and protect process quality highlights not professional weakness, but the inadequacy of policy frameworks that privilege structural indicators while depending on relational labour to mitigate their effects. There is evidence that graduate early years leaders can contribute to improvements in quality through modelling practice, mentoring colleagues and leading professional

development (Mathers et al., 2011). However, this contribution is neither automatic nor solely attributable to qualification status. The influence of graduate practitioners is shaped by existing leadership capacity, organisational resources, setting characteristics and the extent to which leadership becomes collectively embedded within practice (Hadfield et al., 2012). Furthermore, quality depends not only upon formal knowledge and qualifications, but upon the interaction of knowledge with professional values, attitudes, dispositions and experience (Campbell-Barr, 2017). EYTs may therefore be particularly well positioned to champion relational and developmentally appropriate quality, but they should be understood as catalysts within a collective professional endeavour rather than as inherently superior or individually responsible for sustaining quality.

This conceptualisation positions the EYT as a boundary-spanning ecological actor rather than only a microsystem leader. EYTs translate macro- and exosystem expectations into locally meaningful practice, negotiate connections and tensions between microsystems at the mesosystem level, and sustain process quality through interactions within the microsystem. Their professional knowledge and capacity to act are also shaped over time through the chronosystem of qualification reform, policy change and career experience. The critical perspective nevertheless cautions against presenting this mediation as an individual solution, since doing so risks normalising the transfer of systemic responsibility onto practitioners.

Before revisiting the research questions, figure 6.1 below draws together the principal findings through a critical ecological perspective. It makes explicit the ways in which the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem intersect, while also highlighting the operation of power, recognition, inequality and resistance across these ecological levels.

Ecological level	Key finding from this study	Illustrative context or relationship	Implication for quality
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Microsystem	EYTs' ability to influence practice was shaped by their immediate workplace relationships, including support, resistance, leadership and the recognition of their expertise.	Relationships between EYTs, colleagues, managers and children within the ECEC setting; for example, resistance to changes in planning, documentation or pedagogical practice.	Quality was strengthened where EYTs were trusted and supported to use their expertise, but constrained where established practices, restrictive leadership or workplace hierarchies limited their influence.
Mesosystem	Quality was affected by the relationships between the different immediate contexts surrounding the child and the EYT. Tensions arose when professional knowledge was valued differently across these contexts.	Connections between the ECEC setting, families, schools and external professionals; for example, the interaction between the preschool, receiving school and parent in <i>The Dressing Up Box</i> .	Collaborative relationships supported continuity for children, while professional hierarchies and conflicting expectations could marginalise ECEC expertise and weaken partnership working.
Exosystem	Decisions made outside EYTs' immediate settings shaped their working conditions, responsibilities and capacity to enact quality practice.	Local authority arrangements, organisational structures, funding decisions, accountability systems, staffing pressures and access to professional development.	Quality was influenced by structures over which EYTs often had limited direct control, meaning that responsibility for quality could not be located solely with individual practitioners or settings.
Macrosystem	Wider cultural values and policy discourses influenced how ECEC, EYTs and different forms of professional knowledge were understood and valued.	Schoolification, assumptions about school readiness, the higher status afforded to school-based qualifications and persistent distinctions between education and care.	Quality was constrained where formal schooling was positioned as superior to ECEC and where EYTs' specialist knowledge was insufficiently recognised within the wider professional hierarchy.

Chronosystem	Participants' experiences and professional identities developed over time in response to changing policy expectations, career transitions and accumulated workplace experiences.	Changes in the EYT role, policy reforms, movement between settings, changes in leadership and participants' developing confidence and professional identity.	Quality was not static but was shaped by the timing, duration and cumulative effect of professional experiences and wider changes within the ECEC sector.
Critical dimension across all levels	Power, recognition, inequality and resistance operated across and between the ecological levels. The findings demonstrate that opportunities to influence quality were unevenly distributed.	Professional hierarchies, the privileging of some forms of knowledge, resistance to EYTs' influence and the transfer of responsibility for quality onto individual practitioners.	A critical ecological perspective shows that quality is relational, political and structurally produced. It cannot be understood only as the outcome of individual practitioner competence or commitment.

Figure 6.1 Summary of findings through a critical ecological perspective

This ecological synthesis provides the basis for revisiting the research questions and considering how the findings collectively address the aims of the study.

6.4 Revisiting the Research Questions

This study set out to explore how workplace experiences, quality assurance mechanisms and policy discourses shape Early Years Teachers' pedagogy, professional relationships and identity within a complex and evolving ECEC system. Through narrative enquiry, supported by a critical ecological framework, the study has met this aim by illuminating how EYTs live and negotiate quality across interconnected structural and relational domains.

The findings demonstrate that EYTs' pedagogy is not simply shaped by policy and quality frameworks but actively mediated through everyday relational work. Participants described how structural mechanisms such as accountability measures, teacher standards and qualification hierarchies, exert significant influence over practice expectations. However, the study shows that EYTs do not enact these demands uncritically. Instead, they engage in processes of interpretation, negotiation

and, at times, subversion in order to sustain developmentally appropriate, relational pedagogy. In doing so, the research foregrounds quality as something enacted within microsystems, rather than delivered through policy instruments.

In drawing these conclusions, the empirical accounts were read in two connected directions: outwards from participants' everyday experiences to identify the relationships, institutional arrangements and cultural discourses shaping them, and inwards from macro- and exosystem forces to trace how they were mediated through mesosystem relationships and enacted within microsystem practice. The ecological levels are therefore not treated as separate containers. The analysis focuses on their interdependence, on changes over time through the chronosystem, and on the critical questions of whose knowledge is privileged, where decision-making power is located and who carries the consequences of policy contradiction.

6.4.1 Research Question 1.

In relation to the first research question, *How does the quality agenda create challenges and opportunities for EYTs' agency in shaping practice and sustaining professional values?* the study reveals that the quality agenda simultaneously constrains and enables agency. Structural definitions of quality limit EYTs' professional autonomy by privileging measurable outcomes and hierarchical forms of expertise. Yet, within these constraints, EYTs exercise agency through relational leadership and subversive enactments of process quality. These practices allow EYTs to uphold professional values centred on play, relationships and responsiveness, while formally operating within quality-driven systems. Agency is therefore shown to be ecological and contingent, shaped by the interaction between individual expertise and systemic conditions.

More explicitly, agency is enacted in the microsystem through moment-to-moment pedagogical decisions, enabled or constrained in the mesosystem through relationships with colleagues, leaders, families and schools, and conditioned by exosystem arrangements such as inspection, funding and organisational governance. Macrosystem constructions of quality determine which practices are legitimised, while the chronosystem shows that opportunities for agency shift as policy, qualifications and workplace conditions change. Agency is therefore relational and unevenly distributed, rather than an individual attribute that all EYTs can exercise equally.

6.4.2 Research Question 2.

Addressing the second research question, *How do EYTs perceive, negotiate, and respond to their role as graduate leaders within a quality-driven policy context?*, the findings demonstrate that EYTs perceive their role as both professionally significant and structurally undermined. Participants articulated a strong sense of responsibility for pedagogical quality, particularly for babies and young children, yet described ongoing tensions related to status, recognition and legitimacy. The study shows that EYTs respond to these tensions not through overt resistance, but through quiet, relational leadership and strategic compliance. This negotiation highlights the paradox of graduate leadership in ECEC: EYTs are positioned as leaders of quality while being denied the structural authority typically associated with leadership roles.

The paradox of graduate leadership is visible at each ecological level. Leadership is performed within the microsystem through modelling, reflection and relational influence, but its reach depends on mesosystem relationships with senior leaders, QTS colleagues, families and external professionals. Exosystem structures determine formal status, pay, accountability and access to decision-making, while macrosystem assumptions about teaching, gender and professional legitimacy shape whose expertise is recognised. Across the chronosystem, repeated changes to the EYT role have produced an unstable professional location. A critical ecological reading therefore distinguishes between being expected to lead and being granted the structural authority to do so.

6.4.3 Research Question 3.

The third research question, *How do tensions between external quality frameworks and relational, pedagogical understandings of quality influence EYTs' professional identity and practice?*, is addressed through the study's conceptualisation of subversion as a professional practice. The findings illustrate how ongoing tensions between structural and process quality contribute to fragmented and contested professional identities. EYTs are required to perform structural expectations while internally orienting towards relational pedagogical commitments. This dissonance shapes identity as adaptive, negotiated and, at times, precarious. Importantly, the study problematises the sustainability of this identity work, demonstrating that the capacity to reconcile competing quality discourses depends on supportive ecological

conditions that are not consistently present across settings.

Professional identity is consequently formed through ecological interaction rather than within the individual practitioner alone. Microsystem commitments to children, play, care and relationships intersect with mesosystem experiences of recognition or marginalisation; exosystem designations and accountability arrangements define the formal boundaries of the role; and macrosystem discourses concerning professionalism, gender and educational status shape its cultural value. The chronosystem captures the accumulated effects of career trajectories and successive policy reforms. The critical perspective reveals how unequal authority and the expectation of hidden emotional and relational labour contribute to the precariousness of EYT identity.

6.4.4 Returning to the Research Aim

Taken together, the findings show that EYTs' experiences, identities and pedagogical practices are shaped within a dynamic ecological system characterised by policy fragmentation and competing constructions of quality. By foregrounding EYTs' lived experiences and narrative accounts, the study moves beyond simplified policy representations of quality to reveal the hidden relational labour through which quality is enacted and sustained. In doing so, the research not only meets its original aim, but offers a nuanced conceptual contribution that repositions the Early Years Teacher as a critical mediator of quality within contemporary ECEC in England.

Taken together, the findings suggest that quality in ECEC cannot be sustained through individual professionalism alone. While EYTs demonstrate capacity to enact and protect process quality through subversive and relational practices, these strategies are fragile and contingent. Without systemic recognition of the conditions required for such work, quality risks becoming an individualised responsibility rather than a collective, ecological achievement. The following recommendations therefore focus not only on recognising EYTs' expertise, but on creating the structural, cultural and relational conditions in which high-quality early childhood practice can be ethically and sustainably enacted.

6.5 Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that sustaining quality in early childhood education

and care requires more than the refinement of standards or the expansion of qualifications. Instead, quality must be understood as an ecological achievement that depends on the recognition, positioning and working conditions of those charged with enacting it. The following recommendations therefore focus on strengthening the conditions under which EYTs can ethically and sustainably lead process quality within increasingly structuralised systems.

6.5.1 Recommendations for Policy

At a policy level, there is a need for a clearer and more coherent articulation of the purpose and value of the Early Years Teacher role. EYTs should be explicitly recognised as leaders of process quality, with specialist expertise in early childhood pedagogy that is distinct from, but complementary to, Qualified Teacher Status. This recognition is particularly critical in settings working with babies and young children, including school-based provision, where inappropriate pedagogical transfer from older age phases risks undermining developmentally appropriate practice. Consideration should also be given to whether the continued distinction between EYTS and QTS remains defensible, or whether a specialist early childhood pathway within a more coherent teacher-status framework would provide greater clarity and parity. Whilst teaching status nomenclature assumes a standardised title and job role with associated terms, conditions and pay, this is at odds with EYTS due to the facts pay and conditions are not the same and neither is the educational context in which they work (ie, it can be maintained, PVI etc). I argue that for the title to have the same status, the pay, conditions etc need to be the same.

Revisiting the EYITT standards is central to this recognition. Current standards privilege generic teaching competencies while offering limited acknowledgement of the relational, emotional and embodied dimensions of ECEC pedagogy. Explicit reference to babies, play, attachment, attunement and emotional labour would more accurately reflect the nature of quality in ECEC and the expertise EYTs bring to their role. Without such revision, there remains a mismatch between what is measured and what matters in early childhood practice.

Finally, addressing inequities in pay, status and career progression is essential. The

findings demonstrate that professional recognition is not symbolic but material: it shapes whose knowledge carries authority within settings and whose voice influences pedagogical decisions. Aligning EYT's conditions with their responsibilities as graduate leaders of early childhood pedagogy is a necessary step towards a more equitable and sustainable quality agenda.

These recommendations are located principally within the macro- and exosystems because they concern the cultural valuation of early childhood expertise and the policy, qualification, funding and employment arrangements that structure the role. Their effectiveness should, however, be judged by their mesosystem effects on relationships and authority within organisations and by their microsystem consequences for children's everyday experiences. A chronosystem perspective also requires reform to be coherent and sustained over time, rather than introduced through repeated short-term restructuring.

6.5.2 Recommendations for Practice

At the level of practice, the study suggests that settings must move beyond viewing EYT's as technical implementers of policy and instead position them as pedagogical leaders. Leadership teams should actively draw on EYT's specialist knowledge in decision-making, curriculum design and practice development, particularly within mixed-qualification teams where early years expertise can otherwise be marginalised.

Creating protected spaces for reflective and relational practice is also critical. Participants' capacity to sustain process quality depended on opportunities for reflection, dialogue and shared meaning-making with colleagues. Structured time for pedagogical discussion, reflective supervision and collective inquiry should therefore be understood not as optional enhancements, but as essential conditions for quality practice.

In school-based early years provision, particular care must be taken to safeguard the pedagogical distinctiveness of ECEC. EYT's should be enabled to lead practice where younger children are present, ensuring that developmentally inappropriate, school-driven pedagogies do not dominate the microsystem. This requires both trust

in EYT's expertise and an organisational commitment to valuing early years pedagogy on its own terms.

These practice recommendations operate most directly at the micro- and mesosystem levels by strengthening everyday pedagogy and the relationships between EYTs, colleagues, leaders, families and schools. The critical ecological analysis nevertheless shows that local trust and reflective space cannot be sustained through goodwill alone. They require supportive exosystem conditions, including staffing, time, governance and accountability arrangements, together with macrosystem recognition of relational and play-based quality.

6.5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

The study also identifies several avenues for future research. Further work is needed to explore the use of creative and participatory methodologies that may enable practitioners to articulate aspects of quality and identity that are difficult to capture through traditional research methods. Such approaches may be particularly valuable in making visible the embodied and emotional dimensions of early years work.

There is also a clear need for research focused on school-based early years provision, particularly in relation to how EYTs navigate structural hierarchies alongside colleagues holding QTS. Understanding how authority, expertise and quality are negotiated within these contexts is increasingly important as provision continues to expand.

Finally, revisiting the role of the Early Years Professional provides an important longitudinal perspective. Exploring where EYPs are now in relation to role, recognition and career trajectory could offer valuable insights into the long-term consequences of policy reform and professional reconfiguration within the early years workforce.

Future research would benefit from making the chronosystem more explicit through longitudinal designs that follow practitioners, roles and settings across periods of policy change. Comparative work across microsystems and mesosystem relationships could examine how the same macro- and exosystem reforms are mediated differently in PVI, maintained and school-based provision. This would help distinguish temporary adaptation from sustained ecological change and reveal which conditions enable EYT's expertise to influence practice over time.

6.6 Concluding Reflection

This thesis has explored how Early Years Teachers live, interpret and enact quality within a complex policy landscape characterised by fragmentation, schoolification and shifting expectations. Using a critical ecological framework and narrative enquiry, the study demonstrates that EYTs occupy a unique and essential position within the early years system. While policy positions EYTs primarily through structural mechanisms, teacher standards, qualification frameworks, accountability measures, their daily work reveals quality as relational, emotional, embodied and process driven. The study shows that EYTs are not merely policy implementers but are negotiators, resisters and leaders who protect the pedagogical distinctiveness of the early years.

Their narratives illuminate the tensions between structural and process quality in ways that have been largely absent from policy discourse. More importantly, they reveal EYTs as custodians of early childhood pedagogy, working within their microsystems to uphold the values of play, relationships and developmentally grounded practice. In doing so, the thesis contributes a reconceptualisation of the Early Years Teacher as a specialist professional whose expertise is essential to maintaining the integrity of early childhood education in England. At a time of rapid policy change and expansion of provision, this contribution is both timely and urgent.

In ecological terms, the thesis concludes that quality is enacted in the microsystem, negotiated through mesosystem relationships, enabled or constrained by exosystem structures, and culturally defined within macrosystem discourses. These processes are not static: the chronosystem shows how qualification reform, policy expansion, the pandemic and practitioners' career histories reshape their interaction over time. The critical ecological contribution lies in showing that power does not remain at the policy level but travels through institutions and relationships into everyday pedagogy, while resistance and professional judgement can also move outwards from practice. Quality is therefore a collective ecological achievement, not an outcome that can reasonably be secured through the hidden labour of individual EYTs alone.

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Appendices

Appendix A My Narratives

Pen portrait of the author

I have been in my current role as a senior lecturer in BA (Hons) early childhood studies for 10 years, previously I was a course leader for the FdA early childhood studies in a local FE college for 3 years. I began my life in ECEC as a parent helper 25 years ago in a small preschool attended by eldest daughter. Whilst there I undertook a L3 early years qualification and progressed then on to FdA, followed by the top up L6 degree, then EYPS followed by an MA in early childhood studies, all whilst working and raising a family. Despite this I always struggled to see where I fit in, and I also suffer from a bad case of imposter syndrome. Whilst studying for the Top up I changed roles and moved to be a manager of a small nursery and wrap around setting where I was the only graduate practitioner, the owner also had EYPS. Before I worked in ECEC I held a range of roles in my hometown in the retail, hospitality and production sectors which I think gave me a broad skills set and meant that I met and worked with people from a diversity of backgrounds, both of which are really useful when working with children, families and the wider community. I had been to university before when I was 19 but withdrew as I became disengaged, this too was useful experience for supporting students in my current role.

The brush.

N arrived at the setting almost by accident. He had been on a day out with his grandma who had seen our signage on the fence outside our community hall. She knocked on the door, and we welcomed them both in.

Grandma told us about N and their living arrangements. N was 3 and had not been to a setting before and had limited interactions with children his own age. He spent the majority of his time with Grandma as mum was a single parent, worked full time so they had sporadic contact, even though they all shared the same house Grandma said mum was 'only young' and also enjoyed an active social life. Grandma also struggled with a physical disability. Whilst we talked N tentatively approached the train track on one of the carpets whilst looking at the other children. We chatted to

grandma who looked like she would cry when we told her he was eligible for 15-hour funding, that we cooked hot meals and the other activities we did.

N started some short sessions with us, always staying at the train track and he displayed mild distress when it became apparent that grandma would not be staying. Our observations of him showed that his speech and language was considerably higher than his chronological age, as was his knowledge and understanding. However, his personal social and emotional development was the area he appeared to struggle with. He seemed almost frightened of the other children and emotional problems occurred mostly during dance time. The owner of the setting was a qualified dance teacher and Monday mornings she came in to do a dance session with the children. She insisted that all children joined in despite our protestations that N did not like the session, however we struggled to say anything as she was the owner. N would hide under the table he could almost sense what was coming and as soon as her car pulled onto the car park he would make dash for safety. We don't know what it was about the dance sessions that he didn't enjoy was it being in the large group? Was it the practitioner who was unfamiliar to him? (he only saw her once a week) Was it the day, was it was it Mondays? or was it the music? We don't know. N was a complex boy, and he had struck up a friendship with one other child who had a similar temperament to him, quiet reserved shy and like to play with similar things. She said shared a lot of similar traits to him and was the youngest of three siblings and came to the setting after attending a toddler group with dad, who was her main carer. She also had a physical condition which made dad wary of leaving her so he would stay for prolonged periods of time, often sitting in the car park waiting for her to come out. She gradually did attend for a full session, both of these children however sought adult play opportunities rather than with children of their own age. They did like to play alongside each other, and N would continually construct complex structures from Duplo and blocks making intricate train tracks throughout his 'cities.'

As he came to us when he was three it was not long before we started to look at transitions for him to attend a small village school, however he was not in the catchment area and grandma didn't know enough about the appeals process to pursue a place for him where she felt that he would do better. So, he went to the smallest town school, we arranged many visits to help settle him in.

We would try to engage him in many activities in the setting such as the adult led activities he would participate for a period of time however his eyes would always drift back to his beloved train track. He would often have snack at his constructions and train track, not being able to tear himself away and we would never force him to. He wanted to always leave whatever he'd made that day on the carpet so that he could show grandma when she came to collect him. He didn't really enjoy any of the extra stuff that we did in the settings such as forest schools again we don't know exactly why he didn't enjoy forest schools whether it was the puddle suits the wellies being outside the mud we never did understand why he found it so unappealing. In his final term with us he reached a stage where he was happy in small group situations with an adult there. On his last day we were emotional not just for N also for Grandma taking care of N had been her whole life and we knew that school and teachers did not always have the same approach to parents and carers as EY, there is a more pronounced distance (physically and emotionally). On the last day N came in happily holding 2 bags, one for me and one of my colleagues. I forget the other contents in the bag except for one thing he rooted through the tissue to show me, he had proudly told me he'd been to the garden centre gift shop after the cafe, and he had chosen our gifts himself. He handed me a small nail brush shaped like a frog 'it is a frog brush for brushing your frogs' he said.

Themes

The unique child and family

Children's voice (the child)

Policy

The clipboard

Following a successful Ofsted which commended our effective planning processes, the owner of the nursey chain asked me to give a training session for the practitioners in other settings. I was reluctant as I believe that there is no 'one size fits all' and our approach may not work elsewhere as we had developed it as a team over a period of time.

However, I agreed, and found myself in one of the rooms in one of the settings surrounded by colleagues, who were attending after work for 'CPD' unpaid. I began

by describing how our setting went about planning for children's learning and development, interests and needs. I paused and asked for any questions, instead of questions I had a myriad of reasons why practitioners thought it would not work for them. I understood and recognised all of the reasons, and I also recognised that practice was a balancing act between the expectations of the owner (and their desire to get the best Ofsted rating as this may boost enrolment figures), and the specificity of practice in individual settings.

Our method worked for us as we were a small team who were all on board with the process and were not overwhelmed by having lots of key children. All of the team made observations and put them on my clipboard for the plans I also took the plans home to complete on a Friday evening based upon my colleagues notes from the week (something that often caused tension in my home life) but an activity I enjoyed doing as it gave me a sense of the coming week but also one I had no time to do whilst in the setting as I was always included in ratios (again something I enjoyed, parents paid precious money to have me be with their children. This is not something everyone is willing to do as they are already receiving low pay, why do something unpaid? As the manager of my setting, I felt more able to lead and support my team, but I fully understood the implications of coming to this training as an outsider with good ideas.

This boiled down to accountability and performativity from the nursery owner seizing upon every chance to get good results, the gaze of regulation to be seen to be outstanding. where my driver was different, it was about good practice for the benefit of the children's learning and development. I could see how demoralised colleagues were following poor judgements from inspectors (often not EY specialist for example one had come from the probation service and had an overriding concern for safeguarding paperwork, never once looking at children's records or plans and another from HSE who was obsessed with the temperature of the fridge). This regulatory gaze always made me uneasy, that and the fact it was never a level playing field in that the rest of the education sector always had due warning of a visit, PVI settings never do.

Themes

Performativity

Context

Accountability

The dressing up box

if Jay had been born one hour later she would have been starting school the following year she was a vibrant energetic little girl who loved free flow play she was friendly and gregarious. She had been at the setting since she was 1 and she was now approaching 4, and her favourite thing was the dressing up box. She would tear in and head straight for it collecting a gaggle of followers in her wake (she was very popular!) She also used a dummy when she needed to, and she also needed had an afternoon nap. Mum expressed concerns about her starting school and after visiting the reception class and talking to the teachers she felt that Jay would not yet thrive in a classroom. She had some immature word pronunciations and speech sounds that we had been working on, however, apart from that she was on target within the normal range for her all her areas of development. I advised mum that Jay did not have to go to the school and that she had options which she investigated and advised the school that Jay would be staying an extra term in the pre-school. The reception teacher paid a visit to the pre-school to see Jay in the July before we broke up. She insisted to know why mum had arrived at her decision and she stayed to watch Jay play who was busy racing around the hall dressed as a rabbit before telling me she 'needed' school and that she would be 'fine'. I pushed, 'why?' 'Otherwise, should be left behind' 'how so?' 'She would not be ready for what year one involved' 'she will still be in EYFS you shouldn't be doing anything different to us?'

The visits and conversations started again in the September as the new academic year started, the reception teacher kept asking to visit and wanted to see 'what we were doing with Jay' On one occasion mum was at the setting when the reception teacher came in. The situation became stressful for her as she wrestled with the idea of doing what she knew was best for J and the insidious ideas creeping in that she was somehow holding her back and disadvantaging her despite our reassurance. This continued for some time but then a compromise was reached and J did two afternoons with us in our setting and two mornings at school to increase gradually. I think mum had become worn down and felt she had no choice. By the Christmas Jay was in school almost full time and her sessions with us came to an end. By the time

she started she still needed her dummy at times and an afternoon nap. We don't know if this continued while she was in school however we did write it in her records we also don't know if the language interventions that we had been supporting her with also continued though this too was in her records. Of all the children that went to school that year and most would be able to cope with the change there were a handful I was worried about but none so more than Jay who we (myself colleagues and mum) were told would soon 'settle down' a term I felt had a sinister undercurrent, relating to normality and conformity.

Themes

Schoolification

Power and inequality/resistance

DAP

Best interests.

The Dummy

After studying a part time foundation degree in ECS in a local FE college 1 night a week as part of the graduate leader initiative, (and not doing particularly well!) I continued to study and started the top up degree at university. This year felt different it felt like I thought being at university would feel. I had felt 'forced' into the FD as it was funded but I really wanted to complete this last year.

The final module was the dissertation, and I was researching a possible connection between dummy use and speech and language difficulty and delay as I had a professional interest in this related to children in the setting. I felt a drive to research and to question then to analyse to read and to write about what I had found, and this resulted in my work being well received by my tutors, I was asked to present at that year's conference. Again, my research was well received, and it was at this point that something shifted (ruptured) I felt like I had a voice now and that I could contribute meaningfully with an informed opinion about things I felt strongly about and could more effectively advocate for children and families.

Following my degree I then proceeded to do my early years professional status (EYPS) the forerunner to EYTS, it has only recently occurred to me how I have lived

successive policy initiatives to professionalise the workforce, I have been at the chalk face whilst these attempts have been implemented. The premise of EYP was to lead change by taking a critical look at practice in order to improve provision and therefore children's outcomes. Embarking upon this made me more reflective and attuned to colleagues in the team and I began to better understand the leadership approach that early year's practitioners naturally adopted, me included (collaborative and diffused)

Following this I started an MA in early childhood studies as I realised that I enjoyed academic learning, but I was becoming increasingly frustrated by the expectations of early years practitioners from outside of the sector, such as Ofsted, schools and the La. I was also aware of the perception of the workforce from wider society who had little or no knowledge of the complexities of our role. A further frustration was the owners of the setting imposing activities upon us of which I saw no benefit for our children (graduation and nativity plays for example).

We had a party at the end of summer to say goodbye to the children moving on, I became upset and I realised deep down I would not be doing this again in this setting, I had reached a fork in my road. I would not and could not keep doing things that went against my pedagogical beliefs and my knowledge.

A post was advertised at my local FE college for a course leader for their FD in early childhood studies, I applied and was surprised to be called for interview but attended not thinking I would be offered the role. The interview was 30 mins late at which point I nearly went home. I stayed, answered questions, did my short presentation then drove home, full of the usual post interview angst and self-doubt. Whilst in the car my phone rang, and it was the college offering me the job. It was time to put my money where my mouth was and step up to help build and shape practitioners into the competent, confident advocates for children, families, their colleagues and themselves they needed to be in order to change perceptions of our workforce.

Themes

The road barriers.

Following a 'good' Ofsted inspection, we had a visit from the LA QL. She was looking at the setting and the layout we adopted each day (we were a pack away nursery so had the benefit of being flexible with how we decided to arrange the room on a daily basis, depending on which children were attending etc). The QL had a particular focus on our two-year-old provision as we were in receipt of 'Think 2' funding at the time for a number of children. This day we had configured our hall considering our children for the day. We had constructed a dedicated area for our two-year-olds as directed by a QL on a previous visit. We had found however that our two-year-olds were not keen on their dedicated area and had spent the first afternoon we introduced it attempting to escape to their non-dedicated areas and to their friends and siblings in the main hall! The area had thus become a 'cosy and quiet' space for all children which was fine by me and the team who were of the belief that the setting was a collaborative and negotiated place, the children were stakeholders, so they had every right to use the hall and resources as they wished.

The QL did not agree and stated that guidelines suggested they the 'two-year-olds should have their own area', I replied, they have they just choose not to use it!' She proceeded to tell me about another pack-away setting in another part of the county that had received an 'outstanding' judgement. She suggested then arranged a visit for me and deputy to visit to observe their set-up and we agreed with open minds, as we were receptive to new ideas and ways to improve provision for our children and families.

Upon our arrival the differences were immediately apparent. This was much larger building with 2 rooms and a fully resourced kitchen with cooks. There were many staff (10 maybe?) we were a team of 4 at any one time and I was always in ratio; this manager came to greet us from her office. However, the thing that we immediately noticed were the barriers (the type that are used in sectioning off roadworks), running all through both rooms. Huge (if you are 2 years old!) red structures cutting through the space preventing roaming, free movement and a child's eye view of everything on offer. The purpose of the barriers was to segregate age groups and within each 'age appropriate' resources and equipment.

We spent the morning talking to the practitioners and looking around, the manager told us that 5 practitioners set up in the morning for the day. There was further difference between us we would present a half-finished room to the children so that they could decide what else they wanted during the day. We departed and did not discuss anything on the drive home. The QL contacted me to gather our thoughts which I happily disclosed. I stated the reasons why I did not think it would work in our setting and how my colleague felt the same. So, I replied,

“Our families choose us, as siblings can play together in the vast hall, able to play freely in a range of ways with resources they have chosen. They like that different ages of children can interact and something we believe fosters caring in older children but promotes the younger children’s development in all areas.”

The QL asked me to try setting the room into sections-

“With what?” I asked, she replied, “The chairs from around the room?”

So, I set up a square using some chairs and asked her to get inside “Now get down on your hands and knees” “What?!” “You’re the height of one of the babies here, on your hands and knees, what do you see?”

“Chair legs..”

“Is that a suitable stimulating environment for a baby or child? I also do not want any child ever to think that any part of this space is not for them”

We disagreed on many things over my time at the setting, but I can identify this incident as the point at which I decided I would challenge those who might seek to impose practices which did not sit easy with myself and the team. I had not long started my EYP, and I think that this examination of our practice had made me feel very secure in how we did things, always with the children and families at the heart and that practice is contextually specific.

As I saw her in the square of chairs however she had given me a really good idea for den building so every cloud...

Themes

Policy

Context

Knowledge

Relationships

The running tap.

During a transition visit, a reception class lead from a local school was puzzled by the behaviour of D, a 3-year-old boy due to start in the school nursery class the following September.

D was an active child; he had varied interests many of which involved water and paint. I watched her looking at him and asked her what she was thinking. She asked if he was SEN, and I replied no, we have no concerns, why?

“Why is he doing that with the water and the paint all the time? Running the tap and watching the water and the same paint strokes over again?”

These were 2 of D’s favourite activities, running the cold tap in the child height sink and watch the water run through his fingers at different angles as he moved them. He like to paint lines on paper always top to bottom in a range of colours working quickly and with intent often until the paper became so sodden it ripped.

“He has a trajectory schema at the moment,” I replied. “His mum never gets a picture home in one piece!”

She looked at me, “sorry what did you say?”

(I thought she was worried about the lack of ‘product’ going home to demonstrate/evidence activity or learning)

“He never takes a whole picture home...”

“No, the other bit...”

“Schema?”

“Yes”

“Well, you know, trajectory schema, rotation, enveloping...the ideas of Athey”

It was clear that she did not know what I was talking about. My colleague was nearby and had overheard the conversation and our eyes met.

“J has just attended training where Schematic behaviour was the focus. J, do you want to share?”

We gave a session to the school nursey staff, disseminating our knowledge. This gave rise to multiple feelings within our team.

Frustration- the lack of deep specialist training for Primary QTS in ECEC

Concern-how this lack of specialised knowledge could impact upon children, could they wrongly be thought of having SEN, could their behaviour be deemed deviant and not appropriate for the ‘classroom’ how often and in how many other settings would children be dragged away from their learning as adults did not understand the importance of those processes and the deep learning involved?

Anger – our team had this expert knowledge but how is it valued?

Pride- the team were able to demonstrate expert knowledge and excellent practice and facilitate the practice of those who were considered a higher status.

Themes

Knowledge

Young children

Relationships

Hierarchy

The suit

it was my second place of work, I had been there three months when the manager was taken ill, and I acted as a temporary manager I suppose it was a logical decision at the time I felt unprepared for it. I think there is a belief that everyone wants to be a leader, and if you are good with the children and parents then you will be a good, leader. I would argue this.

During this time the owner had reviewed the clothing we wore for working in and began discussing what might look more ‘professional’ (other nursery chains were also doing this) at that time we all wore a polo shirt with the company logo on and we

comfortable but smart black trousers (not jeans though some of my younger colleagues did sometimes wear smart black skinny jeans when the owner was not due to arrive in the setting) this didn't bother me for reasons I'll explain later. So, we were purchased tunics in the style of the medical profession. Whilst comfortable to work in they were not as comfortable as the polo shirts. However, I was not asked to complete the form for a tunic instead I was asked to wear a suit so something like a blazer and trousers or a blazer and skirt, as that's what the other managers in the other settings wore within the company. A formal suit is a thing I had never worn; I had always resisted wearing one, never for sixth form, never for interviews it always spoke to me of power, authority and hierarchy and none of these was anything I wanted to project it was against all my fundamental beliefs. Clothed to me are an act of liberty, like hairstyles, tattoos and piercings. There are conflicting ideas about professionalism but I never believed the way someone chooses to present themselves bears any negative indication to their ability to do their job. However at that point I didn't feel like this was something I could resist, as I was only an acting manager and fairly new to the company as well so I duly purchased the hateful suit, (I left the labels inside) It lasted one day, from my colleagues reaction, to that of the children and parents I knew that the garment had no place in our setting. I didn't wear it again and there was a short brief impassioned interaction with the owner whereby I pointed out it was unsuitable for many aspects of my job. It felt like a barrier, from communications with the rest of my colleagues the relationships with children and families and actually physically interacting with the children. A tunic arrived the next week. I was always a manager that was in ratios therefore I was always interacting with the children a suit is no garment for something that you need to roll around the floor in with two-year-olds.

Themes

Professionalisation

Resistance

Relationships

Context

Appendix B ethical approval document



Life Sciences and Education

ETHICAL APPROVAL FEEDBACK

Researcher name:	Amanda Tayler
Title of Study:	Stories from the sandbox Telling the narratives of Early Years Teachers' experiences in employment.
Status of approval:	Approved

Thank you for addressing the committee's comments. Your research proposal has now been approved by the Ethics Panel and you may commence the implementation phase of your study. You should note that any divergence from the approved procedures and research method will invalidate any insurance and liability cover from the University. You should, therefore, notify the Panel of any significant divergence from this approved proposal.

When your study is complete, please send the ethics committee an end of study report. A template can be found on the ethics BlackBoard site.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Naemi'.

Signed: Prof. Roozbeh Naemi

Date: 03.07.2020

Ethics Coordinator
School of Life Sciences and Education

Appendix C Blank Questionnaire

Stories from the sandpit; Telling the narratives of Early Years Teachers' experiences in employment. (original title)

Gender.

Workplace.

When did you qualify?

Did you take the undergraduate, post-graduate or employer route to gaining EYTS?

Number of years in total working in the Early Years sector.

Question 1. How do you define the role of an early Years Teacher?

Question 2. Do you think that in your day-to-day practice you fulfil the role you have described above? Please explain your answer.

Question 3. Please can you give discuss significant individuals that have an influence upon your practice?

Question 4. Please can you give discuss significant events that have had an influence upon your practice?

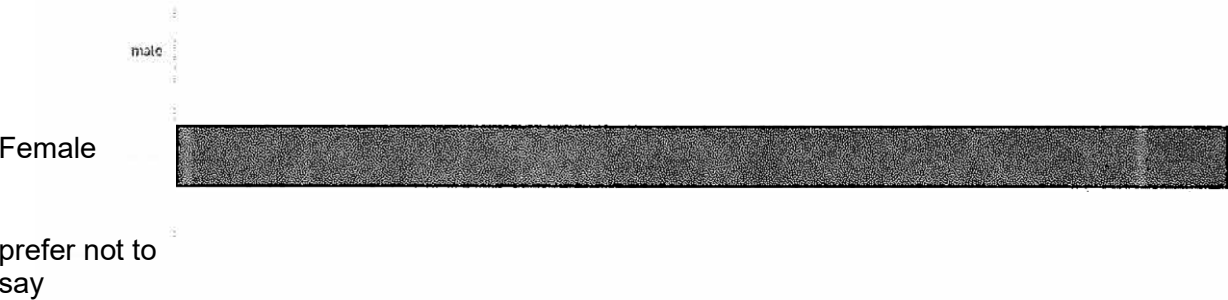
Question 5. Please can you give discuss significant experiences that have had an influence upon your practice?

Many thanks for your response. Please leave your contact details if you would be willing to take part in the second phase of this study which is an interview.

Appendix D Raw data questionnaires

Default Report
The experiences of Early Years Teachers
September 3, 2020 6:38 AM MDT

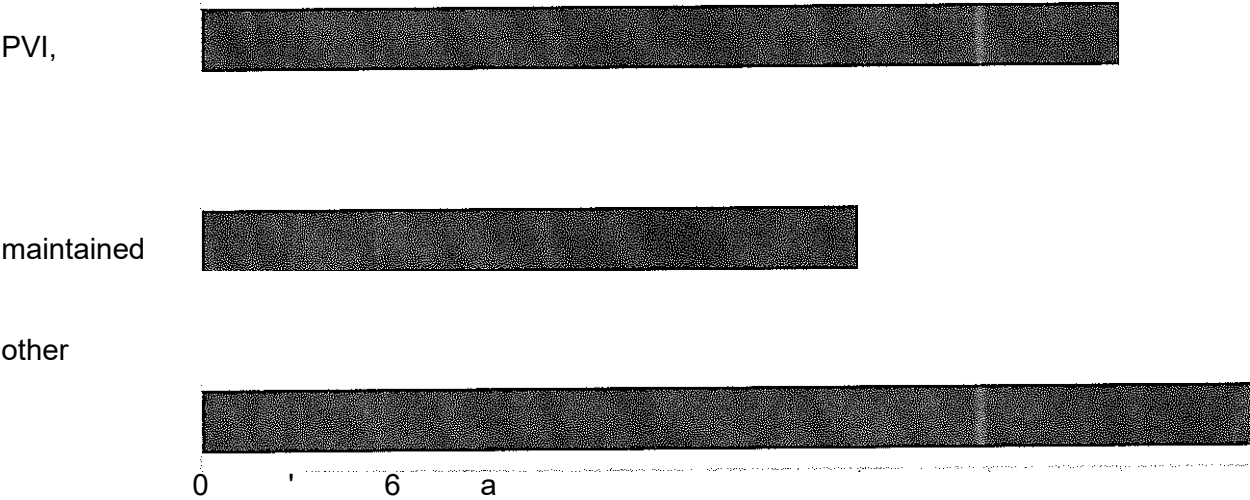
Q1 - Please indicate your gender



#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Please indicate your gender	2.00	2,00	2,00	0,00	0.00	20

#	Field	Choice Count
1	male	0
2	Female	20
3	prefer not to say	0
		20

02 - Workplace- which best describes your current setting?



Q3 - When did you qualify? Please give the year.

When did you qualify? Please give the year.

2014

2016

2017

2014

2014

2016

2017

2015

2014

2018

2017

2017

2017

2015

2020

2016

2002

2014

2015

2013

Q4 - Did you take the undergraduate, post-graduate or employer route to gaining EYTS?

Did you take the undergraduate, post-graduate or employer route to gaining...

Postgraduate

Employer

Post graduate

Postgraduate employer

Postgraduate

Employer

Employer

Employment route

Postgraduate

Post-graduate

Employer

Employer route

Post grad

Post grad

Employer route

Post graduate

Post Grad

Under graduate

Post graduate

Post

05 - What is the number of years in total that you have been working in the Early Years
sector?

12

10

12

18

10

32

5

14

14

3

5

8

3

10

9

6

15

30

25

18

Q6 - How do you define the role of an early Years Teacher?

Change agents (used to be EYPS "the gold standard") with a postgraduate teaching qualification.

Specialized teacher specifically for early years education, supporting to embed a curriculum that really does stretch and challenge all

Jack of all trades and master of some! Being able to adapt to new cohorts, new challenges, new policy. Continuing to learn and develop others and self. Facilitator to children's learning through their interests, through provocations and fascinations. When things get tough reminding yourself what it was like to be 3 years old and holding this at the heart of your practice.

To support children's individual and holistic development from 0-5 years. To provide high quality educational opportunities which help children meet their full potential whilst fostering their individual development needs. To help children progress towards the early learning goals in preparation for school based education. To deliver a broad and balanced curriculum which responds to children's individual learning needs and interests. To ensure that children's individual welfare needs are met.

Early Years Teachers are specialists in early childhood development, teaching very young children up to 5-years-old.

I have full responsibility for a class in a maintained nursery school. I also hold qts which I completed after my EYF

A teacher to those children under 7

To scaffold and nurture children's learning and development through purposeful interactions

Change maker, advocate for children, supporting others to use research-informed pedagogy

To provide the best learning and environment for the children, and support staff on developing their knowledge also

Leaders in pedagogy and learning within settings. To model and support other practitioners with practice. To help improve the setting from existing place

Provide opportunities for children's development from birth to 5.

A teacher who specialises in understanding and providing for the specific developmental needs of the 0-5 age group.

To support children and practitioners to enhance the quality of learning and development

Someone who gives children the best possible start to their education

An expert on the EYFS curriculum *who* support early years settings.

An Early years teacher is someone who is dedicated to the well being of young children this would encompass pastoral and academics as they are all so intertwined.

To teach, nurture and care for children in the early years

To help young children reach their full potential

Promoting learning through play and exploring

Q7 - Do you think that in your day to day practice you fulfil the role you have described above? Please explain your answer.

Yes, since qualifying I have \i\Worked as a manager, a nursery head {both graded outstanding during tenure) and now work as an Ofsted Inspector

Currently a manager so in ways no, although continually teaching my practitioners h01u to extend and develop children's experiences

I try! With being in a school, sometimes the heart of EV can be lost. Sometimes external pressures can get the best of all of us but I do try to add fascinations or new experiences each day to bring joy, teaming opportunities, new expressions into the children's learning environment within the nursery.

I am in a senior management role, but aspire to support my team in meeting the outcomes outlined above.

Yes. I teach 2-3 year olds in a maintained nursery school. The specialist knowledge and experience I have of early child development are essential in enabling me to teach the children in my class.

Yes. We are a large inner city setting with large numbers. Budgets are tight so i am also part of the leadership team

I am a teacher in a special school. Initially, my class was nursery and reception, with the ever changing government decisions of inclusion· my class this year has Year Two children joining us

Yes! Work with 3 and 4 year olds.

Yes - I know train other EYT's

Yes, although I'm still learning how best to lead/support other staff (something I feel could have been better covered on the course)

Yes. When I 1NOrk with children I am aiming to model good practice and influence others through that. I am always looking for new and exciting ways of improving what we do.

Yes although I'm employed as a senior teaching assistant.

Yes absolutely, EYTS is the best qualification for a nursery teacher in a school based nursery as we have the particular knowledge and understanding of best practise in early years teaching. I feel confident leading others based on my EYTS qualification.

Yes, definitely with the children. Building my rile with the wider team

Yes - I work hard alongside my team to ensure children can team and play and to enable them to build strong relationships ready for the future.

No. I don't think there is currently a specific role within settings for EYTs. My role was pretty much the same before and after my qualification. was bumped up to preschool leader but that meant more managerial duties which actually took me further away to what an EYT is trained in.

Yes. If I wasn't i shouldn't be doing it

Yes. I work as a reception class teacher in a school of high disadvantage. I feel that I make a difference to these life's of children.

Q8 - Please can you give examples of any significant events that have had an influence upon your practice?

Childhood, both grandparents and 01M1 mother are teachers, reflexive working over last 12 years, also have studied MA and MSc.

X

I think COVID has had a influence on my practice. It's turned everything I enjoyed, loved and believed in its head! I'm using this time off to recharge and look at ways of bringing the soul back into my practice but keeping in mind the need to keep everyone safe.

. The birth to three matters curriculum was a significant influence on my practice as the child centred nature of the programme was tailored towards children's individuality.

Achieving my degree in Primary Education, postgraduate certificate in the Psychology of Education and EYTS.

Yes. The reorganisation of the setting prompted me to gain my eyt after doing my degree I felt I could not progress without a teaching qualification. As well as this we are a setting which follows in the moment planning so the work of Anna ephgrave has bore significant influence to the running of the nursery

* inclusion - children with SEN being encouraged to stay in mainstream 1.11ith 1:1

Working with children from disadvantaged backgrounds makes you realise how vulnerable children can be and how important it is to listen and respond to their experiences.

Becoming Head of Early Years

Moving to an In the Moment Planning setting has really changed how I view the importance of children leading the learning and owning their space (although it has been quite an adjustment after all the planning of the course)

My EYT training, discovering Planning in the moment

Autism training.

t received exceptional teaching and support through my EYTS PGCE at [REDACTED] and my tutors have guided me in my career in immeasurable ways.

Staff training sessions, supporting peers through level 3 qualification

COVID

Visiting different settings and getting an idea of what they do.

Being forced to introduce RWInc into my setting. It goes against my belief of hood practice and I resigned. Do you think that in your day to day practice you fulfil the role you have...

Q9 - Please can you give any examples of significant experiences that have had an influence upon your practice?

See above.

X

I find all training influences my practice. Great training makes me jump and want to rush back and tell everyone about how we need to do this or that! Bad training (poorly delivered or a bit dull) inspires me to self reflect and look at what I do well, to remind myself that I can do great things and to have faith in my practice. I jump at all training opportunities!

Visiting other settings and observing practice always influences and inspires me to try new approaches and develop practice. For example, visiting a setting which experimented heavily with risky play helped me to develop my understanding of the need for children to learn to manage risks rather than 'over risk assessing'.

I spent 3-years volunteering then working for a children's home in South Africa. The age range of the children we cared for and taught was birth-6 years. My experiences there greatly influenced my practice from working with parents to improving my understanding of and ability to work collaboratively with partner agencies to support young children affected by adverse childhood experiences.

Training as a teacher and spending time in key stage 1 to complete my qts. This gave me an insight into what pressure children have when they are in formal school.

* hearing Anna Ephgrave speak about in the moment planning* reading Julie Fishers book - interacting or interfering* attending a workshop on working with babies * Autism courses delivered by Birmingham University

Completing my MA

Emotion coaching training changed how I was dealing with very upset children and helping them solve conflicts between themselves

Wanting to understand situations with numerous children E. G. Why did/didn't that work? what did I do that was good and could do again and what didn't work & why.
Working as a childminder.

As above, fully supported by the SLT at my current school.
Visiting other settings to support, being part of a quality team to share ideas

Children's mental health is paramount right now and practice has changed to ensure children have the support they need mentally and focus has been less on specific areas and more on the prime areas.

Please can you give any examples of significant experiences that have had a...

A child in my class died after having an epileptic seizures at home one weekend. I often think about him when dealing with children who have similar behaviour needs.

Dealing with difficult staff. Made me look at how I do things

Visiting Reggio in Italy

Visiting a forest school.

Every time a child suddenly gets something whether it is reading, being able to zip up their jacket or just recognising that our class is a good safe space.

Please can you give examples of any significant events that have had an inf..

After qualifying in 1990 with NNEB i spent all my working life working the early years. In 2010 i embarked on my university journey completing a foundation degree in early years, then doing the BA top up and completing the EYTS, i have just recently completed a MA in education. All these events have influenced my practice.

New job with children who need help

Volunteering during school, visiting settings in other countries

Q10 - Please can you give any examples of significant individuals that have had an influence upon your practice?

See above.

X

A lecturer at UoN was so passionate about the 0-5 age group. She filled my head (and my heart)

\Nith wanting to learn, to put into practice, to question, to consider and to love \WOrking in EY.

A practitioner at my daughters nursery influenced me to open my ovvn provision, this was as the provision was very creative, flexible and child centred. From a theorist/practitioner perspective I am heavily influenced by Anna Craft and her creative approach to early years. As a creative practitioner myself, Craft has given me the confidence to use creative strategies to help children to engage with areas of the curriculum they may find difficult For example, using art, music and drama activities to support learning intentions.

Deborah Fielden (my EYTS tutor), Julie Fisher and Anna Ephgrave.

Anna Ephgrave, my headteacher *who* is retiring, my job share partner

* Julie Fisher• Anna Ephgrave * Lorna Wing *Gary Schoplar

Mentoring others

The owner of my current setting (and her knowledge of emotion coaching, family counseling), tutors on my course including Tamsin Grimmer, Julie Fisher

Lecturers, previous manager, Anna Ephgrave

Alistair Brice Clegg

A good deputy who has supported me and believed in me

Too many to name as people from all over have influenced and helped me grow

Previous manager, tutors on my EYTS course

My mentor and a colleague who was on the course with me

Forest school leaders.

One was a previous head who was awful. Ive never met such a negative person Also used her position to intimidate people. When i was Six months pregnant i took my first sick day in 4 years because i hadn't felt my baby kick so was off to the drs. She asked when i would be in! I vowed i would never be that kind of person in leadership. Now I'm head I lead with compassion and care.

The eyt course leader had and still has a great influence on my practice

Appendix E Coded questionnaires

Questionnaires second comb through identifying themes (codes/words in groups)
3rd comb high - themes

Data	theme codes
How do you define the role of an early Years Teacher? Change agents (used to be EYPS "the gold standard") with PG teaching qual	Changing specialist expert
Specialized teacher specifically for early years education, supporting to embed a curriculum that really does stretch and challenge all	intensity other words or tacit support/develop = best to do it?
Jack of all trades and master of some! Being able to adapt to new cohorts, new challenges, new policy . Continuing to learn and develop others and self . Facilitator to children's learning through their interests, through provocations and fascinations . When things get tough reminding yourself what it was like to be 3 years old and holding this at the heart of your practice.	leadership
To support children's individual and holistic development from 0-5 years. To provide high quality educational opportunities which help children meet their full potential whilst fostering their individual development needs. To help children progress towards the early learning goals in preparation for school-based education. To deliver a broad and balanced curriculum which responds to children's individual learning needs and interests. To ensure that children's individual welfare needs are met.	role within school = teaching age of children curriculum practice
Early Years Teachers are specialists in early childhood development, teaching very young children up to 5-years-old.	outcomes tasks
I have full responsibility for a class within a maintained nursery school . I also hold qts which I completed after my eyt	reflected Q query
A teacher to those children under 7	external features colleagues
To scaffold and nurture childrens learning and development through purposeful interactions	
Change-maker , advocate for children, supporting others to use research-informed pedagogy	
To provide the best learning and environment for the children, and support staff on developing their knowledge also	
Leaders in pedagogy and learning within settings. To model and support other practitioners with practice. To help improve the setting from existing place	
Provide opportunities for children's development from birth to 5.	
A teacher who specialises in understanding and providing for the specific developmental needs of the 0-5 age group.	
To support children and practitioners to enhance the quality of learning and development	
Someone who gives children the best possible start to their education An expert on the EYFS curriculum who support early years settings	

Classification: Restricted

Questionnaires second comb through identifying themes

Yes absolutely, EYTS is the best qualification for a nursery teacher in a school-based nursery as we have the particular knowledge and understanding of best practise in early years teaching. I feel confident leading others based on my EYTS qualification .	
Yes, definitely with the children. Building my role with the wider team	
Yes - I work hard alongside my team to ensure children can learn and play and to enable them to build strong relationships ready for the future.	
No. I don't think there is currently a specific role within settings for EYTs. My role was pretty much the same before and after my qualification. I was bumped up to preschool leader but that meant more managerial duties which actually took me further away to what an EYT is trained in .	
Yes. If I wasn't I shouldn't be doing it	
Yes. I work as a reception class teacher in a school of high disadvantage . I feel I make a difference to these life's of children.	
Yes. Children are confident in their learning	
Yes	
Please can you give examples of any significant events that have had an influence upon your practice? Childhood, grandparents and mother were teachers reflexive working over last 12 years, also studied MA and MSc	relationships story/qual experiences workplace context other setting teacher
I think COVID has had a influence on my practice. (It's turned everything I enjoyed, loved and believed in its head. I'm using this time off to recharge and look at ways of bringing the soul back into my practice but keeping in mind the need to keep everyone safe.) reflexive	new practice/ideas curriculum
The birth to three matters curriculum was a significant influence on my practice as the child centred nature of the programme was tailored towards children's individuality.	challenged set up
Achieving my degree in Primary Education, postgraduate certificate in the Psychology of Education and EYTS.	
Yes. The reorganisation of the setting prompted me to gain my eyt after doing my degree I felt I could not progress without a teaching qualification. As well as this we are a setting which follows in the moment planning so the work of Anna Ephgrave has bore significant influence to the running of the nursery	challenged set up practice/idea change
* Inclusion - children with SEN being encouraged to stay in mainstream with 1:1 working with children from disadvantaged backgrounds makes you realise how vulnerable children can be and how important it is to listen and respond to their experiences.	
Becoming Head of Early Years	

Classification: Restricted

Questionnaires second comb through identifying themes

Moving to an In the Moment Planning setting has really changed how I view the importance of children leading the learning and owning their space (although it has been quite an adjustment after all the planning of the course). My EYT training, discovering Planning in the moment Autism training. I received exceptional teaching and support through my EYTS PGCE at University of Northampton and my tutors have guided me in my career in immeasurable ways. Staff training sessions, supporting peers through level 3 qualification COVID Visiting different settings and getting an idea of what they do. Being forced to introduce RWInc into my setting. It goes against my belief of hood practice and I resigned. After qualifying in 1990 with NNEB I spent all my working life working working the early years. In 2010 I embarked on my university journey completing a foundation degree in early years, then doing the BA top up and completing the EYTS, I have just recently completed a MA in education. All these events have influenced my practice. New job with children who need help Volunteering during school, visiting settings in other countries Please can you give any examples of significant experiences that have had an influence upon your practice? X I find all training influences my practice. Great training makes me jump and want to rush back and tell everyone about how we need to this or that! Bad training (poorly delivered or a bit dull) inspires me to self-reflect and look at what I do well, to remind myself that I can do great things and to have faith in my practice. I jump at all training opportunities! Visiting other settings and observing practice always influences and inspires me to try new approaches and develop practice. For example, visiting a setting which experimented heavily with risky play helped me to develop my understanding of the need for children to learn to manage risks rather than 'over risk assessing'. I spent 3-years volunteering then working for a children's home in South Africa. The age range of the children we cared for and taught was birth-6 years. My experiences there greatly influenced my practice from working with parents to improving my understanding of and ability to work collaboratively with partner agencies to support young children affected by adverse childhood experiences.	
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Classification: Restricted

Questionnaires second comb through identifying themes

Training as a teacher and spending time in key stage 1 to complete my qts. This gave me an insight into what pressure children have when they are in formal school. * hearing Anna Ephgrave speak about in the moment planning * reading Julie Fishers book - interacting or interfering * attending a workshop on working with babies * Autism courses delivered by Birmingham University ... Completing my MA Emotion coaching training changed how I viewed dealing with very upset children and helping them solve conflicts between themselves Wanting to understand situations with numerous children E. G. Why did/didn't that work? What did I do that was good and could do again and what didn't work & why. Working as a childminder. As above, fully supported by the SLT at my current school. Visiting other settings to support, being part of a quality team to share ideas Children's mental health is paramount right now and practice has changed to ensure children have the support they need mentally and focus has been less on specific areas and more on the prime areas. Visiting a forest school. Every time a child suddenly gets something whether it is reading, being able to zip up their jacket or just recognising that our class is a good safe space. A child in my class died after having an epileptic seizures at home one weekend. I often think about him when dealing with children who have similar behaviour needs. Dealing with difficult staff. Made me look at how I do things Visiting Reggio in Italy Please can you give any examples of significant individuals that have had an influence upon your practice? X A lecturer at UoN was so passionate about the 0-5 age group. She filled my head (and my heart) with wanting to learn, to put into practice, to question, to consider and to love working in EY. A practitioner at my daughters nursery influenced me to open my own provision, this was as the provision was very creative, flexible and child centred. From a theorist/practitioner perspective I am heavily influenced by Anna Craft and her creative approach to early years. As a creative practitioner myself, Craft has given me the confidence to use creative strategies to help children to engage with areas	
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Classification: Restricted

Questionnaires second comb through identifying themes

of the curriculum they may find difficult. For example, using art, music and drama activities to support learning intentions. Deborah Fielden (my EYTS tutor), Julie Fisher and Anna Ephgrave. Anna Ephgrave, my headteacher who is retiring, my job share partner * Julie Fisher * Anna Ephgrave * Lorna Wing * Gary Schoplar ... <u>Mentoring others</u> The owner of my current setting (and her knowledge of emotion coaching, family counseling), tutors on my course including Tamsin Grimmer, Julie Fischer Lecturers, previous manager, Anna Ephgrave Alistair Bryve clegg As above. Previous manager, tutors on my EYTS course My mentor and a colleague who was on the course with me Forest school leaders. One was a previous head who was awful. I've never met such a negative person who used her position to intimidate people. When I was 8 months pregnant I took my first sick day in 4 years because I hadn't felt my baby kick so I was off to the drs. She asked when I would be in! I vowed I would never be that kind of person in leadership. Now I'm head I lead with compassion and care. The eyt course leader had and still has a great influence on my practice A good deputy who has supported me and believed in me Too many to name as people from all over have influenced and helped me grow	
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Classification: Restricted

Questionnaires second comb through identifying themes

An Early years teacher is someone who is dedicated to the well being of young children this would encompass pastoral and academics as they are all so intertwined. To teach, nurture and care for children in the early years To help young children reach their full potential Promoting learning through play and exploring Do you think that in your day to day practice you fulfil the role you have described above? Please explain your answer. yes Since qualifying I have worked as a manager, nursery head, (both graded outstanding during tenure) and now work as an ofsted inspector Currently a manager so in ways no, although continually teaching my practitioners how to extend and develop children's experiences I try! With being in a school, sometimes the heart of EY can be lost. Sometimes external pressures can get the best of all of us but I do try to add fascinations or new experiences each day to bring joy, learning opportunities, new expressions into the children's learning environment within the nursery. I am in a senior management role, but aspire to support my team in meeting the outcomes outlined above. Yes. I teach 2-3 year olds in a maintained nursery school. The specialist knowledge and experience I have of early child development are essential in enabling me to teach the children in my class. Yes. We are a large inner city setting with large numbers. Budgets are tight so I am also part of the leadership team I am a teacher in a special school. Initially, my class was nursery and reception. With the ever changing government decisions of inclusion, my class this year has Year Two children joining us Yes! Work with 3 and 4 year olds. Yes - I know train other EYT's Yes, although I'm still learning how best to lead/support other staff (something I feel could have been better covered on the course) Yes. When I work with children I am aiming to model good practice and influence others through that. I am always looking for new and exciting ways of improving what we do. Yes although I'm employed as a senior teaching assistant.	
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Classification: Restricted

Appendix F Example transcript conversation

Lisa

Showing around the sandpit

What have you got there?

Some digging tools, Taking tools to some stones and discs again yes some sticks natural sticks stones got some little painted fruit and food and stuff and then just some acorns

yeah

and then sand

brilliant the idea of using sand xxx is that, what it, what the idea is that it kind of promotes discussion so it's got it's roots in therapy although we're not using it for therapy that's where the idea came from that it is so like a vehicle really to aid discussion, that's all really alright

okay yeah okay

So I'm going to ask you to do with all your brilliant resources you've got there is just kind of take me through a typical day in your setting if you don't mind?

right okay fair enough

so can just, I was just going to ask you which route you came via you did you come the graduate route to EYTS?

Er yes work based so I whilst I was working in a private nursery

yeah so I've done my Level 3 childcare yeah and then I was pre school room leader at the time and they offered me the chance to do my EYT with Edge Hill a so I did it while I was working at Edge Hill. So it was over the course of a year and it was basically just I think it was one day a month in Uni and when it was work based it was coursework and observations, it was good it was nice doing while I was working, it was really easy to get all, I'll say easy but like all the evidence was really readily available.

so did you do the foundation degree route then, did you do a foundation degree first?

no no so I've got a degree in interior design

alright okay

nothing to do with it at all!

it is amazing how applicable different degrees become I think

yeah I guess the creative side of it and leaving it like definitely helps cause I think you have to be creative don't you can't

yeah I think you find it really really difficult, yeah be sort of open minded and open to change coz if you think if you more stayed in your ways and more sort of prone to sort of routines and and plans and things and I think you'd find it really difficult coz coz it just doesn't happen does it no not with the best of intentions nothing ever goes the way you planned it does it so?

So yes I think that side of it is definitely sort of helped yeah so yeah I did my degree, I didn't, I have only been in childcare for six years, and before that I was a pub manager yeah then I took a break from that just worked at Costa coffee for a while yeah while I decided what I wanted to do and decided I want to childcare

I've not got any children I just I just a lot of it was like while I was working in pubs and in hospitality and stuff obviously you get children and you yeah they come in and talk chatting to them and thought you know what I've got a rapport with these children naturally and other people commented on it an awful lot, and I do enjoy spending time with them, then I've got nieces and nephews and things and I sort of said, let's have a look at it let's see if it is something I actually could do so I did me Level 3 online CACHE young young people and children's workforce Level 3 did that, and while while volunteering for part of that I've got a full time job at the nursery was volunteering at

brilliant

and the rest the rest was history as they say so yeah it's really good

it's really interesting you know because I've done a few of these interviews now and met so many people who have come up via so many different routes and got so many different paths behind them it's it's amazing. I mean I'm just like you I've done loads of like random things like pubs and retail, catering and all that kind of stuff but without really knowing for a while what I actually wanted to do

yeah yeah I think I think with childcare I think you have to have experience in other in other things coz coz it is so varied and because you do have to think on your feet so much I think the better practitioners are the ones that have you had a bit variance in other things

I agree

and I'm not saying they're not good practitioners but I just think it gives you extra ability to see beyond beyond the actual moment that you know the bigger picture as it were suppose

yeah yeah I agree and I think I've lived and worked in the same small town all my life so lots of people knew me from working in lots of different places so when a parent saw me there to look after their children it was very much a case of oh, I know you you're alright you used to work in such and such a pub! I mean it it kind of takes away sometimes that sort of hesitancy that some parents have got with engaging with people in the education system

yeah yeah I think I think that trust is so important and I think I think time in the hospitality sector really helps helps with that as well as in in retail and everything having that rapport with all people definitely

you know an an an coz I've worked yeah the nursery, the nursery I did that I did my my EYT in was you know it's in XXXX it's a it's a well off area, it's it's I suppose your leafy suburb yeah

the parents are well off and then then where I'm working now is the opposite you know it's in the centre of the very deprived area and if you can get both sets of parents on board yeah to work with you and to trust you

yeah

to be able to do that is so important I think and I think sort of hospitality retail face to face grounding helps with that

yeah I agree I couldn't agree with you more definitely yeah

how far it makes your job 100 times harder if you haven't got parents on board you might as well forget it if I'm honest, because everything you do in the setting is meaningless really if it isn't sort of embedded or supported at home

yeah yeah

I mean yeah we've all got we've all got the parents that they aren't on board and that's nothing to do with you they're just not on board yeah for lots of different reasons and

yeah okay right and you want to talk me through your day then what kind of happens first and what the sort of typical sequence of events is, I know there's not one day that's typical and everyday is different if you were going to describe a typical day to me what would it what would it look like?

So we are a sessional setting and the first session comes in at 8:45 they will come straight into continuous provision, so that probably takes about half an hour for them all to arrive eventually coming in dribs and drabs to be honest so they will come into continuous provision there's four practitioners in there including myself, they will tell us about their day have a chat to us about what's happened on the way in, those obviously some children who might be upset some that have fallen over on the way in, some of them are new to the setting, so it's nice to have time just to sort of allow that to sort of thing to happen and calm and let them find themselves and work out how their day is going to be I think

Yeah, because we all have that don't we back we have a brew in the staff room or we get in for a chat, to there's nothing worse than walking into work late and hitting the ground running you just feel off for the entire day don't you?

You do yeah

So for them, them as well to come in and just have that time in continuous provision and just immerse themselves is quite nice so they come into continuous provision like I say while that's happening we take the register we don't do a sit down registers, we're a setting with two three and four year olds yeah altogether

Brilliant

so sort of sitting down and taking the register isn't something that we do we make the decision that it wasn't really beneficial sitting them all down stopping them but we try and we try not to stop them as much as much as we can we try and let it flow the day flow as much as we can within the sort of restrictions of three hours. I'm not actually the class teachers as it's a main stream school I can't actually teach that class as I haven't got QTS I've only got EYTS

and thereby hangs the rub!

Ye, tell me about it! So there's a teacher who obviously isn't specially trained in EY, just trained in KS1 so anyway...

It's the whole argument isn't it?

Yes and one that's left me with sleepless nights many a time, so she will take the older ones, the pre-schoolers for a short session she does that twice a day, once when everyone has arrived and settled then at the end of the day when we are getting ready for home. So depending on how the children are, one session might be a short phonics session, phase 1 letters and sounds and one will be story time and they will be interchangeable as to which one is which.

so We get the chance to focus on the twos and that 2 year old play and because they can sometimes get a bit lost I think in these settings where there is a mixture

yeah

it's nice that they've got the older ones to sort of model themselves on and look up to or they did you get lost and forgotten sometimes especially in mainstream where there isn't that understanding of two year old play there isn't that understanding of three year olds like I said that there is primary teacher she really struggles with the twos yeah a bit yeah because she leave it to me really to be honest, its quite nice you know, I get I get I get chance to spend time which I do love, I love the two year olds I love like the younger ones to be honest

yeah

so I so while she's doing sort of the more focused older stuff I will spend time with the two year olds in continuous vision and building those sort of early early skills as it were listening, attention the exploration, that side of it so that's nice yeah that's to be honest depends on how the how the preschoolers are that's that could be anything from 10 minutes to half an hour

I then sometimes during that time with the two year olds I'll open up outside coz we have freeflow throughout the day, so I open up during that time as I've got the two year olds cause some of them will ask can we go outside now, and so depending on the children we will either go outside during that time or we'll all go out when the when the preschoolers come back into the room

Yeah

I always will go outside I love being outside that's my main area, I just think it's the absolute best place for learning and exploration and building those skills so I I tend to go outside with them

Have you got your own area out there then xxxx or do you share it with the school?

we share it with reception so we've got our own early years area which is really nice

yeah obviously sharing it with reception they are not out as much as us, they don't have Free flow (find it really difficult to say that!) throughout throughout day they don't have like a direct door to the outside that we have so they can't just leave the door open it needs sort of supervising so they are outside everyday reception but not free flow like us so we have a shared area with reception but we use it a lot more than them which is really nice to be honest yeah, so when reception come out, we are always a bit like 'reception are out!'

so so we have our own our own area and I've spent a lot of time sort of developing that area as well yeah which is really nice an we've got we've got gross motor so we've got the bikes and scooters and tricycles and things and we've got you know the bounds the bouncers and and we've got a Hill and a tunnel and we've got all that sort of stuff for the gross motor and then we've got so small world area got reading we've got books in every area which I'm really conscious that there should be yeah you know sort of literacy in every area so they'll they'll we just spend time in continuous provision really and we the practitioners or just be with them whether that's either inside or outside

yeah

we are we do do observations were on tapestry so we will do observations at the moment we're just sort of setting up a week commencing for each child yeah that just gets added to throughout the week so there's no sort of plans that were not 'next stepping'

Are you in the moment planning then xxx?

we sort of a cross between at the moment SLT are not entirely on board or understanding of that shall we say so we were in a happy medium I think yeah there are observations sort of, they're not they're not like 'next step' like I say but there is planning done each week by the class teacher, (I just like to point out when you videos there is that there with the stuff in the bag it's a

it's a scalpel I used it to cut my bag of sand open that isn't something we have in provision and I've just looked at it and realised and thought all my word yes is not something we have in provision yes you look back to it they go my goodness! I

to be honest I didn't think I was just looking at all the lovely resources that you've got and I thinking how they fit with the importance that you placed on the outdoor area, would you say you tend to adopt a kind of A curiosity approach as well then

yeah yeah I think I do that no more for my own benefit, well, Well not my own benefit but that's how I work rather than that being a whole school approach, I find it a lot easier to observe my children and get a lot more from them using that approach it fits with how I work so I have like said when I when I've been developing the outdoor area I've been very conscious of what we're putting in that is natural objects that is loose parts and open ended play resources

do you find that sometimes puts you at odds with what the class teacher wants to do a little bit cause I don't think she is it I think she likes the idea of it thought the actual practicality of it and I think that is where there is that difference between people who are early years trained specifically and people who are national curriculum trained

yeah

it's the child development side of it isn't it's that it's not, it's that understanding 'why' side of it that isn't taught in QTS,

it's the devil's in the detail really I can remember having to explain to a reception teacher who got a class full of three year olds what schema was and why we're doing certain things and I just said well it's a schema and she said yes 'what?' and said its schematic behaviour yeah so we had to give the school some training on schemas because they didn't know what they were because it isn't covered in QTS training

I know and and I just I feel really sad that that's the case because it it's not schema's aren't something that are just EYFS children you know that scheme is carry on right through the school and so much can be gained from understanding that and knowing what to do with them, how to develop them, it's not something that that people understand and I think until you understand child development and Childs brains and Childs bodies, God I don't think we'll move on from from where we are to be honest until that's something that's taught in QTS,

yeah I agree I mean you were talking about you 2 year olds in your 2 year old provision 2 year olds are wired so differently from a 3 year old and a four year old and how they want to use their bodies to learn doesn't lend itself to anything to do with the national curriculum or formal learning does it?

no nothing at all nothing at all and I cringe and she does it so the class teacher does it and she's like 'sit down sit with your legs crossed, sit nicely' and I'm like does it matter does it matter, but they can't sit like that it's there's research that shows it's not beneficial for them to sit like that it harms them

yeah

if they're listening let them lie on the tummy it doesn't mean they're not listening yes you know they can be messing with another book and every now and then they'll but in with something that's the Story that the classroom class teachers reading, you think they are listening, it is going in,

yeah yeah

but they're doing it in their two year old way so just let them yet and learn from then,

but were so focused on getting them to 'school ready' and that term sticks in my in my throat a bit as well

yeah

we're so focused on it and it's such a shame because I think we're losing so much that we learn from them

definitely, there's a whole load of opportunities that are being ignored really aren't there because we get this whole idea that the remit of early years is to get them ready for school when it really really isn't,

it should be but I can't remember who you know and I think it's been said by lots of people that why are we getting children ready for year one when we should be getting year one ready for children and it's so right yes why are we adapting children you know when we should be adapting our provision and our practise

yeah and I think that I don't know a single child that would not have benefited from a more play based approach at least age 7

Yeah and other countries have proved it haven't they?

Yeah, So what happens at lunchtime then if they've had their continuous provision and they've had a good explore etc what do?

they go yeah, so some go home we've got about we've got handful that stay all day yeah that they will have lunch in the Hall and that changed in COVID, they used to have lunch in nursery so so lunch so the first session finishes at quarter to twelve, 11:45, so we normally sort of get them to help tidy up about 20 past 11 and then we'll sit down with them and its Story time, it's like get ready for home time, get books and bags and things together and water bottles and all manner of things that they brought with them and we'll get ready for home time and then we'll go, and obviously at the moment parents aren't coming in now so parents used to come in and collect them but at the moment we sort of line them up outside, we're lucky enough to have a sheltered area outside that we can get their coats on and then we go and stand outside, we go and open the gate and their near enough to sort of shout when it is, when their parents are there and so that's quarter to 11:45 by that point the three or four that are staying for dinner have been taken up to the Hall, one of us will stay with them and have their dinner and then bring them back down to nursery, previously like I said they would have lunch, it would be brought down to them and they'd have it in nursery with us and that's one of the good things that's actually come out of covid I think is that I've said for a long time that why are they not going down and having lunch in the Hall, yet everyone you know what why and on the other hand yes they are very different they are very they do need different but they also need those experiences let them why are we scared of having three and 4 year olds in the lunch Hall with the other children, and what happens in the six weeks over the Holidays that suddenly makes them ready to have lunch in reception with the children?

yeah yeah absolutely

They're still 4! So out of necessity the school has allowed nursery to join all the other children in the Hall for lunch and I think people have been quite surprised at how sort of able they are and have been quite to be able to show other people, 'ooh are they in nursery?' yes they are 'aren't they eating well?' yes they are, you know they are all capable beings it's you know they can! And I look at some of the other years and I think actually probably better than eating to be honest! so they'll have their dinner down there which is lovely actually and

it's really good for children as well cause I think someone of the most daunting things when you start school is where is everything where will I be you know what that takes away, some mystery that can only be good

also is it it's really nice like you say for them to be able to experience that and see some of the other children, a lot of them have got siblings a lot of them have gone, yeah and that joy when they see one of their siblings in big school, it's lovely you know it's really nice for them so yeah they have their dinner come back down to nursery and the afternoon session starts at half 12 so we let the afternoon ones in at half 12 and then and then the same the same happens again for the afternoon session,

yeah

sometimes the ones that that there all day will actually stay with me in the twos when the others go through for their more focused work because they've done it once that day and will always ask them do you know do you want to go and through their or do you want to stay here and to be honest very often they want to stay where they are, which is, which is telling isn't it but yeah and so they'll stay with me and and stay in continuous provision and the same routine will happen again yeah till home time which is between 10 past 3 and half three nursery officially ends at half three, but we have a lot with siblings whose parents school finishes at ten past so a lot will pick the nursery children when they put the sibling which is which makes sense

yeah definitely, that is really interesting you said some really interesting things that have you know given me food for thought really did one last thing I want to ask you xxxx is what do you think the early years teacher qualification has given you and I'm assuming you the only early years teacher in the setting?

are yeah yes yeah yeah

So what would you think you got from it?

it's given me that that knowledge we were talking about of children and young children its giving me that knowledge of how children develop how children work how they think we as practitioners can can facilitate that learning and exploration best with that understanding so I think that's that's the biggest thing its the biggest difference between QTS and EYTS I think and yeah it's just it's the child development and the care as well you know there's a lot of teachers who work in early years who are like, like no I'm not doing that I'm not that's not my job and Im like well it is coz it's Early Years, care is important, care is part of early years and it should be part of the rest school shouldn't it but

I agree yeah and I mean we had the thing a while ago didn't we about not hugging children and all that kind of thing, why would you want your child to go to a place where they wont get a hug? well it is it documented that it's you know it's its part of their need isn't it is this contact physical contact is a physiological need isn't it so for us to turn round and say they're not having that is bizarre

yeah

so even understanding things like that I think it, it sort of and it opens you up to other practitioners and specialists and professionals that you know, I mentioned people to the reception teacher or to the to the class teacher and they are like Ive never heard of them yeah you're working in early years and you don't know who this person is you know you know I attended that the Anna Ephgrave training on Zoom, training

yeah yeah quite a few people that have interviewed went to that

right fab well I managed to convince the head teacher attends too and to a pay for it, she went on it as well

what did she think?

she she was all enthusiasm and I think she really enjoyed it I don't think she understood it okay she made all the right noises yeah yeah you know and she she got on board with sort of how important interactions are but didn't want to apply the theory and was scared of applying the theory I think of in the moment planning, all she keeps saying is like but how do you know how do you know you've covered all the areas how do you know? my because we know you just do you know don't like talking going but how do you know why why it's like just because! so I think I think she and and again it goes back to that understanding of child development if you don't understand that I don't think you understand that way of working

no definitely not

because it doesn't make sense if you don't understand child development does it know it doesn't it really does not

why would you just allow children to play what it what are you getting from that and if you don't understand what that play is bringing

yeah

I f you don't understand what they learn while they are playing then why would you implement a way of working within your setting that is just playing because that's what you think it is isn't it just playing

yeah

and to a head teacher of a school you know yes you could just play all day would would it goes against everything doesn't it?

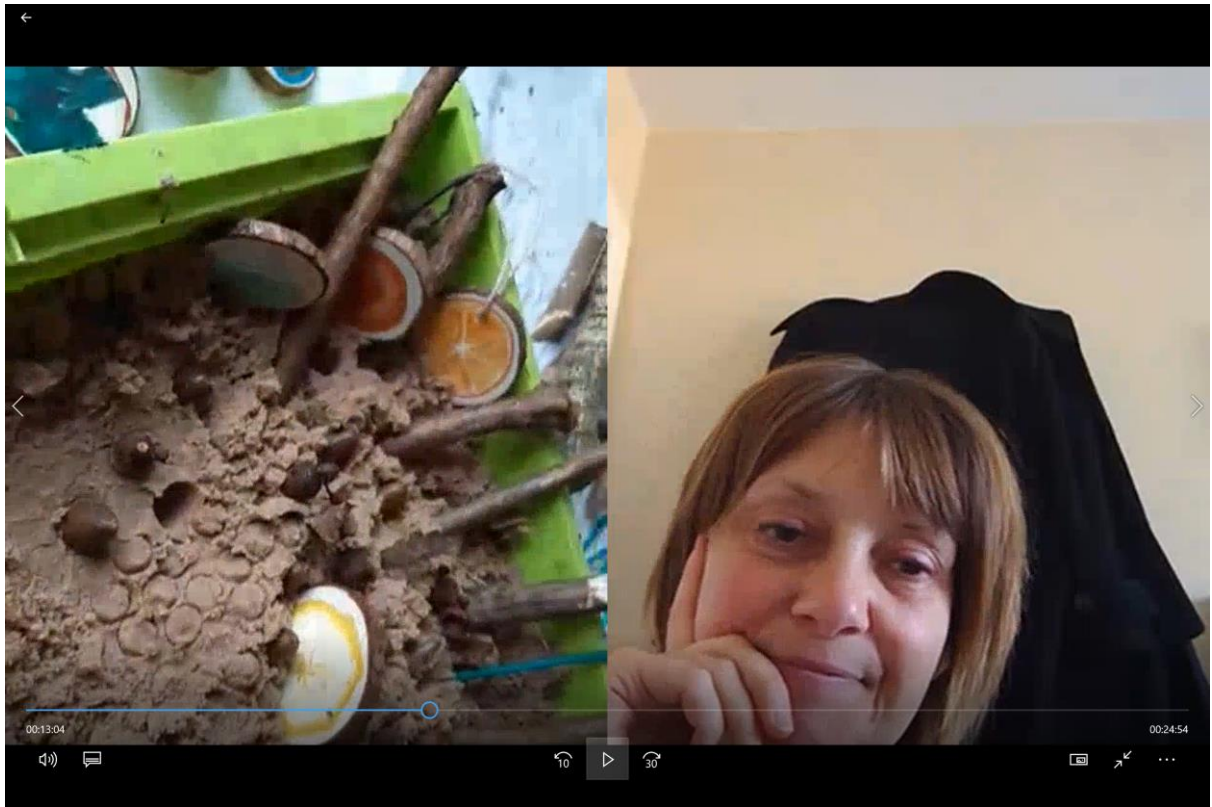
and I guess from her perspective if she if you're working in quite a deprived area you've got to demonstrate really that you're having an impact on that child outcomes I met you and if you're allowing them just to play I think that we would make head teachers get a bit Oh

yeah

and if you haven't got the confidence to explain actually they're not just playing you know it's the fear of Ofsted isn't it and I yeah and I've said to all the practitioners you know we've got a practitioner in in there that has, she's only she's only been in early years for 1 years she's only been in nursery for a year she's an NQT, she trained in key stage 1 you know key stage one and her experience of early years is so limited and she's lovely and she actually really nice with them and she does come to me for a lot of advice and stuff

yeah I said look, when Ofsted come if they do, as long as you're confident in what you're doing and you can explain why you're doing it you'll be fine you know if you can say look I'm ... they're like, but you know it's that its 'observing interfering or interacting' and but I 'just look like I'm doing

nothing' yeah you do to the untrained eye but if you can if you can say and have confidence to say I'm observing that child conscious that I don't want to interact with it because a I know that child every time I do try and interact it runs away, immediately what it's doing, I get my iPad to take photo it notices and it runs away
 yeah yeah
 you know you're showing your knowledge of the child yeah and you're you've made a conscious decision not to interfere and not to interact because of ABC
 yeah but I think having the confidence to do that is something that A, the EYT has probably given me
 yeah yeah
 that knowledge and having the confidence to tell others that it's okay as well
 yeah
 I think too, a long long time when I first started childcare to sit and just watch children and feel like, because I think because of my background you know hospitality catering is so busy and you're always doing and you always look like you're working yeah so then just sit next to a child and just listen to them chat, I really struggled with feeling that I wasn't working!
 yeah yeah yeah it can often feel like that Cant it
 but it's it's really important isn't it for to let them pursue what they are pursuing independently I mean what would you would use to working with children you get to understand particular children's queues for your interaction don't you
 yes but on the whole I think most of them like you say are quite happy to just get on with it without us interfering in quite rightly say the scatter don't they scatter like kittens if you go over
 yeah it is and and they don't they don't need you they don't need you generally they don't want you know
 And I'll they'll only only only need you the majority of the time they're very you know they've tried 100 million times and they eventually it's not working,
 can you show me can you can we talk about it
 (L) Yes I suppose I'd better go and ask them for help! I can't this she probably won't know! Cos I can't do this yeah
 yeah
 I'll just find out for you!
 no it's I think it's I think the EYT is given me that as well as the ability to sort with just back be brave enough to not do anything
 yeah we took a group of our students over to Spain last year and they very there very much like that and our students were in the nursery and they were trying to get down with the children you know the things that you our system tells us we should be doing and the children and practitioners looked at them agog So what you want
 yeah yeah yeah but like, we when you have volunteers in the setting or students in the setting that that's one of the first things you tell them to do isn't it is it will just get down and chat to the children and just... we should be saying watch the children yeah wait for their cues, you know but we don't we like to get down and yeah because they look so lost I think, especially volunteers and you all think in a lot of the time and you shouldn't but you think of God sake yeah time for this just don't play with the children yeah you know you've got 101 things to do yeah and having another adult in the room who doesn't know what they're doing sometimes feels like more of a hindrance than yeah we've been there yeah that help I mean we got this I was just going to say I guess that's why we give them like the rubbish jobs like the laminating and stuff and it's not because well it's not that I'm halfway we've not were not given the time to know to help these people and you know if we were given a time to meet them perhaps an hour before to go through stuff and you know slt will keep going they says Sabrina and she's going to be with you this morning and off you go and you are ohh hello talk to the children and you've not got time to think of stuff whereas if you were given a warning at least you might be able to get somethings from to do or this is how we do it here yeah yeah this is what we expect from you and that there isn't you're not given that are you very often he's just not that
 never



Appendix G Example conversation analysis

LISA .

~~https://www.microsoft.com/video/71dcd6dc-2c04-4888-8f56-3e6d8ac0f74d~~

~~https://www.microsoft.com/video/71dcd6dc-2c04-4888-8f56-3e6d8ac0f74d~~

(Showing around the sandpit) - Lisa playing in the sandpit.

ne - What have you got there?

uua Some digging tools, Taking tools to some stones and discs again yes some sticks natural sticks stones got some little painted fruit and food and stuff and then just some acorns

yeah

and then sand

ne brilliant the idea of using sand ^{box} is that, what it, what the idea is that it kind of promotes discussion so it's got its roots in therapy although we're not using it for therapy that's where the idea came from that it is so like a vehicle really to aid discussion, that's all really alright

okay yeah okay

So I'm going to ask you to do with all your brilliant resources you've got there is just kind of take me through a typical day in your setting if you don't mind?

right okay fair enough

so can just, I was just going to ask you which route you came via you did you come the graduate route to EYTS?

Er yes work based so I whilst I was working in a private nursery

uua intent yeah so I've done my Level 3 childcare yeah and then I was pre school room leader at the time and they offered me the chance to do my EYT with Edge Hill a so I did it while I was working at Edge Hill. So it was over the course of a year and it was basically just I think it was one day a month in Uni and when it was work based it was coursework and observations, it was good it was nice doing while I was working, it was really easy to get all, I'll say easy but like all the evidence was really readily available.

so did you do the foundation degree route then, did you do a foundation degree first?

no no so I've got a degree in Interior design

alright okay

nothing to do with it at all!

it is amazing how applicable different degrees become I think

uua yeah I guess the creative side of it and leaving it like definitely helps cause I think you have to be creative don't you can't

yeah I think you find it really really difficult, yeah be sort of open minded and open to change coz if you think if you more stayed in your ways and more sort of prone to sort of routines and plans and things and I think you'd find it really difficult coz coz it just doesn't happen does it

make .

Classification: Restricted

no not with the best of intentions nothing ever goes the way you planned it ~~does it so?~~

usa { So yes I think that side of it is definitely sort of helped yeah so yeah I did my degree I didn't, I have only been in childcare for six years, and before that I was a pub manager yeah then I took a break from that just worked at Costa coffee for a while yeah while I decided what I wanted to do and decided I want to childcare

Have you children of your own xxxx?

um { no no no not got any children I just I just a lot of it was like while I was working in pubs and in hospitality and stuff obviously you get children and you yeah they come in and talk chatting to them and thought you know what I've got a rapport with these children naturally and other people commented on it an awful lot, and I do enjoy spending time with them, then I've got nieces and nephews and things and I sort of said, let's have a look at it let's see if it is something I actually could do so I did me Level 3 online CACHE young young people and children's workforce Level 3 did that, and while while volunteering for part of that I've got a full time job at the nursery was volunteering at brilliant

and the rest the rest was history as they say so yeah it's really good

me { it's really interesting you know because I've done a few of these interviews now and met so many people who have come up via so many different routes and got so many different paths behind them it's it's amazing. I mean I'm just like you I've done loads of like random things like pubs and retail, catering and all that kind of stuff but without really knowing for a while what I actually wanted to do

yeah yeah I think I think with childcare I think you have to have experience in other in other things coz coz it is so varied and because you do have to think on your feet so much I think the better practitioners are the ones that have you had a bit variance in other things

I agree

and I'm not saying they're not good practitioners but I just think it gives you extra ability to see beyond beyond the actual moment that you know the bigger picture as it were suppose

me { yeah yeah I agree and I think I've lived and worked in the same small town all my life so lots of people knew me from working in lots of different places so when a parent saw me there to look after their children it was very much a case of oh, I know you you're alright you used to work in such and such a pub! I mean it it kind of takes away sometimes that sort of hesitancy that some parents have got with engaging with people in the education system

yeah yeah I think I think that trust is so important and I think I think time in the hospitality sector really helps helps with that as well as in in retail and everything having that rapport with all people

definitely

you know an an an coz I've worked yeah the nursery, the nursery I did that I did my my EYT in was you know it's in XXXX it's a it's a well off area, it's it's I suppose your leafy suburb

being in a leafy suburb

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yeah

the parents are well off and then then where I'm working now is the opposite you know it's in the centre of the very deprived area and if you can get both sets of parents on board

yeah

to work with you and to trust you

yeah

to be able to do that is so important I think and I think sort of hospitality retail face to face grounding helps with that

yeah I agree I couldn't agree with you more definitely yeah

how far it makes your job 100 times harder if you haven't got parents on board you might as well forget it if I'm honest, because everything you do in the setting is meaningless really if it isn't sort of embedded or supported at home

yeah yeah

I mean yeah we've all got we've all got the parents that they aren't on board and that's nothing to do with you they're just not on board yeah for lots of different reasons and

me { yeah okay right and you want to talk me through your day then what kind of happens first and what the sort of typical sequence of events is, I know there's not one day that's typical and everyday is different if you were going to describe a typical day to me what would it what would it look like?

So we are a sessional setting and the first session comes in at 8:45 they will come straight into continuous provision, so that probably takes about half an hour for them all to arrive eventually coming in dribs and drabs to be honest so they will come into continuous provision there's four practitioners in there including myself, they will tell us about their day have a chat to us about what's happened on the way in, those obviously some children who might be upset some that have fallen over on the way in, some of them are new to the setting, so it's nice to have time just to sort of allow that to sort of thing to happen and calm and let them find themselves and work out how their day is going to be I think

um { Yeah, because we all have that don't we back we have a brew in the staff room or we get in for a chat, to there's nothing worse than walking into work late and hitting the ground running you just feel off for the entire day don't you?

You do yeah

So for them, them as well to come in and just have that time in continuous provision and just immerse themselves is quite nice so they come into continuous provision like I say while that's happening we take the register we don't do a sit down registers, we're a setting with two three and four year olds yeah altogether

Brilliant

usa { so sort of sitting down and taking the register isn't something that we do we make the decision that it wasn't really beneficial sitting them all down stopping them but we try and we try not to stop them as much as we can we try and let it flow the day flow as much as we can within the sort of restrictions of three hours. Im not actually the class

(3)

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easy with objects in India.
through the internet

wa | yeah obviously sharing it with reception they are not out as much as us, they don't have Free flow (find it really difficult to say that!) throughout throughout day they don't have like a direct door to the outside that we have so they can't just leave the door open it needs sort of supervising so they are outside everyday reception but not free flow like us so we have a shared area with reception but we use it a lot more than them which is really nice to be honest yeah, so when reception come out, we are always a bit like 'reception are out!'

inde? under? what children read? | so so we have our own our own area and I've spent a lot of time sort of developing that area as well yeah which is really nice an we've got we've got gross motor so we've got the bikes and scooters and tricycles and things and we've got you know the bounds the bouncers and and we've got a hill and a tunnel and we've got all that sort of stuff for the gross motor and then we've got so small world area got reading we've got books in every area which I'm really conscious that there should be yeah you know sort of literacy in every area so they'll they'll we just spend time in continuous provision really and we the practitioners or just be with them whether that's either inside or outside

yeah

we are we do do observations were on tapestry so we will do observations at the moment we're just sort of setting up a week commencing for each child yeah that just gets added to throughout the week so there's no sort of plans that were not 'next stepping' structured.

Are you in the moment planning then xxx?

we sort of a cross between at the moment SLT are not entirely on board or understanding of that shall we say so we were in a happy medium I think yeah there are observations sort of, they're not they're not like 'next step' like I say but there is planning done each week by the class teacher, (I just like to point out when you videos there is that there with the stuff in the bag it's a it's a scalpel I used it to cut my bag of sand open that isn't something we have in provision and I've just looked at it and realised and thought all my word yes is not, something we have in provision yes you look back to it they go my goodness! I

to be honest I didn't think I was just looking at all the lovely resources that you've got and I thinking how they fit with the importance that you placed on the outdoor area, would you say you tend to adopt a kind of A curiosity approach as well then

yeah yeah I think I do that more for my own benefit, well, Well not my own benefit but that's how I work rather than that being a whole school approach, I find it a lot easier to observe my children and get a lot more from them using that approach it fits with how I work so I have like said when I when I've been developing the outdoor area I've been very conscious of what we're putting in that is natural objects that is loose parts and open ended play resources

do you find that sometimes puts you at odds with what the class teacher wants to do? a little bit cause I don't think she is it I think she likes the idea of it thought the actual practicality of it and I think that is where there is that difference between people who are early years trained specifically and people who are national curriculum trained

yeah

it's the child development side of it isn't it's that it's not, it's that understanding 'why' side of it that isn't taught in QTS,

Sanskrit
Kralage
Sanskrit Pedagogy.
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teachers as it's a main stream school I can't actually teach that class as I haven't got QTS I've only got EYIS.

and thereby hangs the rub!

Ye, tell me about it! So there's a teacher who obviously isn't specially trained in EY, just trained in KS1 so anyway...

It's the whole argument isn't it?

Yes and one that's left me with sleepless nights many a time, so she will take the older ones, the pre-schoolers for a short session she does that twice a day, once when everyone has arrived and settled then at the end of the day when we are getting ready for home. So depending on how the children are, one session might be a short phonics-session, phase 1 letters and sounds and one will be story time and they will be interchangeable as to which one is which.

so We get the chance to focus on the twos and that 2 year old play and because they can sometimes get a bit lost I think in these settings where there is a mixture

yeah

it's nice that they've got the older ones to sort of model themselves on and look up to or they did you get lost and forgotten sometimes especially in mainstream where there isn't that understanding of two year old play there isn't that understanding of three year olds like I said that there is primary teacher she really struggles with the twos yeah a bit yeah because she leave it to me really to be honest, its quite nice you know, I get I get I get chance to spend time which I do love, I love the two year olds I love like the younger ones to be honest

yeah

so I so while she's doing sort of the more focused older stuff I will spend time with the two year olds in continuous vision and building those sort of early early skills as it were listening, attention the exploration, that side of it so that's nice yeah that's to be honest depends on how the how the preschoolers are that's that could be anything from 10 minutes to half an hour

I then sometimes during that time with the two year olds I'll open up outside coz we have freeflow throughout the day, so I open up during that time as I've got the two year olds cause some of them will ask can we go outside now, and so depending on the children we will either go outside during that time or we'll all go out when the when the preschoolers come back into the room

Yeah

I always will go outside I love being outside that's my main area, I just think it's the absolute best place for learning and exploration and building those skills so I I tend to go outside with them

Have you got your own area out there then xxxx or do you share it with the school?

we share it with reception so we've got our own early years area which is really nice

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it's the devil's in the detail really I can remember having to explain to a reception teacher who got a class full of three year olds what schema was and why we're doing certain things and I just said well it's a schema and she said yes 'what?' and said its schematic behaviour yeah so we had to give the school some training on schemas because they didn't know what they were because it isn't covered in QTS training

I know and I just I feel really sad that that's the case because it's not schema's aren't something that are just EYFS children you know that schema is carry on right through the school and so much can be gained from understanding that and knowing what to do with them, how to develop them, it's not something that that people understand and I think until you understand child development and Childs brains and Childs bodies, God I don't think we'll move on from from where we are to be honest until that's something that's taught in QTS,

yeah I agree I mean you were talking about you 2 year olds in your 2 year old provision 2 year olds are wired so differently from a 3 year old and a four year old and how they want to use their bodies to learn doesn't lend itself to anything to do with the national curriculum or formal learning does it?

no nothing at all nothing at all and I cringe and she does it so the class teacher does it and she's like 'sit down sit with your legs crossed, sit nicely' and I'm like does it matter does it matter, but they can't sit like that it's there's research that shows it's not beneficial for them to sit like that it harms them

yeah

if they're listening let them lie on the tummy it doesn't mean they're not listening yes you know they can be messing with another book and every now and then they'll but in with something that's the Story that the classroom class teachers reading, you think they are listening, it is going in,

yeah yeah

but they're doing it in their two year old way so just let them yet and learn from then, but were so focused on getting them to 'school ready' and that term sticks in my in my throat a bit as well

yeah

we're so focused on it and it's such a shame because I think we're losing so much that we learn from them

definitely, there's a whole load of opportunities that are being ignored really aren't there because we get this whole idea that the remit of early years is to get them ready for school when it really really isn't,

it should be but I can't remember who you know and I think it's been said by lots of people that why are we getting children ready for year one when we should be getting year one ready for children and it's so right yes why are we adapting children you know when we should be adapting our provision and our practise

yeah and I think that I don't know a single child that would not have benefited from a more play based approach at least age 7

yes - play based approaches

if my intrahand shift?

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Yeah and other countries have proved it haven't they?

Yeah, So what happens at lunchtime then if they've had their continuous provision and they've had a good explore etc what do?

they go yeah, so some go home we've got about we've got handful that stay all day yeah that they will have lunch in the Hall and that changed in COVID, they used to have lunch in nursery so so lunch so the first session finishes at quarter to twelve, 11:45, so we normally sort of get them to help tidy up about 20 past 11 and then we'll sit down with them and its Story time, it's like get ready for home time, get books and bags and things together and water bottles and all manner of things that they bought him with them and we'll get ready for home time and then we'll go, and obviously at the moment parents aren't coming in now so parents used to come in and collect them but at the moment we sort of line them up outside, we're lucky enough to have a sheltered area outside that we can get their coats on and then we go and stand outside, we go and open the gate and their near enough to sort of shout when it is, when their parents are there and so that's quarter to 11:45 by that point the three or four that are staying for dinner have been taken up to the Hall, one of us will stay with them and have their dinner and then bring them back down to nursery, previously like I said they would have lunch, it would be brought down to them and they'd have it in nursery with us and that's one of the good things that's actually come out of covid I think is that I've said for a long time that why are they not going down and having lunch in the Hall, yet everyone you know what why and on the other hand yes they are very different they are very they do need different but they also need those experiences let them why are we scared of having three and 4 year olds in the lunch Hall with the other children, and what happens in the six weeks over the Holidays that suddenly makes them ready to have lunch in reception with the children?

yeah yeah absolutely

They're still 4! So out of necessity the school has allowed nursery to join all the other children in the Hall for lunch and I think people have been quite surprised at how sort of able they are and have been quite to be able to show other people, 'ooh are they in nursery?' yes they are 'aren't they eating well?' yes they are, you know they are all capable beings it's you know they can! And I look at some of the other years and I think actually probably better than eating to be honest! so they'll have their dinner down there which is lovely actually and

it's really good for children as well cause I think someone of the most daunting things when you start school is where is everything where will I be you know what that takes away, some mystery that can only be good

also is it it's really nice like you say for them to be able to experience that and see some of the other children, a lot of them have got siblings a lot of them have gon, yeah and that joy when they see one of their siblings in big school, it's lovely you know it's really nice for them so yeah they have their dinner come back down to nursery and the afternoon session starts at half 12 so we let the afternoon ones in at half 12 and then and then the same the same happens again for the afternoon session,

yeah

sometimes the ones that that there all day will actually stay with me in the twos when the others go through for their more focused work because they've done it once that day and

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will always ask them do you know do you want to go and through their or do you want to stay here and to be honest very often they want to stay where they are, which is, which is telling isn't it but yeah and so they'll stay with me and and stay in continuous provision and the same routine will happen again yeah till home time which is between 10 past 3 and half three nursery officially ends at half three, but we have a lot with siblings whose parents school finishes at ten past so a lot will pick the nursery children when they put the sibling which is which makes sense

yeah definitely, that is really interesting you said some really interesting things that have you know given me food for thought really did one last thing I want to ask you xxxx is what do you think the early years teacher qualification has given you and I'm assuming you the only early years teacher in the setting?

are yeah yes yeah yeah

So what would you think you got from it?

it's given me that that knowledge we were talking about of children and young children its giving me that knowledge of how children develop how children work how they think we as practitioners can facilitate that learning and exploration best with that understanding so I think that's that's the biggest thing its the biggest difference between QTS and EYIS I think and yeah it's just it's the child development and the care as well you know there's a lot of teachers who work in early years who are like, like no I'm not doing that I'm not that's not my job and I'm like well it is coz it's Early Years, care is important, care is part of early years and it should be part of the rest school shouldn't it but

I agree yeah and I mean we had the thing a while ago didn't we about not hugging children and all that kind of thing, why would you want your child to go to a place where they won't get a hug?

well it is it documented that it's you know it's its part of their need isn't it is this contact physical contact is a physiological need isn't it so for us to turn round and say they're not having that is bizarre

yeah

so even understanding things like that I think it, it sort of and it opens you up to other practitioners and specialists and professionals that you know, I mentioned people to the reception teacher or to the to the class teacher and they are like I've never heard of them yeah you're working in early years and you don't know who this person is you know you know I attended that the Anna Ephgrave training on Zoom, training

yeah yeah quite a few people that have interviewed went to that

right fab well I managed to convince the head teacher attends too and to a pay for it, she went on it as well

what did she think?

she she was all enthusiasm and I think she really enjoyed it I don't think she understood it okay

she made all the right noises yeah yeah you know and she she got on board with sort of how important interactions are but didn't want to apply the theory and was scared of

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applying the theory I think of in the moment planning, all she keeps saying is like but how do you know how do you know you've covered all the areas how do you know? my because we know you just do you know don't like talking going but how do you know why why it's like just because! so I think I think she and and again it goes back to that understanding of child development if you don't understand that I don't think you understand that way of working

no definitely not

because it doesn't make sense if you don't understand child development does it know it doesn't it really does not

why would you just allow children to play what it what are you getting from that and if you don't understand what that play is bringing

yeah

I f you don't understand what they learn while they are playing then why would you implement a way of working within your setting that is just playing because that's what you think it is isn't it just playing

yeah

and to a head teacher of a school you know yes you could just play all day would would it go against everything doesn't it?

and I guess from her perspective if she if you're working in quite a deprived area you've got to demonstrate really that you're having an impact on that child outcomes I met you and if you're allowing them just to play I think that we would make head teachers get a bit Oh

yeah

and if you haven't got the confidence to explain actually they're not just playing you know it's the fear of Ofsted isn't it and I yeah and I've said to all the practitioners you know we've got a practitioner in in there that has, she's only she's only been in early years for 1 years she's only been in nursery for a year she's an NQT, she trained in key stage 1 you know key stage one and her experience of early years is so limited and she's lovely and she actually really nice with them and she does come to me for a lot of advice and stuff

yeah I said look, when Ofsted come if they do, as long as you're confident in what you're doing and you can explain why you're doing it you'll be fine you know if you can say look I'm ... they're like, but you know it's that its 'observing interfering or interacting' and but I 'just look like I'm doing nothing' yeah you do to the untrained eye but if you can if you can say and have confidence to say I'm observing that child conscious that I don't want to interact with it because a I know that child every time I do try and interact it runs away, immediately what it's doing, I get my iPad to take photo it notices and it runs away

yeah yeah

you know you're showing your knowledge of the child yeah and you're you've made a conscious decision not to interfere and not to interact because of ABC

yeah but I think having the confidence to do that is something that A, the EYT has probably given me

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yeah yeah
 that knowledge and having the confidence to tell others that it's okay as well
 yeah
 I think too, a long long time when I first started childcare to sit and just watch children and feel like, because I think because of my background you know hospitality catering is so busy and you're always doing and you always look like you're working yeah so then just sit next to a child and just listen to them chat, I really struggled with feeling that I wasn't working!
 yeah yeah yeah it can often feel like that Can't it
 but it's it's really important isn't it for to let them pursue what they are pursuing independently I mean what would you use to working with children you get to understand particular children's queues for your interaction don't you
 yes but on the whole I think most of them like you say are quite happy to just get on with it without us interfering in quite rightly say the scatter don't they scatter like kittens if you go over
 yeah it is and and they don't they don't need you they don't need you generally they don't want you know
 And I'll they'll only only only need you the majority of the time they're very you know they've tried 100 million times and they eventually it's not working,
 can you show me can you can we talk about it
 (L) Yes I suppose I'd better go and ask them for help! I can't this she probably won't know! Cos I can't do this yeah
 yeah
 I'll just find out for you!
 no it's I think it's I think the EYT is given me that as well as the ability to sort with just back be brave enough to not do anything
 yeah we took a group of our students over to Spain last year and they very there very much like that and our students were in the nursery and they were trying to get down with the children you know the things that you our system tells us we should be doing and the children and practitioners looked at them agog So what you want
 yeah yeah yeah but like, we when you have volunteers in the setting or students in the setting that that's one of the first things you tell them to do Isn't it is it will just get down and chat to the children and just... we should be saying watch the children yeah wait for their cues, you know but we don't we like to get down and yeah because they look so lost I think, especially volunteers and you all think in a lot of the time and you shouldn't but you think of God sake yeah time for this just don't play with the children yeah you know you've got 101 things to do yeah and having another adult in the room who doesn't know what they're doing sometimes feels like more of a hindrance than yeah we've been there yeah that help I mean we got this - I was just going to say I guess that's why we give them like the rubbish jobs like the laminating and stuff and it's not because well it's not that I'm halfway we've not were not given the time to know to help these people and you know if we

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were given a time to meet them perhaps an hour before to go through stuff and you know sit will keep going they says Sabrina and she's going to be with you this morning and off you go and you are ohh hello talk to the children and you've not got time to think of stuff whereas if you were given a warning at least you might be able to get somethings from to do or this is how we do it here yeah yeah this is what we expect from you and that there isn't you're not given that are you very often he's just not that
 never



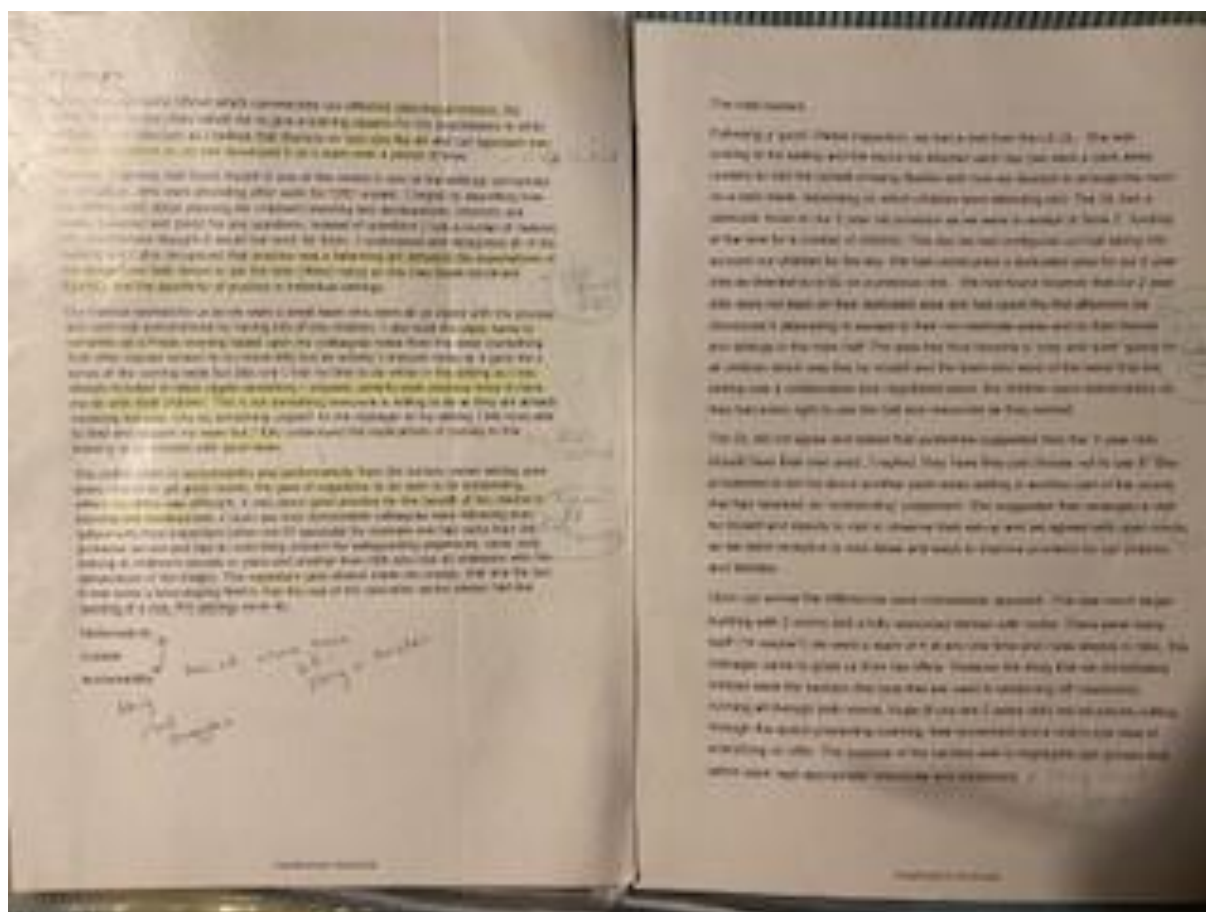
gradually

smaller children

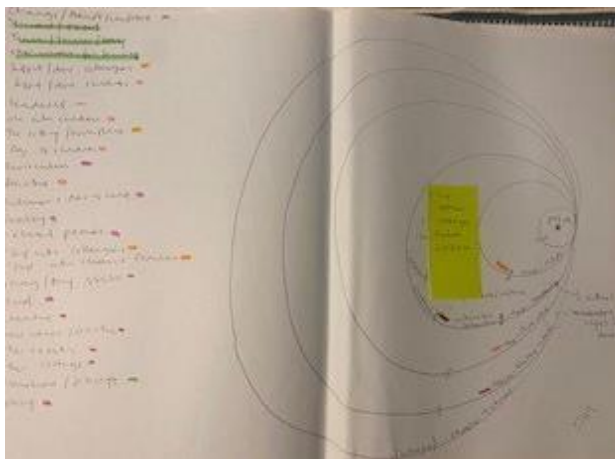
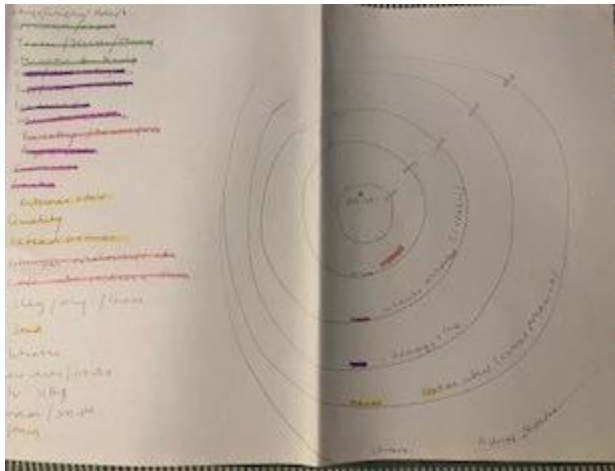
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Appendix H My Coded Narratives



Appendix I Theoretical framework working documents to support data analysis



Appendix J working documents for presenting the findings

Diagram for sorting analysis for presenting findings

