"*Playing the education game – an exploration of the relationships between children's cultural capital, wellbeing and the ways in which they experience early years settings in England*"

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Contents

4

Abstract

The aim of this research was to explore perceptions of practitioners and parents of the relationships between young children's cultural capital, their physical and emotional wellbeing and the experiences they have in early years settings in England. The study was undertaken during the global Covid-19 pandemic, when families and early years settings faced multiple challenges. Data collection took place during and immediately after the second governmental closure of early years settings and schools.

This study followed a qualitative, interpretive approach to capture views from practitioners, trainees and parents. Due to Covid-19, data collection was conducted solely online. All participants completed online qualitative surveys. Seven practitioners then participated in follow up episodic narrative interviews with the researcher. Through thematic analysis the views of participants have been analysed to highlight the multi-dimensional nature of the relationships between cultural capital, wellbeing and experiences that children have at early years care and education settings.

This study has highlighted the importance of children's early home experiences and the relationships they build with their parents or main carers. Practitioners and parents emphasised that the experiences children have at home determine whether they feel confident and comfortable in the educational environment and that the current system sees children labelled as difficult to manage or as having additional needs when it is that their cultural capital is different to the entrenched expectations of a rigid education system

A new, complex synthesis of sociological and psychological theories has been developed to conceptualize the findings. The use of the Bourdieusian theory of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; 1994) has allowed for the deeper exploration of the interactions between different

8

ecological systems influencing the child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1993). A new conceptual

framework has been developed which builds on the work of these two theorists, bringing it

into conversation with the findings of this project to propose a new way of interpreting the

influence of cultural capital on children's bioecology.

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Thank you to my family and friends who have provided me with emotional support and advice throughout this project. A special thank you to my Nan, who has particularly supported the final year of my journey, allowing me to live with her in order to finish this study.

Finally, to my Mum who sadly passed away in December 2022. She offered me immeasurable support in the first three years of this project, and I know she would have liked nothing more than to have seen it to its completion. She dedicated her working life to providing rich experiences to young children through owning and managing her own day nursery for 30 years and this project is dedicated to her and her outstanding contribution to the early years community. This is for you Mum; I hope I have done you proud.

Figures

Figures

Tables

Abbreviations

ASC	Annual School Census
ASSIA	Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts
BAME	Black and Minority Ethnic
BEI	British Education Index
BERA	British Education Research Association
BSA	British Sociological Association
BTM	Birth to Three Matters
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CHILD	Child Indicators of Life and Development
CHPP	Child Health Promotion Programme
CINAHL	Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature
CNSF	Core National Service Framework
DCFS	Department for Children, Families and Schools
DEFRA	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
DfE	Department for Education
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DHSC	Department for Health and Social Care
DoH	Department of Health
ELG	Early Learning Goal
EPPE	Effective Provision of Pre-School Education
ERIC	Education Resources Information Centre
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
FOOD	Food on our Doorstep
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulations
HL	House of Lords
MCS	Millennium Cohort Study
NAO	National Audit Office
NFER	National Foundation for Educational Research
NICE	National Institute for Clinical Excellence

OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PLASC	Pupil Level Annual School Census
PVI	Private, voluntary and independent settings
QCA	Qualifications Curriculum Alliance
RCPCH	Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
SATs	Statutory Assessment Tests
SCAA	School Curriculum and Assessment Authority
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

1: Introduction

1.1 Overview

This chapter will provide a summary of the overall aims and objectives of the project along with an introduction to the structure of the thesis. It will begin with a statement of subjectivity (Simons, 2009) to explain the researcher's position within the research. This will be followed by an introduction to the rationale behind the project and an outline of the aims and objectives. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the structure of the rest of the thesis.

1.2 Researcher's Statement of Subjectivity

The researcher is a fully qualified primary school teacher, with a particular interest in early years. They have worked in schools and private day nurseries in the West Midlands region, although not in any of the participating settings. Through their work in settings and previous Masters' level research, they developed a particular interest in the way that children's backgrounds influence the way in which they experience education. The inspiration for this project came from their work in schools in areas of high deprivation and from professional discussions with other teachers and researchers.

At the time of data collection, the researcher was working as an Assistant Lecturer at the same institution as some of the trainee participants were studying. However, the researcher did not have any personal or professional connection to any of the participants.

1.3 Researcher Positionality

It is acknowledged by Punch (2014) and Simons (2009) that all researchers hold a position within their research and that it is impossible to enter into a research project without some form of pre-developed position. Therefore, it is important that researchers are transparent in this and that their position is clearly reflected within the project. It could

be argued as the researcher was not a practising teacher at the time of the project and they had never worked within any of the participant settings that they held elements of the position of an outsider and that by taking on this position they could identify themself as the less knowledgeable body when collecting and interpreting data (Creswell and Poth, 2018). However, the decision was made that they should position themself as an insider as they have previously been an early years teacher within the Birmingham authority. This is particularly important since their ideas and prior identity as an early years teacher could affect the way in which they interact with participants and interpret the data collected for this project (Hammersley, 2005; Simons, 2009). In addition to this it is important to consider that the researcher cannot be expected to separate themselves personally from their researcher profile and, since the researcher is always central to the decision-making processes within research, these decisions are naturally informed by the researcher's personality and life experiences (Bentz and Shapiro, 1996; Coffey, 1999). Consequently, it is important that this position is reflected throughout the project. In order to make this as transparent as possible, this has been done by following Simons' (2009) method of producing a clear prior statement of subjectivity in order to disclose their position. Further to this an ongoing research journal has been maintained throughout the project in order to document any critical incidents or conscious biases (Holly, 1989; Janesick, 1999; Simons, 2009) so that these could be considered during data analysis.

1.4 Introduction and Rationale

This project was designed to explore the links between three topical issues, namely cultural capital, wellbeing and educational experience. The project focused specifically on the views and experiences of parents of children aged birth to five, and practitioners and trainee practitioners working with children birth to five from the West Midlands area. The

study took place between 2019 and 2024, with data collection commencing early in 2021. This period of time saw unique and unprecedented challenges faced by the early years sector as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The pandemic also placed significant restrictions on the research community, and it was necessary for the researcher to redesign the research methods for this study in order to comply with this. Further details about how data collection was conducted will be provided in chapter five: Methodology and Methods.

Successive governments and many charities in the United Kingdom and worldwide have focused on children's physical and mental wellbeing (Barnardo's, 2019; Department for Education, 2023; The Children's Society, 2023). Research by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] (2021) reported that 250 million children worldwide are out of school and that they face considerably greater wellbeing challenges than their peers who are in full time education. This suggests a positive relationship between access to education and maintaining good levels of wellbeing for children. Inequalities that begin in the early years have a detrimental effect upon children's long-term attainment and wellbeing and children with health inequalities are more likely to become adults with similar problems (Marmot, 2010; Marmot et al., 2020a). This highlights the important role of early years education and care settings in minimising inequalities, not just for children whilst they are young but also for safeguarding their long-term potential. This study is therefore focused upon early years settings working with children aged between birth and five years old. This project was conceived and begun prior to the start of the Covid-19 pandemic but with the inevitable influence of the pandemic upon wellbeing of both adults and children, this project has taken on an additional layer of meaning and adds to the

rapidly expanding body of international research looking at the influence of Covid-19 upon child mental health and wellbeing (Canning and Robinson, 2021; Dudovitz et al., 2022; Idoiaga Mondragon, 2021; Kurz et. al., 2022; Owens et. al., 2022).

Whilst there is existing research which has analysed the increasing issue of health inequality in society (Marmot et al., 2010; Mattheys, 2018) and in children (Collishaw et al., 2019; Fairchild, 2019; Field, 2010; The Children's Society, 2023), there is very little research focusing on the relationship between cultural capital, children's wellbeing and their experiences in early years settings in this way. Although some reports such as The Marmot Review (Marmot et al., 2010), Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On (Marmot et al., 2020a) and The Good Childhood Report (The Children's Society, 2023) briefly comment upon the role of educational settings in addressing social inequality, there is little focused evidence from early years settings and no direct reference to cultural capital. Therefore, it was intended that by focusing specifically on early years settings within one region an in-depth exploration of the relationships between wellbeing, educational experiences and capital specifically in the first five years of a child's life could be conducted.

1.5 Choice of Terminology
1.51 Cultural Capital

When considering the terminology to use for this study, the researcher explored multiple possibilities. This study focuses primarily upon the ways in which a child's socio-economic status influences the cultural capital that they build (Bourdieu, 1986; 1994). Socio-economic status has, historically, been established using household income as a measure (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2006; Hobbs and Vignoles, 2010). However, previous research has shown that socio-economic background is established through a complex combination of factors (Evans and Mellon, 2016; Jerrim, 2013; Kraus, Park & Tan, 2017) rather than simply

on income or occupation alone. This is underpinned by the sociological theories of Bourdieu (1986; 1994) which suggest that social status is developed through a process of social reproduction and that a person's experiences and opportunities are more influential that their financial position.

For this project the researcher was keen to ensure that participants considered all aspects of children's social background and therefore the decision was made to refer to cultural capital as opposed to socio-economic status. Furthermore, this study was concerned with the experiences of children from all social backgrounds, not only those from disadvantaged backgrounds, hence the decision to refer to the different cultural capital that children possess, rather than social inequality, social disadvantage or poverty.

Bourdieu (1977; 1986) used the term cultural capital to collectively refer to the skills, experiences and knowledge that an individual has built, and which enables them to function within a specific environment, or field. It has been argued that cultural capital is concerned only with the engagement in "highbrow tastes" (Edgerton and Roberts, 2004: 194) and acts somewhat as a status symbol. However, it is suggested by Lareau and Weininger (2003) that this simplistic definition does not fully explain and represent Bourdieu's original ideas and that it fails to acknowledge the interdependence of cultural capital and technical and cognitive skills. Lareau and Weininger (2003) and Edgerton and Roberts (2004) argue that cultural capital encompasses the understanding and application of cultural practices, institutional processes and the ability to acquire the relevant social and behavioural skills needed to function within a specific field. This definition brings together the concept of cultural capital and the development of skills, something which is key in this project. Therefore, this broader and more inclusive definition of cultural capital has been used for

the purposes of this study. Further consideration of cultural capital and associated terms is given in Chapter Three – Working with Theory.

1.52 Wellbeing

Whilst it is argued that there is no clear definition of what child wellbeing consists of (Raghavan and Alexandrova, 2014), the decision to use this term was made by the researcher in order to encompass the holistic development of the child. This study is concerned with the relationship between the child's cultural capital and their holistic development as a human being, as well as the way in which they experience early education. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the following broad definition of child wellbeing proposed by UNICEF (2007: 1) has been adopted:

"Their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they are born."

This encouraged participants to talk about both mental and physical health as well as developmental stages, all of which contribute to the holistic development of the child. Further consideration of the term is given in Chapter Two, Section 2.23: Defining and Theorising Child Wellbeing.

1.53 Play and Educational Experiences

Considerable thought was given to the terminology chosen to describe the educational aspect of this study. The use of the word 'play' was considered as a way to describe the opportunities that young children have to explore and explain their world (OHCHR, 1989). However, the definition of play is open to much interpretation and criticism. Murray (2018) suggested that whilst play is encouraged by many early childhood educators and researchers it is difficult to clearly define what is meant by the word. This is because historically play has had great significance placed upon it by key early childhood theorists

such as Froebel (1826), Montessori (1916) and Piaget (1945) but each one presented play in a different way and placed value upon different elements of play. Furthermore, in contemporary literature early childhood specialists (e.g. Gleave and Cole-Hamilton, 2012; Kelly, Sharpe and Fotou, 2022; Moyles, 2015; Nash, 2018) support the historical value of play but acknowledge that opportunities for children to play are declining and that play is increasingly undervalued as a concept by early years practitioners and society as a whole. When carrying out the online survey phase of the project it became clear that many of the participants of this study hold a linear and simplistic view of the concept of play which is consistent with the idea of play being undervalued (Gleave and Cole-Hamilton, 2012; Kelly, Sharpe and Fotou, 2022; Moyles, 2015; Nash, 2018) and the findings of contemporary research by Murray (2018) and Walsh and Fallon (2021). Therefore, the decision was made to refer to the 'ways in which children experience early years settings' in order to provide a more comprehensive and inclusive term to cover all aspects of children's experiences, not just the simplistic elements of play recognised by many practitioners and parents. This change in terminology prior to the commencement of the interview phase of data collection encouraged practitioners to discuss broader themes related to the children in their settings.

1.6 Aims and Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to explore the multi-faceted relationships between children's cultural capital, their holistic development and the experiences they have of early years education. This was carried out through the lens of early years practitioners, trainee practitioners and parents of children aged between birth and 5 years. The study aimed to capture the views of the participants and to use them to explore how children's cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; 1994) influences the position they hold within the education field of

play and the way in which their micro and macrosystems support them in accessing early education opportunities (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1993).

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. *How do practitioners and parents perceive the way in which cultural capital influences the wellbeing of children aged birth to five?*

2. *What perceptions do practitioners and parents have about the way in which cultural capital influences children's interactions with their different ecological systems in the early years?*

3. *How do practitioners and parents perceive the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and children's cultural capital, wellbeing, and early years experiences?*

1.7 Outline of Chapters

The thesis will be presented in eight chapters. The next chapter will consider the existing empirical literature on the topic. Chapter three will outline and justify the theoretical perspective adopted for this study, followed by the policy context for the study in chapter four. Chapter five provides the rationale for the methodology and methods chosen for the project. Chapters six and seven are concerned with the presentation of the findings from the online qualitative survey and the in-depth interviews. Finally, in chapter eight there is a discussion of the findings, the existing literature, policy and the theoretical underpinning, culminating in recommendations for practice, policy and future research.

2: Existing Literature

2.1 Introduction

As outlined in the previous chapter, striving for social equity, and promoting children's wellbeing and early years education have been a focus of successive governments, to varying degrees, since New Labour in 1997. This political discourse, which will be further explored in chapter four, has led to some very significant pieces of research being published in this area over the last 27 years. In this chapter some of the most influential and relevant pieces of literature from this time period will be presented and discussed. In order to select relevant literature a comprehensive search was undertaken of the following databases:

British Education Index (BEI)

Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC)

Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)

Community Care Inform (Child)

Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL)

Web of Science

Due to the multi-dimensional nature of this project, multiple searches were carried out on each database to find the most relevant papers. An initial search including all the key areas of the project was carried out to highlight any papers which focused on the same areas. However, no relevant search results were found on any database using all the key words. Therefore, it was decided that the key words needed to be split into multiple searches to find appropriate literature. The following searches were carried out on each database:

1. Wellbeing AND early years	The following Boolean strings were used for each search term:	
2. Cultural capital AND wellbeing	Wellbeing OR well-being OR health	
3. Early years AND cultural capital	"Early years" OR "early childhood" OR "birth to five" OR "0-5" OR "nursery" OR "pre-school" OR "foundation stage" OR "early education"	
4. Wellbeing AND early years AND social background	"cultural capital" OR "Social class" OR "social inequality" OR "social background"	
5. Wellbeing AND early years AND play		
6. Early Years AND social background AND opportunities	"opportunities" OR "play" OR "experiences" OR "activities" OR "learning"	

Figure 1 Search terms and Boolean Strings used in literature search

Following these searches any duplicate papers and papers published before 1997 were

removed from the search. The selected papers were then subjected to thematic analysis

using Nvivo software to create the following themes and sub-themes.

Theme Number	Major Theme	Sub-Themes
One	**Definitions and Measures**	Income as a method to measure Social Background
		Using Free School Meals to measure Social Background
		Defining and Theorising Child Wellbeing
		Using Leuven Scales to Measure Wellbeing
Two	**Austerity, Income and Health**	Disadvantage and Family Mental Health
		Disadvantage and Children's Mental Health
		Food Insecurity and Wellbeing
		Reproduction of health inequalities through activity choices
Three	**Social Background and Early Learning Experiences**	Social Background and Cognition
		Inequalities of Educational Opportunities
		Forming an identity
Four	**Protecting Against Adversity**	Mitigating the effects of adversity through pro-social behaviour
		Play as a determinant for long term health
		Practitioner perspectives on poverty
		Practitioner Understanding of Children's Social and Emotional Development
		Employing specific interventions
Five	**Social Background and Home Environment**	Social Background and infant mortality
		Social Background and Family Migration
		Parenting Skills
		Parental Involvement in learning
Six	**Applications of Social Reproduction Theory and Ecological Systems Theory**	Use of Cultural Capital, Habitus and Field
		International Perspectives on Habitus, Field and Ecological Systems
Seven	Covid-19	The Unequal Effect of Covid-19 on Employment
		Covid-19 and the Home Environment
		Covid-19 and Children's Development and Wellbeing
		Disadvantaged Children's Lived Experience of Covid-19

Figure 2 Themes and Sub-themes arising from literature search.

2.2 Definitions and Measures

2.21 Income as a Measure of Social Background

Family income levels have historically been used as a key indicator of social background

when conducting research (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2006; Hobbs and Vignoles, 2010). This is

particularly the case when assessing school performance and distribution of pupils from

different socio-economic groups within schools (Gorard, 2012) with the Department for

Education [DfE] relying heavily on the use of free school meal eligibility data to analyse

deprivation within school communities (Gorard, 2012; Hobbs and Vignoles, 2010). Research

related to the accuracy of using these factors as a measure of inequality and deprivation will

be discussed here.

In secondary research conducted by Wilkinson and Pickett (2006) 155 peer reviewed

reports were analysed in order to discuss the potential links between income inequality and

health. The papers were categorised as being wholly supportive, partially supportive, or

unsupportive of the hypothesis that income and health are linked. It was found that only 8

of the papers were unsupportive of the hypothesis. However, the authors reported that

whilst there is an inherent link between income and health that does not necessarily act as

an accurate indicator of social status. The paper discusses the other factors that may

contribute to social inequality, such as education, power and status but does not include

these in the analysis of the peer reviewed reports. Wilkinson and Pickett (2006) conclude

that income is the most accurate way to assess social inequality since it is the most

comparable variable across the world.

Despite this, more recently Stewart and Roberts (2019) conducted an analysis of 251

responses to a UK government consultation on child poverty measurement. Stewart and

Roberts (2019) reported that despite 88% of respondents suggesting that income should remain an important marker when assessing social background, household income was scrapped in 2015 by the UK Government as a marker when assessing child poverty levels. Of the remaining 12% of respondents, Stewart and Roberts (2019) reported that the majority believed that income should form part of the measure of social background but should not be an overriding factor. They reported that one of the main concerns for relying upon income as a marker was that household income does not accurately reflect standard of living since the cost of living varies considerably across the UK. However, despite this Stewart and Roberts (2019) reported very clear support for the continuation of the use of income as a marker, either as a dominant marker or as part of a multi-dimensional approach. They suggest that this could be due to a significant history of using income as a poverty marker but also acknowledge, like Wilkinson and Pickett (2006) that income is easily comparable and so provides a good statistical measure to be compared across the UK and worldwide.

2.22 Using Free School Meals to Measure Social Background

Gorard (2012) conducted research using secondary data from the Annual School Census [ASC] and the Pupil Level Annual School Census [PLASC] to explore whether using free school meals eligibility is an accurate measure of child poverty in England. They highlighted that free school meal entitlement is purely measured on household income and eligibility for certain means tested benefits and therefore gives a very simplified interpretation of the wealth of families with children at school. The data from PLASC showed that whilst 11.5% of key stage four pupils were entitled to free school meals there was a large percentage of pupils whose data was 'missing' regarding free school meals (10.2%). Gorard (2012) acknowledges that some of these pupils are young people attending

fee paying schools and who are therefore not eligible but there is also another group of pupils who are not represented by the data.

Research by Hobbs and Vignoles (2010) and Kounali et al. (2008) reported further problems with using free school meal eligibility as a measure of deprivation. Hobbs and Vignoles (2010) conducted research using data from the Family Resource Survey to analyse whether free school meal eligibility is an appropriate proxy for family income and deprivation. Kounali et al. (2008) used a more comprehensive data set comprised of three sources, PLASC, the National Pupil Database and data from the Hampshire Research with Primary Schools project. The particular emphasis of both these pieces of research was to assess the relationship between the free school meal status of children and their family income levels to discover the extent to which children who are eligible for free school meals live in families with the lowest incomes. Hobbs and Vignoles (2010) reported that whilst, on average, pupils taking up free school meals live in families with lower incomes than those who don't take them up there is a significant overlap in the range of incomes of families who are eligible and those who are not. In support of this it was reported by Kounali et al. (2008) that families who sit close to the eligibility threshold are crudely placed into one category or the other and families who may be experiencing significant disadvantage may be categorised as non-disadvantaged due to their income being only a few pounds over the threshold. Consequently, it is reported that there are children eligible for free school meals whose family socio-economic position is more favourable than some children who do not meet the eligibility criteria. Kounali et al (2008) also reported that the eligibility of a child changes through their time at school and so for families with fluctuating incomes this can mean that the data on free school meals is not always accurate.

It is concluded by both Hobbs and Vignoles (2010) and Kounali et al (2008) that using free school meal entitlement alone is not an accurate assessment of family socio-economic status or level of deprivation and in particular it cannot be used to accurately assess inequality across family households due to the significant overlap of incomes.

It is reported that free school meals eligibility is being widely used by government departments and independent researchers as a measure of deprivation. However, any social policy analysis or school performance data produced using information based on free school meal status will be subject to inaccuracy due to a large percentage of missing data and the overlap of family incomes (Gorard, 2012; Hobbs and Vignoles, 2010; Kounali et al., 2008). Whilst these papers are useful when considering the inaccuracy of using free school meal data to measure poverty it is important to highlight that the data used by Gorard (2012) in particular is based solely upon pupils in key stage four and that no analysis of pupils in younger years took place. Another vital consideration is that although Hobbs and Vignoles (2010) and Kounali et al. (2008) included data from younger children, free school meals cannot be a measure for children who are younger than compulsory school age. Furthermore, even those that are in their first years at school (Year R to Year Two) are now entitled to universal free school meals which means that the income data for those year groups is limited. Consequently, although free school meals data is used widely as a measure of poverty and inequality, for the purposes of the current project this is a wholly inappropriate measure due to the lack of data for the age group concerned and the limitations highlighted here.

2.23 Defining and Theorising Child Wellbeing

Wellbeing has been a priority for health and social policies for successive governments in many countries around the world. However, in research carried out by

Raghavan and Alexandrova (2014) it is argued that there is no clear definition of what child wellbeing actually consists of. Their research highlighted that there has been considerable work carried out to produce multiple methods to measure wellbeing, including the United Nations Children's Fund paper (UNICEF, 2012) which has 13 domains of wellbeing by which to measure a child's wellbeing levels and the Child Indicators of Life and Development project [CHILD] which produced 38 national indicators grouped into four main areas (Rigby et al., 2003). Raghavan and Alexandrova (2014) propose that although there are theories relating to wellbeing more generally, there are no specific theories to help to define child wellbeing.

This is supported by research by Lewis (2019) and Street (2021) who also report that current theories relating to wellbeing are focused on adult wellbeing rather than children and Street (2021) suggests that child wellbeing should be seen as a separate concept, distinct from that of human wellbeing and adult wellbeing. Lewis (2019) suggests that current wellbeing theories cannot, and should not, simply be translated to children because children have their own unique way of interacting with the world and their level of understanding of different emotional and social concepts is vastly different to that of an adult. Therefore Lewis (2019) advocates the use of a multi-disciplinary approach to theorising child wellbeing in order that all the different elements that are unique to children can be considered in an age-appropriate way.

2.24 Using Leuven Scales to measure Wellbeing

Practice in UK early years settings is often influenced by Leuven scales of wellbeing and involvement (Laevers, 1998). Laevers proposes that young children's wellbeing at any given moment can be measured using a five-point scale and that alongside a further five

point scale to measure involvement in an activity these scores can be used to determine a child's overall likelihood of engaging in deep level thinking and learning (Laevers, 1998).

Using Leuven Scales has been suggested as a welcome move away from more traditional methods of measuring performativity and cognition (Robert-Holmes, 2015). However, there has been much criticism of this method of assessing wellbeing (Bates, 2019; Hunkin, 2018; Lee, 2019; MacRae and Jones, 2023). MacRae and Jones (2023) suggest that the use of a linear scale, with little consideration of the wider influences upon a child's wellbeing actually serves to feed into the growing culture of performativity and the importance placed upon school readiness. It is also suggested that the Leuven scales are increasingly being used to measure the effectiveness of provision within settings rather than the wellbeing of individual children, thus further feeding into the neoliberal agenda of performativity and surveillance (Bates, 2019; Lee, 2019; MacRae and Jones, 2023).

MacRae and Jones (2023) make particular reference to children from disadvantaged backgrounds for whom there are anxieties around school readiness and suggests that for these children the use of Leuven scales risks becoming a monitoring activity. Similarly, in research by Whalley (2017) and Vincent and Maxwell (2016) it is reported that in some settings Leuven Scales are used to encourage parents to participate in their child's learning and that the use of them in this way places pressure on parents and perpetuates the discourse of negative parenting principles.

2.3 Disadvantage, Health, and Activity Choices
2.31 Disadvantage and Family Mental Health

Qualitative research undertaken by Mattheys et al. (2018) focused on the effects of social inequality and disadvantage on mental health outcomes within one area of North East England with a high level of deprivation. Whilst this research does not focus specifically on

children it considers the mental health of people of all ages within Stockton on Tees. Through conducting interviews with residents already experiencing mental health problems and key stakeholders in the community, Mattheys et al. (2018) reported that there is a clear social gradient for mental health as well as physical health and that the more affluent you are the better your health tends to be. Through qualitative interviews with residents from both the most deprived areas and the least deprived areas of Stockton on Tees, Mattheys et al. (2018) found that feeling financially insecure was a clear factor in the worsening mental health of most people living in the most deprived neighbourhoods. This finding was also key in secondary research carried out by Duffy (2013) using government published data relating to cuts in spending on welfare since 2010. This research reported that not only does feeling financially insecure contribute to the worsening of mental health problems, the government cuts to welfare and the introduction of penalties such as the bedroom tax have further added to the stresses felt by the most deprived households (Duffy, 2013). In support of this, Mattheys et al. (2018) also reported that people living in deprived neighbourhoods were most affected by the funding cuts and austerity highlighted in chapter four: Policy Context. This, according to Mattheys et al (2018) and Duffy (2013), has widened the gap between those in the most and least deprived neighbourhoods and has had a negative effect upon the mental health of those in the most deprived areas. Additionally, Mattheys et al. (2018) reported that people from the most deprived neighbourhoods faced barriers to participating in social and cultural activities because of being unable to afford them or being unable to travel to the areas where the activities were on offer. This was highlighted by one participant as a problem for their children as well as themselves and the participant commented on the declining mental health of their whole family due social activities being out of reach for them. These studies, whilst focusing on all ages, provide an important

insight into the potential relationship between social inequality and mental health which is a key factor in the general wellbeing of both children and adults. However, it is important to note that the study by Mattheys et al. (2018) only focuses upon one area of one region of the UK and so cannot be relied upon to provide a general view of the situation across the nation. In addition, the research carried out by Duffy (2013) was carried out on behalf of the Campaign for a Fair Society and therefore the findings are disproportionately weighted towards finding fault in the government systems as opposed to necessarily presenting a balanced picture of the country as a whole.

2.32 Disadvantage and Children's Mental Health

Research carried out by Collishaw et al. (2019) focused more specifically upon the mental health of children from disadvantaged backgrounds across three population cohorts using the British Child and Adolescent Mental Health Surveys in 1999 and 2004 and the Millennium Cohort Study in 2012. Whilst the study was of a quantitative nature it highlighted that, on average, children from low-income backgrounds have significantly greater mental health difficulties than children from more financially stable families. The prevalence of mental health conditions in children under the age of eleven has increased from the levels reported in 1999 across all socio-economic groups but it appears that the mental health gap between children from the most and least affluent families is also growing. However, as acknowledged by Fairchild (2019) in his paper highlighting the work of Collishaw et al (2019), since the research is purely quantitative it failed to uncover the underlying causes for such a radical increase in child mental health conditions. Fairchild (2019) reported that one of the causes may be an increase in waiting time to receive support from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health service which results in conditions worsening prior to treatment commencing and therefore it is necessary for children to

undergo more complex and longer treatment programmes. However, Fairchild (2019) also calls for more research to be carried out to uncover the complex reasons behind the increase in child mental health diagnoses in order that interventions can be planned to mitigate the mental health inequality.

Despite not addressing the reasons behind the increase in child mental health conditions Collishaw et al. (2019) reported that since children who have been diagnosed with mental health conditions are more likely to become adults with mental health conditions, it is important that this growing issue is tackled.

The negative relationship between financial difficulty and mental health issues is also reported by Kirby, Wright and Allgar (2019) in their study of a subset of the 'Born in Bradford' cohort which involved mothers and educators of 636 children aged 4-5 years old. Mothers and educators completed a series of questionnaires about family circumstances, child development and behaviour which were then quantitatively analysed. Kirby, Wright and Allgar (2019) report that children from families where the mother reported financial difficulties such as being behind with household bills were less likely to reach the expected level of development for literacy or physical development at the end of the early years foundation stage. Kirby, Wright and Allgar (2019) suggest that this could be due to children having less access to activities which promote physical development and literacy skills and that this can have a direct influence upon their mental health. However, in contrast to Mattheys (2018), Collishaw et al. (2019) and Fairchild (2019), Kirby, Wright and Allgar (2019) acknowledge that poor mental health may, in some cases, actually be the cause of children's lack of engagement in activities and that children with poor mental health may choose not to access activities rather than being precluded due to financial pressures. In addition Kirby,

Wright and Allgar (2019) also report that a child's attachment to their parents or main caregivers is a greater indicator of mental health than the family financial position and that a child who lives in a warm and loving environment with financial problems is less likely to suffer poor mental health than a child who lives in an affluent family but without the warmth and care from their parent or carer.

2.33 Food Insecurity and Wellbeing

The number of emergency food parcels handed out by Trussell Trust has risen by 120% in the last five years and the number of parcels handed out to children has risen by 132% over the same period (Trussell Trust, 2023). Food insecurity has been a significant issue for people living in deprivation for many years but, as the data from Trussell Trust illustrates, food poverty is rising in all areas of the UK, and it is affecting children more than ever before (Trussell Trust, 2023).

In earlier research by Lambie-Mumford and Green (2017), data from Trussell Trust from several years of provision was utilised alongside governmental deprivation data to analyse the effect that austerity has had on food bank usage. Lambie-Mumford and Green (2017) concluded that the welfare reform decisions made by the coalition and Conservative governments had an influence on the rise in children accessing food banks due to food insecurity. They reported that a steep increase in food parcels for children was seen from 2010 onwards, which is the time at which the coalition government began to make changes to the welfare system. The most recent data from Trussell Trust shows that numbers have continued to rise and Trussell Trust report that this is potentially due to the combination of a steep rise in the cost of living and the Covid-19 pandemic (Trussell Trust, 2023).

Knight, O'Connell, and Brannan (2018) carried out a European project involving families in deprived neighbourhoods in the UK and Portugal and more affluent families living

in Norway. The project sought to explore food poverty in the three different settings

through qualitative interviews with parents and adolescents aged 11-15. Knight et al. (2018)

report that young people in deprived neighbourhoods in the UK often skip meals or feel

hungry and that parents regularly go without food to feed their children. This inevitably

leads to an increase in health issues within people living in deprived areas in comparison to

those in more affluent neighbourhoods (Knight et al., 2018). Furthermore Knight et al.

(2018) report that families living in food poverty are more likely to rely upon frozen foods,

processed food and high energy, low nutrient choices such as white bread and pasta. This

also contributes to an increase in risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, and other

related health conditions (Knight et al., 2018).

The link between food poverty and poor food choices is echoed in research carried

out by Lovelace and Rabiee-Kahn (2013) to investigate food choices made by mothers from

low-income backgrounds when feeding their pre-school children. Lovelace and Rabiee-Kahn

(2013) report that mothers are more likely to choose pre-prepared, packaged baby and

toddler foods because they perceive them to be safer, healthier, and cheaper than feeding

young children meals made from scratch. Lovelace and Rabiee-Kahn (2013) also explain that

several of the mothers in their study held misconceptions about the levels of sugar and salt

in foods that they had purchased for their child, and many admitted to not checking the

nutritional information before feeding their child but being guided more by brand and price.

Lovelace and Rabiee-Khan (2013) report that mothers are governed by the cost of food and

that many find convenience and frozen foods cheaper and more readily available in their

local communities which leads to them relying upon them. However, some mothers in

Lovelace and Rabiee-Kahn's (2013) study do report that Healthy Start vouchers had helped

them to provide their child with a greater variety of fruit and vegetables and that they felt

their child had benefitted from them. Unfortunately, half of the participants in the study reported that they did not claim Healthy Start vouchers because they had found it too difficult, meaning that their children were missing out on the benefit of fresh fruit and vegetables from the scheme. Further to this, only three mothers reported that they were giving their children the free multivitamins that they were entitled to, with several parents suggesting that their children didn't need them and others expressing anxiety about giving their child something they didn't know enough about (Lovelace and Rabiee-Khan, 2013).

2.34 Reproduction of Health Inequalities through Activity Choices

In research by Wiltshire, Lee and Williams (2019) it is argued that in order to truly understand the influence that inequality has upon the choices and experiences of young people it is important to consider both the structural inequalities in society and the undesirable behaviours that are present in individuals. Wiltshire et al. (2019) recruited participants aged 13-14 to explore the relationship between physical activity, social class, and health. Wiltshire et al (2019) sampled four different schools and recruited 29 participants across the four schools. Participants' social class was defined using free school meals status which, in itself may cause inaccuracies in data due to some eligible pupils failing to be registered, an issue highlighted by Gorard et al. (2003). However, despite this possible inaccuracy, Wiltshire et al (2019) present evidence to suggest that the level and type of activity that teenagers participate in is, in part, dependent upon their social class background. Furthermore, Wiltshire et al (2019) acknowledge that the opportunities for physical activity available to young people from less affluent families are different to those available to wealthier pupils but also, and perhaps more importantly, the perception of certain activities and the uptake of opportunities is different depending on the pupils' class backgrounds. In addition, Wiltshire et al. (2019) conceptualise their findings through the

theories of Bourdieu with a particular emphasis upon "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1994 p.63) and the idea that young people are more likely to participate in activities that have a place and are popular within their own community or "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1994 p.63). Therefore, although the study by Wiltshire et al (2019) explores a very different, specific area of education and deals with pupils of a different age range, many of the ideas and the theoretical framework which they selected could equally be applied to the play opportunities and experiences of young children in early years settings.

2.4 Social Background and Early Learning Experiences

2.41 Social Background and Cognition

As discussed in the Chapter Four, the correlation between poverty and children's early educational attainment has been a focus of social policy for successive governments albeit to varying degrees. This policy has been informed by multiple pieces of research, all suggesting that children who live in socially disadvantaged families are less likely to meet the expected levels of cognitive development (Blanden et al, 2007; Collishaw et al., 2019; Field, 2010; Gregg and Macmillan, 2009; Sammons et al., 2004). Furthermore, there has also been research by Schoon et al. (2012) and Kiernan and Mensah (2009) which specifically considers the effect of persistent, long term social disadvantage upon children's cognitive ability in comparison to children who experience brief, transitory periods of disadvantage. Both Schoon et al (2012) and Kiernan and Mensah (2009) found that persistent poverty had a greater negative effect upon children's cognition than multiple transitory periods of disadvantage spread throughout early childhood. The research carried out by Schoon et al (2012) and Kiernan and Mensah (2009) utilised the data collected from the second and third sweeps of the Millennium Cohort Study and focused specifically upon children's development at age 3 in relation to their experience of social disadvantage which therefore

limited the evidence of the influence of social disadvantage on long term cognition.

However, in research by Dickerson and Popli (2016), which utilised the same MCS data but included data for the children at age three, five and seven years, a pattern of longer-term negative correlation between social disadvantage and lower cognitive scores is reported. Dickerson and Popli (2016) report that children who have been in persistent poverty throughout their first seven years on average score 20 percentile points lower than their peers who have not experienced poverty.

In research by Sullivan, Ketende and Joshi (2013) the same set of MCS data is used to analyse cognitive scores at age three, five and seven. Sullivan et al. (2013) agree that children living in less socially advantaged families are more likely to have lower cognitive scores than their advantaged peers. However, Sullivan et al. (2013) also consider in their research the different ways in which disadvantage can be measured. They report that household income as a measure of disadvantage has less of an influence upon children's cognitive scores whereas parental education and occupation showed stronger correlation with children's cognitive development. It is suggested by Sullivan et al. (2013) that this shows that cognitive development is driven by cultural and educational resources more than material resources. They also highlight that although parents play a vital role in child development, they cannot overcome all the barriers caused by social class and low levels of parent education (see parental involvement section).

2.42 Inequality of Educational Opportunities

In a large-scale project conducted by UNICEF (Innocenti, 2018), data was collected to investigate educational inequalities in the 41 most affluent countries worldwide of which the UK is one. UNICEF reported that in 16 of the 29 European countries included in the study, children from the poorest fifth of society had lower attendance rates at early years

settings than children in the richest fifth of society. The UK was reported to have the fourth

largest difference between the percentage of children in the poorest fifth attending an early

years setting (under 60%) in comparison to their more affluent counterparts (over 80%).

UNICEF also reported that children from disadvantaged backgrounds on average score lower

on reading assessments and children from families where parents have a poor vocabulary

are likely to develop a limited vocabulary themselves, regardless of the educational

opportunities available to them (Innocenti, 2018). This suggests a high level of influence

from family background upon children's likely outcomes both in the early years and in their

continuing education.

The longer-term effects of such inequalities are discussed in several recent research

papers focused on addressing societal inequality (Bynner and Heinz, 2021; Melhuish, 2014;

Pickett, 2014). Bynner and Heinz (2021) focused upon the effect of long-term inequality on

adolescents within Europe and reported that experiencing inequality throughout childhood

not only influences performance at school but also often prevents children and young

people from developing the skills required to become fully functioning adult members of

society. Bynner and Heinz (2021) suggest that this is due to disadvantaged children living in

households where these skills are not consistently modelled by the adults around them and

living in environments with high levels of stress and uncertainty. This leads, according to the

research by Bynner and Heinz (2021) to adolescents experiencing lower levels of self-

esteem, higher levels of anxiety and being less able to make and maintain positive

relationships. This view is echoed by Melhuish (2014) and Pickett (2014) who both suggest

that the development of social and emotional skills is reliant upon a secure, stable and

loving home environment and therefore children from disadvantaged backgrounds

sometimes require ongoing and intensive support from the state which places additional

pressure upon an already stretched welfare system.

2.43 Forming an Identity

Stirrup, Evans, and Davies (2017) suggest, in research exploring play pedagogy and

social class, that children are deeply influenced by the perceptions and judgements made by

their peers and their care givers both at home and in their early years settings. Their

research involved three early years settings in England and was a qualitative project

involving ten months of ethnographic fieldwork. Findings are presented which suggest that

despite the development of government policies intended to address the social inequality

faced by some children such as Sure Start and funding for vulnerable two-year-olds, the staff

perceptions of children from disadvantaged backgrounds and the expectations put upon

them are largely different to those put upon children from more affluent backgrounds.

Furthermore Stirrup et al. (2017) argue that a child's identity is constructed through

conscious and subconscious influences and that simply offering alternative play

opportunities and attempting to create inclusive play environments does not address the

subconscious bias of many early years educators. Based upon observations in several

settings, research by Reay (2004) and Stirrup et al. (2017) suggests that children who cannot

or choose not to access the rich play opportunities made available to them are interpreted

as 'odd' or 'difficult' and staff were observed suggesting that their home environment and

background was one of the contributing factors to them being 'difficult' to manage in the

setting. Ethnographic research carried out by MacClure et al. (2012) reported evidence that

supports this finding by Stirrup et al. (2017). MacClure et al. (2012) used discourse analysis

and poststructuralist theory when observing within four reception classes in England to

analyse the reasons why some children gain a reputation for being difficult to manage.

Whilst this research did not focus specifically on social class, in the findings of the project MacClure et al. (2012) acknowledge that children's social backgrounds are integral to the reputations that they develop in school.

Furthermore, Stirrup et al. (2017) continue to emphasise that children from more affluent backgrounds often have the opportunity to engage in a rich variety of experiences and build wide ranging skills which means that those children are better placed to engage in play in early years settings whereas the opportunities available to disadvantaged children are much more restricted so when they are then exposed to a wider range of opportunities in their early years setting they do not have the skills to be able to access them. Stirrup et al. (2017) conclude that practitioners need to become better skilled in supporting disadvantaged children in developing a wide range of skills and the conscious and subconscious categorisation of children as 'good', 'odd' and 'difficult' needs to be addressed in order to make progress towards tackling the effect of social inequality on early years experiences.

This research adds to works by Flouri et al. (2018); Kiernan and Mensah (2009) and Melhuish (2004) which suggests that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to display physical behaviour traits which lead to them being labelled with behavioural difficulties or as being disruptive. In contrast, recent research has shown that some children from disadvantaged backgrounds are able to mitigate the effects of such disadvantage through the development of pro-social behaviour traits (Armstrong-Carter et al., 2021; Carlo et al., 2018; Elias and Haynes, 2008; Flouri and Sarmadi, 2016) (see 2.51).

2.5 Protecting Against Adversity
2.51 Mitigating the effects of adversity through Pro-social Behaviour

There have been multiple studies conducted in the United States of America investigating whether children who are born and raised in neighbourhoods with low socio-economic status can mitigate the effect of adversity through the development of good pro-social skills (Carlo et al., 2018; Elias and Haynes, 2008; Flouri and Sarmadi, 2016). Work carried out in the United Kingdom on this subject is limited to one project completed by Armstrong-Carter et al. (2021) using the data from the Born in Bradford cohort. Armstrong-Carter et al. (2021) used data from standardized teacher assessments of children's pro-social behaviour and cognitive development at three intervals between the ages of four and seven years old, alongside the local government data available on neighbourhood socio-economic status. Armstrong-Carter et al. (2021) reported that there was a direct correlation between living in areas with low socio-economic status and achieving low cognitive scores in early childhood. However, this was only the case for children who also scored low scores on the pro-social behaviour assessment. Armstrong-Carter et al. (2021) found that children who had well developed pro-social behaviours were not affected by the socio-economic situation of their neighbourhood and could still achieve high cognitive outcomes. They suggest that this may be due to the positive effect of children working together and learning from one another and that forming close relationships with peers may help children to better cope with stresses associated with living in a low socio-economic area. Armstrong-Carter et al. (2021) advocated that nurseries and schools, particularly those with high numbers of children from deprived areas, should place greater focus on developing social and emotional literacy in order to protect children from the negative effects of living in areas of low socio-economic status.

2.52 Play as a Determinant for Long-term Health

Neilsen (2020) conducted a review of literature relating to the importance of play experiences and concluded that high quality, play based primary education is needed as it is a determinant of long-term health and wellbeing. He reported that within education more emphasis should be put upon play and playful activities since they carry great importance for developing cognition and learning skills which in turn will be key to securing long term good health and wellbeing outcomes. Whilst Neilsen (2020) acknowledged that securing children's health and wellbeing is important for the functioning of society, he focused upon the social and developmental benefits of childhood play and the subsequent impact that this has upon the long-term wellbeing of the individual. Neilsen (2020) argued that for children to be able to take full advantage of the experiences offered by the education system they must first learn to play and through this also learn to interact socially, speak and listen and share resources with others which is a view supported by MacClure et al. (2012). He argues that these skills are the foundations of being able to function effectively in society and can therefore have a direct influence on the long-term life chances of a child. Neilsen (2020) drew upon the ideas already discussed of Wilkinson and Pickett (2006), and those of Marmot (2005) (see Chapter Four: Policy Context) in relation to the complexity of social inequality. Neilsen (2020) agreed that social inequality is created by more than simply an inequality of wealth. Neilsen (2020) highlighted Wolf and De Shalit's 2007 idea that "fertile functionings" can improve a person's capability to overcome social inequality and deprivation.

Furthermore, based on the Capability Theory devised by Sen (1992), Neilsen (2020) set out three key elements of play provision necessary in order to ensure that children have the capability to access and benefit fully from the experiences on offer to them. He argued that

children need access to an appropriate play space, to sufficiently authentic activities and to a safe and supportive environment in which to play.

2.53 Practitioner Perspectives on Poverty

In a qualitative exploration of practitioners' views on how pre-school children experience poverty, Simpson (2013) reported that early years educators have internalised the troubling neo-liberal coalition policy (see chapter four – policy context) rhetoric of poverty being the responsibility of the individual and something that can be remedied by changing one's behaviour. Simpson (2013) reported that early years leaders in the poorest region in England, the North East, suggested that parents were responsible for their children living in poverty and that parents' low aspirations for their children in the future are to blame for the cycle of poor children becoming poor adults. Simpson (2013) also reported that practitioners encouraged activities focused on developing parenting skills and improving parental engagement because they believe that a lack of engagement is one of the main causes for children living in deprivation.

In contrast, in research by Lyndon (2022), where early years practitioners are encouraged to share their own experiences of poverty and disadvantage it is reported by some practitioners that some families find themselves in poverty through no fault of their own. However, Lyndon (2022) reported that the findings suggest that fathers who find themselves in poverty are more likely to be looked upon sympathetically than mothers and that people are more likely to suggest that the mother is to blame for the situation. Furthermore Lyndon (2022) reported that some practitioners themselves considered that they had experienced disadvantage at some point during their lives. She reported that these participants were all keen to avoid the use of the language around poverty and they were also more likely to align themselves to the neoliberal discourse highlighted previously where

individuals are responsible for their own situation. Lyndon (2022) suggested that this shows a reluctance to be associated with the perceived stigmatisation attached to poverty as a concept but also a wider misunderstanding of the complexity of the relationship between poverty and family life.

2.54 Practitioner Understanding of Children's Social and Emotional Development

Children's social and emotional development is prioritised in government policy (see Chapter 4: Policy Context). However, there is a relatively small body of existing research which specifically considers the understanding of practitioners in the context of supporting children's social and emotional development.

Work by Page and Elfer (2013) focused upon the concept of attachment as an important factor when supporting children's social and emotional development. Page and Elfer (2013) conducted interviews with early years practitioners to explore their perceptions of the importance of attachment. A positive link was reported by participants in the Page and Elfer (2013) study between secure attachment and good levels of social and emotional development in children in the early years. Page and Elfer (2013) conclude that practitioners value the relationships that children have with their main caregivers and acknowledge the importance of these relationships upon their social and emotional development.

In contrast a 2013 study by Aubrey and Ward, which also collected the views of early years practitioners, focused upon the behaviour displayed by children in early years settings as an indicator of their social and emotional development. The study found that practitioners felt that low level disruption and difficulties with concentration and listening skills were the most significant markers in children with social and emotional development difficulties. Aubrey and Ward (2013) reported that practitioners felt that these difficulties are most likely at the beginning of the school year when children are yet to learn the

expectations and routines of nursery or school. This suggests a link between the understanding of the unwritten rules of the education system and children who possess different capital to that which is expected by the system (Bourdieu, 1977). This idea is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3: Theoretical Perspectives.

More recently, a 2019 study by Seaman and Giles which involved semi-structured interviews with early years practitioners focused on practitioners perspectives on supporting children's social and emotional wellbeing as a strand of their overall social and emotional development. This study reported that whilst some practitioners felt confident in their understanding of social and emotional wellbeing being a reference to happiness, health and satisfaction, others were confused about the meaning of the term and lacked confidence in supporting children's social and emotional wellbeing (Seaman and Giles, 2019). It was reported by Seaman and Giles (2019) that practitioners believed that supporting children effectively was reliant upon positive relationships between the child and their parents and between the early years setting and the child's family. It was suggested by some participants in the study that poor relationships is the main factor when observing low levels of social and emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, several practitioners reported that they felt that their own emotional wellbeing and stress levels had a direct influence upon the social and emotional wellbeing of the children in their care (Seaman and Giles, 2019).

2.55 Employing Specific Interventions

Whilst there is little research specifically focused on the links between social inequality, wellbeing and early education of young children in the UK, internal research carried out by The Institute of Health Equity was reported by Morrison et al. (2017) to find that interventions carried out in the early years of a child's life have the most impact on long term child development which supports the ideas presented by Marmot (2010) (see Chapter

Four: Policy Context). However, the research by Morrison et al. (2017) was focused on interventions carried out in a range of European settings as opposed to specifically considering UK interventions. Consequently, as much of this research was conducted in Eastern European countries it could be argued that the needs of the children and families in these countries are different and therefore the study has limited relevance in the UK. However, the study did include two projects undertaken in Northern Ireland as a representation of work in the UK and the results from these projects were largely similar to those in the other countries and supported the idea that intervening in the early years is the most beneficial in terms of addressing inequalities and their relationship with child development (Morrison et al, 2017). Many of the interventions featured in the report are focused upon working with disadvantaged families to improve parenting skills. Morrison et al. (2017) reported that such interventions, when carried out regularly, can have a positive influence upon children's early development. This further supports the neoliberal ideas around poverty which were discussed in the previous sub-section. Interventions such as these provide targeted support for specific families but fail to consider the structural societal issues which contribute to more widespread inequality. Therefore, it could be argued that, whilst Morrison et al (2017) reported that the interventions were effective, their effectiveness is only felt by the specific families chosen to access the support, rather than being a wider societal change to improve the life chances of all children under five.

2.6 Social Background and Home Environment

2.61 Social Background and Infant Mortality

Within a wider project exploring child health more generally using a range of government data, The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health [RCPCH] (2020) reported that 30% of children in the UK are living in poverty after housing costs and that

7.8% of children live in persistent poverty. The RCPCH (2020) report explains that social deprivation has an influence on many different areas of child, infant and maternal health. They report that although infant mortality rates have slowed over the last 40 years, social status and levels of deprivation have a direct impact upon the levels of infant mortality with maternal deprivation being one of the most common risk factors for infant mortality. RCPCH (2020) reported that this is due to maternal deprivation increasing the likelihood of the presence of co-morbidities such as smoking during pregnancy, poor nutrition, low uptake of breastfeeding and lack of understanding of safe sleeping techniques. RCPCH (2020) recommend as a result of their project that the government should re-emphasise the policy focus on the first 1000 days of a child's life in order that all parents are supported to ensure children are given the best possible care in their infancy.

This is further supported by Taylor-Robinson et al. (2019) in their project which analysed the Annual Vital Statistics data for the number of live births and infant deaths from 2000-2017 for 324 local areas and each local area was then assessed against the 2015 Indices of Multiple Deprivation. Taylor-Robinson et al. (2019) found that although levels of infant death fell in all areas between 2000 and 2013, from 2013 to 2017 there was a sharp increase in deaths during infancy in the two most deprived quintiles. They reported no such increase in the most affluent quintiles thus causing a widening of the gap between the most and least affluent areas of England and Wales. However, this research is purely quantitative and uses secondary data which means that it is limited to the data available from the secondary source. Therefore, this project does not consider the reasons why infant mortality may have increased in the most deprived areas of England and Wales over this period.

It is important to consider that RCPCH (2020) also reported that social deprivation is linked to the death rate of all children under the age of 18, not just to infant mortality. They presented data to highlight that the death rate of children under the age of 18 living in the most deprived neighbourhoods in Wales are 70% more likely to die than those living in the most affluent areas. Whilst this data only accounts for one of the countries in the United Kingdom, RCPCH (2020) suggested that this is likely to be representative of the situation across the UK as a whole. RCPCH (2020) report that the increased risk of dying during childhood is linked inextricably to maternal and infant health and that improving the child mortality rate would be best tackled through interventions to improve maternal health during pregnancy and infant health in the first 1000 days of life.

2.62 Social Background and Family Migration

Research carried out by Condon and McClean (2016) focused on the perceptions of migrant families in relation to securing their child's health and wellbeing. Their research involved focus groups with parents of children under five who had migrated to the UK within the last ten years from Romania, Somalia, Poland, and Pakistan. Condon and McClean (2016) reported that parents from all four countries suggested that they believed ensuring financial security for their family was the most influential factor to ensuring their child's health and wellbeing. Parents from three out of the four countries stated that the reason for moving to the UK was to improve the life chances of their children since they believed that the UK prioritized the health and wellbeing of children by offering free education and healthcare. However, this was contrasted by reports that many of the parents suggested that the opportunities for their children to play freely outdoors and access to healthy food was better in their home countries. All parents agreed that the security of their child's health and wellbeing in the UK was directly influenced by their ability

to find employment, despite many of the participants having qualifications from their home country equivalent to A Level or higher. Condon and McClean (2016) report that the biggest concern for parents from Somalia and Pakistan was that their children did not have access to outdoor space in the same way as they would have done in their home country because in the UK they had to live in flats or small houses with little or no garden due to their financial insecurity.

In contrast, a quantitative study by Jayaweera and Quigley (2010) analysing the trends in health of mothers with children under one who have migrated to the UK reported that ethnicity has more influence upon any health inequality experienced by migrants than socio-economic factors such as employment status and income. They presented data to suggest that female migrants from White minority ethnic backgrounds were statistically more likely to report both physical and mental health problems but were also the most likely migrants to be working. However, they also acknowledged that women from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds were more likely to suffer from a lack of ante-natal care. Jayaweera and Quigley (2010) reported that these backgrounds are the most likely to be socio-economically deprived and therefore there may be a link between socio-economic status and health in these communities although this was not explored further within this project. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that other factors such as access to transport, language barriers, access to support and information and cultural beliefs and traditions (Jayaweera et. al., 2005; Jayaweera and Quigley, 2010) need to be considered and therefore it is not possible to conclude that health inequalities are exclusively caused by either ethnicity or socio-economic status of migrants but rather it is implied that all these factors contribute to the multi-dimensional influences upon health in migrant minority ethnic groups.

In an international context research by Mitchell and Kamenarac (2021) was carried

out as part of a larger project exploring the sense of belonging for refugee families when re-

settling in New Zealand (Mitchell et al., 2020). The study by Mitchell and Kamenarac (2021)

used rights-based framing to focus specifically on the position that young child refugees

hold within the policies of New Zealand government. Mitchell and Kamenarac (2021) argued

that whilst government policy details the provision made for refugees it does not

consistently take into account the cultural capital that refugees bring with them from their

home countries. They argue that policies such as the Reception Programme, which suggests

that refugees are not given a choice of where they are placed following their initial six week

placement at the resettlement centre, do not take into account the importance of shared

culture and values because many refugees find themselves in neighbourhoods with no one

from their home country (Mitchell and Kamenarac, 2021). Furthermore, they reported that

the policy encourages refugees to integrate into New Zealand practices and cultures with a

"sense of urgency" (Mitchell and Kamenarac, 2021 230) that does not allow for an extended

period of transition from life in a different country with often very different expectations

and culture. This perpetuates a feeling amongst refugee families of insecurity and a sense

that they don't belong within their new community since there is an expectation that they

will quickly find work, become financially independent and live unsupported in a community

for which they need to develop completely different aspects of cultural capital to the capital

they required in their home country (Mitchell and Kamenarac, 2021).

The study by Condon and McClean (2016), whilst focusing specifically on migrant

families, highlights the importance of financial security and the potential effect that financial

insecurity can have on children's wellbeing. In addition, the study by Mitchell and

Kamenarac (2021) emphasises the negative influence that a rushed resettlement

programme and the subsequent insecurity felt by many families can have on the sense of belonging felt by refugees. Therefore, whilst this study has a different focus, it is an important finding to note when exploring the relationship between cultural capital and wellbeing. However, it is also important to acknowledge the multi-dimensional factors highlighted by Jayaweera et al. (2005) and Jayaweera and Quigley (2010) when considering the more complex nature of migrant families and health and wellbeing.

2.63 Parenting Skills

Recent research undertaken by Hayes et al. (2018) in the United Kingdom was mainly concerned with the individual influence of parents and suggests that increased parental involvement and improvements in parenting skills would improve the long-term potential of their children as opposed to exploring ways in which society could contribute to the improvement of children's life chances. This approach aligns with the problematic political discourse present since New Labour (see Chapter Four: Policy Context) suggesting a deficit model where parents living in less economically advantaged circumstances are deemed automatically to need support to become good parents and that they are responsible for any inequality their child might face (Ball, 2008; Reay, 2009). In line with this, Hayes et al. (2018) suggested that the cognitive outcomes of children in the early years and beyond are associated strongly to parental involvement at home and the provision of rich learning opportunities in the home environment. Hayes et al. (2018) argued that these opportunities are provided more consistently by parents from middle- and upper-class backgrounds as opposed to working class families and therefore children from the higher social classes achieve better outcomes at the end of their early years. However, Hayes et al. (2018) failed to address the many societal inequalities that may impact upon the parents' ability to provide such activities and simply focuses upon the need to improve the parenting skills of

working-class parents, a strategy also widely employed by the government through initiatives such as Sure Start.

Conversely, Sullivan et al. (2013) cites evidence from Sylva et al. (2004, p5.) and Allen (2011, p. xiv) which suggests that what "parents do is more important than who they are" but suggests that although the political discourse is very much focused upon parental involvement, parents are affected by social inequality and this inequality not only affects what they do but also what resources they have to support their child. Sullivan et al. (2013) used secondary data from the Millennium Cohort Study to analyse whether social class has an impact upon cognitive scores achieved at age 7. Sullivan et al. (2013) report that whilst social class and parental education have a direct impact upon children's attainment, parenting behaviours only have a small effect on the scores achieved by the children, thus supporting the idea that inequalities in society are an important factor to consider when attempting to reduce inequalities in education. Whilst this study is useful in that it supports the idea that societal inequality has an impact upon children's development it is important to consider that this is a quantitative study which analyses the presence of different factors and the child's cognitive score. Therefore, this study does not consider other factors which may be present and affecting the child at the time of the test or explore the possible reasons for the inequality. Furthermore, this research is focused specifically upon the academic outcomes for children as opposed to the child's holistic development and therefore offers a useful but different perspective to consider.

2.64 Parental Involvement in Learning

A key piece of research by Hornby and Lafaele (2011) highlighted that parental involvement in children's learning is key for children to reach their full potential. However, the same research also reported multiple barriers which prevent parents from becoming

fully involved in their child's learning. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) proposed a model whereby these barriers were categorised into four main areas: individual parent and family barriers, child factors, parent-teacher factors and societal factors. The social background of a family features in all four of these key areas as a potential reason for a barrier forming (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). In a follow up project by Hornby and Blackwell (2018) it was reported that there continue to be many barriers to parents becoming involved, although some schools felt that parents were more involved than they had been previously primarily due to a bigger focus on parental involvement in school policies and initiatives. Hornby and Blackwell (2018) carried out qualitative research involving 11 primary schools and reported that seven of the participant schools had changed their policies or introduced new initiatives within the preceding five years. Four types of barriers were identified by Hornby and Blackwell (2018), three of which (individual parent and family barriers, parent-teacher factors, and societal factors) were the same as those in the original research by Hornby and Lafaele (2011). One of the key barriers which eight of the 11 schools identified was parents' own educational experiences and their attitudes and perceptions of school (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018). Hornby and Blackwell (2018) reported that several participants suggested that families from disadvantaged backgrounds were often most affected by this because parents had often had a negative experience of education and that parents from disadvantaged families were often loathed to participate because they were worried that the teacher, or other parents, might judge or criticise them. However, in the follow up project Hornby and Blackwell (2018) concluded that although the barriers still exist schools were, overall, better prepared to support families to encourage engagement and parental involvement was more of a priority in all eleven schools than it was previously.

Similar findings were reported by Sime and Sheridan (2014) in their study of parental engagement from disadvantaged parents within early childhood education settings in one local authority in Scotland. Sime and Sheridan (2014) found that parents had high aspirations for their children and valued the early education centres because they understood the importance of good foundations for longer term learning. However, Sime and Sheridan (2014) also reported that early years educators had explained that the parents' own negative educational experiences often prevented them from fully engaging in the parental engagement activities, echoing the evidence from Hornby and Blackwell (2018). Sime and Sheridan (2014) also reported parents' concerns over not being able to provide their children with the range of activities and experiences that more affluent families can afford due to financial difficulties or due to the parents lacking the cultural capital and confidence required to access such opportunities. Parents in Sime and Sheridan's (2014) research reported that they found the early childhood education settings a useful source of support and information and that some settings also helped to develop community classes and groups which they enjoyed accessing. This suggests that although there are clear barriers to parental engagement for deprived families, early years settings can help disadvantaged parents to gradually become more confident in engaging with their child's learning through the provision of support and activities which develop their social and cultural capital (Sime and Sheridan, 2014).

2.7 Applications of Social Reproduction Theory and Ecological Systems Theory in an Early Years Context

2.71 Use of Cultural Capital, Habitus and Field

Although Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus and field were traditionally applied to secondary schools and higher education institutions (Bourdieu, 1977;1984; Bourdieu,

Passeron and de Saint Martin., 1994) there is an increasing body of research which applies these concepts to the early years context.

In a study by Brooker (2002), which explored the social inequalities experienced by children starting school, it is reported that the education system fails some children due to not being set up to support children from a wide range of social backgrounds. Brooker (2002) identified that three key components of capital are important when predicting whether a child will be successful within the education system. These three components are the family's language and communication skills, the educational experiences of the parents, in particular the mother, and whether the home environment is literacy rich (Brooker, 2002). In line with Bourdieu's (1977) thinking, Brooker (2002) suggested that each child has an individual habitus, based upon the capital that they have developed at home and that for some children their habitus matches that of the school but for others their habitus is very different to the expectations and routines of the "exclusive western view of childhood" (Brooker, 2002: 163) upon which the UK education system is based.

This idea is supported by ethnographic research carried out by Lareau (2003) who explored the role of social class in the development of children's capital and habitus and the influence that this can have upon children's educational experiences. She reported that the experiences young children have of social situations and the social class system within the UK has a key role in perpetuating the inequities within the education system (Lareau, 2003). Lareau (2003) attributes this link to the different types of capital that are developed by children from different social class backgrounds and the importance of a child's capital being aligned to that of the education system. Lareau (2003) explained that children from advantaged backgrounds are more likely to develop capital which is well aligned to the

expectations and values of the education system and therefore those children are more likely to succeed within the system.

Research by Gregory et al. (2004) specifically focused on literacy education and the role of capital in the attainment gap between children from different social classes. Gregory et al. (2004) carried out ethnographic research in three early years settings to explore whether social class, and more specifically the capital which children from different backgrounds hold, influences the children's experiences of learning to read and write. Gregory et al. (2004) reported that the teaching of literacy in the three schools was markedly different. The school located in a middle-class area was more likely to invite parents to participate in shared learning and actively encouraged children to draw upon their home experiences, including asking them to bring cultural items from home to act as prompts for their writing (Gregory et al, 2004). Therefore, it was reported by Gregory et al. (2004) that the children were supported in making connections between their prior experiences, their capital, and the new concepts being taught at school, thus creating a shared cultural knowledge between home and school. However, Gregory et al. (2004) also noted that it is possible for schools to overcome the potential inequities faced by children from less advantaged backgrounds. Gregory et al. (2004: 85) reported that one teacher in their study created a culture within the classroom which "defied existing paradigms of social class, capital and early school success" through the pedagogical choices they made and their lack of expectation that children start school having had specific experiences or with underpinning knowledge of specific concepts.

2.72 International Perspectives on Habitus, Capital and Ecological Systems

Work by Clarkin-Phillips (2016) utilises a synergy of social reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1977) and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to explore social

inequity within New Zealand Kindergarten environments. Clarkin-Phillips (2016) focuses

upon the view that education is a phenomenon constructed and controlled by the dominant

group (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; 1990). Clarkin- Phillips (2016)

conducted a case study of a Kindergarten community within which the majority of families

were from a low socio-economic background. She collected data using multiple methods

from practitioners working in the setting and families who accessed the provision. Clarkin-

Phillips (2016) argued that the capital held by the senior practitioners in the setting acted as

the catalyst for change in transforming the kindergarten from a setting at risk of closure to

one which holds significant value within the local community. Furthermore Clarkin-Phillips

(2016) suggested that whilst families experienced a clear mismatch between their habitus

and that of the setting, the acceptance of families and the affordances offered by

practitioners were key factors in minimising the mismatch and the time it took for families to

feel a sense of belonging at the kindergarten.

In further work by Clarkin-Phillips (2018) she proposed that despite the widely

accepted view that one's habitus is formed by deep seated family values, experiences and

processes it is possible for a child to form a secondary habitus. This is particularly important

for children from backgrounds where their primary habitus does not match the expectations

of the education system. Clarkin-Phillips (2018) suggested that in these cases children need

to be supported by specific pedagogy which helps them to form a secondary habitus which

enables them to function effectively within the school setting.

This supports the work by Gregory (2004) which suggested that practitioner attitudes and decisions can directly influence the experiences of all children and the sense of belonging they feel within their early years setting regardless of their home background. Both Clarkin-Phillips (2016; 2018) and Gregory (2004) reported that it is possible for children to transcend the barriers of their primary habitus but that this is reliant upon specific pedagogical decisions made by practitioners who are fully informed and knowledgeable about the influence of cultural capital, habitus and field upon the educational experiences of young children. This is particularly important to note in the context of the current study since practitioners and parents were asked about their experiences in relation to children from different backgrounds being able to equitably access early years provision. More discussion of this is provided in the research findings and discussion chapters (see chapters six, seven and eight).

2.8 Covid-19
2.81 The Unequal Effect of Covid-19 on Employment

There is an increasing body of research suggesting that the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns have contributed to a widening of the gap between the financial situation of the least and most affluent households in the UK (Andrew et al., 2020a; Blundell et al., 2020; Curtin, O'Shea and Hayes, 2022; RCPCH, 2020; Trussell Trust, 2023)

In research carried out by Blundell et al. (2020) it is reported that there was a significant disparity in the percentage of lone mothers who had their employment affected by Covid-19 lockdowns and the percentage of parents from two parent households who experienced the same issues. Blundell et al. (2020) report that almost 40% of lone mothers, most of whom were employed in lower socio-economic status roles, were engaged in work in sectors that were closed during lockdown. This is in stark contrast to 34% of mothers in

couples and just 23% of fathers. Blundell et al. (2020) also report that mothers were less

likely to be able to work from home, meaning that mothers, whether lone or in a couple,

were more likely to experience unemployment or loss of income due to lockdown. These

findings are echoed in another study, conducted by Andrew et al (2020a), using data from

the UK Household Longitudinal Study. Andrew et al. (2020a) report that parents from lower

socio-economic groups were more likely to experience loss of income and mothers from

lower socio-economic groups were the most likely of all to face either temporary or

permanent unemployment as a result of Covid-19. Andrew et al. (2020a) report that over

50% of working parents from the lowest socio-economic group continue to work outside of

the home, in contrast to just 25% of mothers and 19% of fathers in the higher socio-

economic groups. This, as suggested by both Blundell et al. (2020) and Andrew et al. (2020a)

had a direct influence on parents' availability and ability to support their children with home

learning during lockdowns. Both studies report that children from lower socio-economic

groups were more likely to attend school and early years settings as key worker children

whilst parents worked outside the home.

In a separate study Andrew et al. (2020b) report that children from more affluent

households engaged on average, with one hour a day more online home learning than their

peers from disadvantaged families. This, according to Andrew et al. (2020b), contributed to

widening the gap in achievement between children from disadvantaged families and their

wealthier counterparts. Research by Cullinane and Montacute (2020) and Khan (2022) also

found a disparity between the levels of engagement in home learning for children from the

most and least deprived households. However, Cullinane and Montacute (2020) and Khan

(2022) reported that the reason for this was most likely due to practical difficulties in

accessing online lessons and activities such as lack of internet access, poor connectivity and

the sharing of devices between multiple siblings.

2.82 Covid-19 and the Home Environment

Baker and Bakopoulou (2023) report in their research into 'Food on Our Doorstep'

[FOOD] programmes which provide heavily discounted food products from Fareshare to

families within children's centres in Bristol, that a huge increase in uptake of the service was

seen during the Covid-19 pandemic. Baker and Bakopoulou (2023) report that although the

programmes were unable to continue in their original format, as a face-to-face activity, the

scheme continued to drop off food to families who were isolating and provided a socially

distanced collection service for those who were able to get to the children's centre.

Participants in Baker and Bakopoulou's (2023) research highlighted the importance of the

FOOD clubs during the Covid-19 pandemic as a critical service for those in need and

reported that those attending the FOOD clubs during the pandemic were often struggling to

provide basic items such as nappies for their young children as well as food. They explained

that the FOOD clubs provided support for families to source items such as these and to get

support with paying gas and electricity bills. Baker and Bakopoulou (2023) attribute the

increase in need and the acute difficulties experienced by many families accessing the clubs

to the insecurity of employment during the pandemic, with many finding themselves

unexpectedly unemployed or furloughed. They also highlight the long delays to Universal

Credit payments which were experienced by many and inevitably contributed to families

finding themselves in food poverty during lockdown.

2.83 Covid-19 and Child Development and Wellbeing

Whilst the direct impact of Covid-19 on the health of young children has been low

there is a growing concern for the long-term effects on wellbeing that may be felt due to

lockdowns, postponement of routine treatments, a change in the way people access

healthcare and an increased risk of children experiencing abuse or neglect (Hefferon et al.,

2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic and the associated lockdowns placed additional pressure

upon families, and this is reported by Hefferon et al. (2021) to have contributed to a large

increase in domestic violence cases in England. Telephone calls to support lines for domestic

violence increased by 66% and websites saw a 950% increase in visits during the first

national lockdown which indicates that many families were living at risk of harm (Hefferon

et al., 2021). Furthermore, both adult and child mental health services have seen a rise in

referrals and support services for children who are young carers, or who have special

educational needs, were closed for much of 2020 (Hefferon et al., 2021). Coupled with this,

data from the study shows that only 4-10% of vulnerable children who were entitled to a

school place during lockdown attended regularly, meaning that many vulnerable children

were at home for several weeks without any face-to-face monitoring from school or social

services which inevitably had a negative effect upon child wellbeing (Hefferon et al., 2021).

Rosenthal et al. (2023) conducted research investigating the developmental

implications of children under six years old living in temporary accommodation in London

during Covid-19. Rosenthal et al. (2023) reported that many of the issues that had been

faced by families living in temporary accommodation prior to the pandemic had been

amplified and exacerbated by Covid-19. The study uncovered evidence that suggested

families living in temporary accommodation were particularly negatively affected by the

reduction in face-to-face health services available during the pandemic. Health professionals

in the Rosenthal et al. (2023) study posit that this is due to unreliable and inconsistent

access to internet to be able to engage with online services and the difficulty that professionals had in developing a close and trusting relationship with service users through the digital platforms. Rosenthal et al. (2023) reported that professionals stressed the importance of strong multi-agency working when supporting families living in temporary housing in order that their health, social and financial needs could all be met. They explained that during the pandemic this was particularly difficult to achieve which made families especially vulnerable to worsening health and social problems. Many professionals involved in the Rosenthal et al. (2023) study reported working with children who had been living in temporary accommodation during Covid-19 and who had exhibited a regression of development such as a reversal of potty training, a regression of speech development or a change in behaviour. They explained that these issues had gone unmanaged during the pandemic in many cases as families did not know how to access the relevant services and there were no regular checks being made by health visitors or other professionals. Rosenthal et al. (2023) expressed concern that these issues will have potentially long-term effects upon children's development and learning and that the full effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on vulnerable children will not become apparent for many years to come.

2.84 Disadvantaged Children's Lived Experiences of Covid-19

Specific research into the lived experience of disadvantaged children during Covid 19 lockdowns has not been carried out in the UK. However, two such projects (Curtin, O'Shea and Hayes, 2022; Leitao, Shumba and Quinn, 2022) have been undertaken in The Republic of Ireland, a country similar, although not identical to the UK in terms of wealth, culture and education.

The study by Leitao et al. (2022) was split into two parts, the first of which focused upon the lived experience of families with children aged under the age of six. Data was

collected from 168 families living in disadvantaged areas of Dublin through online parent questionnaires. Leitao et al. (2022) found that families in their study experienced increased social isolation and a negative impact upon adult and child emotional wellbeing during the pandemic. Leitao et al. (2022) suggest that this may be as a result of a reduction in access to services which aim to support social cohesion and mental health which are particularly important for families living in disadvantaged areas. The study also found that some parents experienced an increase in demands with regards to childcare and housework responsibilities which added to their stress. However, 20% of parents reported that they had experienced positive changes due to the pandemic such as being able to work from home and therefore spend more time with their children (Leitao et al., 2022).

Similar results were reported by Curtin et al. (2022) in a project conducted with 15 mothers of children aged 0-6 registered with the prevention and early intervention programme in Southern Ireland due to vulnerability or disadvantage. This project focused more closely upon the effect that the Covid-19 pandemic had on the children rather than the family as a whole but Curtin et al. (2022) reported similar findings in relation to an increase in social isolation and a deterioration in emotional wellbeing. Mothers in the study by Curtin et al. (2022) reported that the closure of nurseries, creches and social groups had led to greater social isolation and that this change in routine had affected their children's behaviour. They reported concerns that their children were regressing in areas such as weaning, speech development and toilet training which Curtin et al. (2022) highlighted is a concern for future development. Furthermore, Curtin et al. (2022) reported that mothers were concerned that they had been unable to access healthcare services for their child during the pandemic and that waiting lists were very long as a result of a backlog of cases from during the lockdowns. Whilst Curtin et al (2022) acknowledge that, on the whole, the

move to online services for much of the healthcare system was seen positively, families

living in disadvantaged situations are less likely to be able to access online healthcare due to

internet or device shortages or a lack of understanding of how to access online services.

Therefore Curtin et al. (2022) suggest that people who are living in disadvantage are

disproportionately affected by the move towards online healthcare and they propose that a

better support system needs to be implemented to help people to make the transition.

Conversely, similarly to Leitao et al. (2022), parents in the Curtin et al. (2022) study

reported that they had enjoyed spending more time with their children and that they felt

they had a better work-life balance since the pandemic. Mothers explained that they felt

they had a stronger bond with their children because they had spent more time together

which, as Curtin et al (2022) suggest, can act as a protective factor for stress throughout

childhood. This may be a long-term positive effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated

lockdowns.

2.9 Conclusion

Whilst there is no current literature which addresses all three strands of this project,

this literature review has presented and analysed a wide range of papers that provide an

insight into one or more of the key themes of social and cultural capital, wellbeing and early

years experiences. The following chapters will set out how this project has drawn together

the themes to create a new synthesis of ideas which has been explored through the creation

and application of a new theoretical framework.

3: Theoretical Approach

3.1 Introduction

This research is multidisciplinary and is rooted in psycho-social principles of the way in which humans interact with each other and with society as a whole. Therefore, the theoretical approach chosen for this study is psycho-social in nature, drawing upon two key theories to create a newly synthesised model to analyse and discuss the findings of this project. The theories selected, those of Bourdieu (1974; 1986), a sociologist and Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1993), a psychologist, are commonly applied to educational contexts to explain the influences upon educational engagement and developmental outcomes (Clarkin-Phillips, 2018; Reay, 2004;2018; Sullivan, 2001; Tudge et al., 2017; Wiltshire et al., 2019). However, these theories have not previously been combined within the UK early years context to provide an integrated model to explain the intricate relationships between social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986; 1994) and ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1993). The synthesis of the theories aims to address the complex, multi-dimensional nature of this project by considering psycho-social, educational and wellbeing aspects raised in the findings using elements of previously created models to formulate a new tool which can be applied not only to this project but to future research in this field.

3.2 Playing the Game

A key sociological theory to consider when studying the intergenerational reproduction of educational inequality is Bourdieu's social reproduction theory (Bourdieu; 1974, 1986).

Bourdieu uses the analogy of a game when presenting his key theories, with cultural capital and habitus sitting within a wider concept of field (Bourdieu, 1977). He then refers to

individuals and groups within the field as players or teams who fight for position and possession depending on their acquired capital and the habitus in which they sit.

3.21 Field

The field is described as the "network, a configuration of objective relations between practices" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97) and a place where players jostle for position and perform at different levels depending on their capital. The functioning of the field is reliant upon capital and the types of capital developed by the players within it determine their level of performance within the field.

Bourdieu argues that any capital developed by an individual is only relevant and useful if other members of the field value it. He suggests that dominance within a field is created by those members who possess the most valuable capital and that players who possess different capital to that valued by the field often find it difficult to 'play the game' (Bourdieu, 1977).

In the context of this study, the field is that of the early years setting or school. The players include key people such as the school staff, wider education professionals and the children themselves. It is argued that dominance in the early years setting is held by the practitioners working in the environment and those children who have developed similar capital to the practitioners. It is suggested by Bourdieu (1977), and later by Lamont and Lareau (1998), Lareau and Weininger (2003), Reay (2004) and Clarkin-Phillips (2018), that the education system is not adapted sufficiently to embrace children who enter settings with different capital to that of the practitioners.

3.22 Habitus

Habitus is the term used by Bourdieu (1974; 1977) to describe the learned dispositions and preferences of an individual which determine the way in which they

interact with the world. It is suggested by Bourdieu (1974;1977) that habitus is greatly influenced by an individual's, or player's, family upbringing and their socialization within the family setting. Habitus shapes the way in which an individual player functions within the field based upon their learned skills, dispositions and inclinations. Bourdieu argues that this is largely based upon the way in which the player's family have interacted with the field and their position within the game historically (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

In the context of this study a child's habitus is shaped by the experiences they have at home in their early years. Additionally, considering the importance placed on family history by Bourdieu (1977) and Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), it can be said that the educational experiences and consequential attitudes of a child's parents and other key family members have a direct influence on the child's habitus.

Bourdieu (1977) uses habitus as a way to explain why individual players behave in a certain way based upon their family status, class and previous experience. This translates to explain the way in which the 'game' plays out, with players who possess the greatest amount of capital relevant to the field finding it the easiest to 'play the game'. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) suggest that the interactions between the field and habitus are ongoing and that players who hold the most capital will influence the development of the field and this in turn will strengthen their position within said field. This, according to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), is due to the interactions between a dominant player's habitus and capital and the field. A dominant player uses their habitus to influence the field and experiences a positive interaction where the field reinforces their own "way of being" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.127) or habitus.

3.23 Cultural Capital

Bourdieu conceptualises cultural capital as the collection of skills, experiences and knowledge which enables an individual to function within a specific field. It can be argued that cultural capital is simply the appreciation of sophisticated cultural experiences (Lareau and Weininger, 2003) and the possession of "highbrow tastes" (Edgerton and Roberts, 2004: 194). However, Lareau and Weininger (2003) suggest that this interpretation of cultural capital is not aligned to the ideas presented by Bourdieu himself. Edgerton and Roberts (2004:194) agree with this and posit that cultural capital in the context in which Bourdieu intended is a more complex set of cultural competencies which involve "familiarity with relevant institutional contexts, processes, and expectations, possession of relevant intellectual and social skills (e.g. 'cultural knowledge' and 'vocabulary')". In the context of this study these ideas translate to the child's skills and knowledge in relation to the processes and expectations set by their early years setting. A child who has developed capital which prepares them for these routines and processes is better equipped to 'play the game' expected of them in their setting.

Furthermore, Lareau and Weininger (2003) also argue that it is not possible to view cultural capital as independent from cognitive or technical skills. The basis of this is grounded in Bourdieu's own view that the separation of technical skills and social competence is grounded in social construction whereby the most dominant players in the field impose the skills and abilities which they think are most important upon other players in the field. Consequently Bourdieu (1977; 1986) suggests that the dominant players are always deemed most able or capable, simply because they are the individuals who have imposed the rules of the game on the other players. It is suggested by Edgerton and Roberts (2004) that this also acknowledges the deep-rooted link between an individual's family

background and the ease at which they develop cognitive skills since it illustrates the intergenerational transfer of skills which enable an individual to function effectively within a certain field.

3.3 Playing the Education Game

Whilst Bourdieu's theory has been largely linked to educational outcomes and performance, it is important to note that for this project it will be used in an alternative way in order to consider the way in which children's social capital affects their wellbeing and holistic development.

Bourdieu argued that a child's educational performance is directly influenced by their parents' cultural capital. He proposed that parents with the cultural capital required to function within the education field pass this capital to their children through socialisation and role-modelling and children then in turn are able to convert their capital into academic success (Davies and Guppy, 2006; Edgerton and Roberts, 2004; Lareau and Weininger, 2003). This suggestion is supported by contemporary research carried out by Dickerson and Popli (2016) and Sullivan, Ketende and Joshi (2013) using Millenium Cohort Data and Sylva et al. (2004) as part of the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education [EPPE] project.

It was suggested by Bourdieu (1974) that schools and other educational establishments are institutionally middle class and that they are set up to expect and reward certain types of cultural capital. Lamonte and Lareau (1988: 155), when considering cultural capital suggest it holds a particular importance within educational settings since "schools are not socially neutral institutions but reflect the experiences of the dominant class". The "dominant class" in this context is those who have cultivated cultural capital which fits into the expectations and environment of the educational setting and those who have cultural

capital which is better aligned to an alternative field are less well placed to succeed socially

and academically (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984; Davies and Guppy, 2006; Edgerton and Roberts,

2004; Lamonte and Lareau, 1988; Lareau and Weininger, 2003).

This idea is important to consider as part of this project since it is a key consideration

when exploring the factors which contribute to inequalities within educational settings.

Within this project, as mentioned previously, the focus is less upon academic success and

achievement but more the relationship between social factors and children's wellbeing.

Therefore, Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (1977; 1986) has been used to consider

how and why habitus and cultural capital has an influence upon children's holistic

development and wellbeing before they turn five. However, Bourdieu's theory does not

allow a full appraisal of the ways in which children use their cultural capital to improve their

performance at school (Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997; Jaeger, 2009) and it does not consider

wider holistic effects that cultural capital may have upon children. To fully examine this, the

Bourdieusian ideas of social reproduction (1977, 1986) has been combined with Ecological

Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and employed as a blended theoretical model.

It is important to acknowledge that the work of Bourdieu and Bronfenbrenner has

been combined and used to illustrate the issue of educational inequality in an international

context. Studies by Clarkin-Phillips (2016; 2018) have sought to construct a blended

conceptual framework which includes the key concepts of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) and

ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Furthermore, an alignment of the two theories

has also been proposed within the area of social work in Northern Ireland by Houston

(2017). However, whilst this study draws upon similar ideas to those presented by Clarkin-

Phillips (2016;2018) and Houston (2017) it should be noted that the blended theoretical

model used in this study has not been employed previously to explore the relationships

between cultural capital, wellbeing and experiences within the context of the UK early years

community.

3.4 The Role of Wider Players in the Game

The concepts of field, habitus and cultural capital align closely to the work of

Bronfenbrenner (1979), another key theorist in the area of early childhood. Bourdieu and

Bronfenbrenner hold several common themes across their work including their particular

interest in social justice and the acknowledgement of a need to level the playing field for

children from all backgrounds.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory allows for the consideration of not only

the child and their parents but the relationships that they have with wider societal

influences such as school or nursery, other family or friends, the neighbourhood in which

they live and society as a whole. Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that people are

influenced by the way in which they interact with their environment and that these

interactions can be split into five broad categories or "systems". He created a model of

nested contexts in which the five systems sit within one another, showing that each one is

related to the others and that whilst those systems closest to the child have the greatest

influence, all five systems are crucial to the educational and social development of the child

(see figure 3).
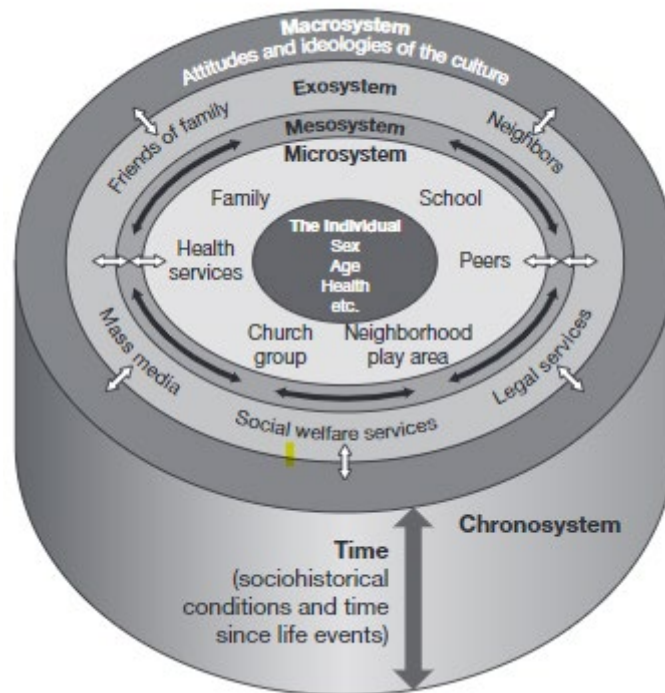
Figure 3 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model. Adapted from Santrock (2007).

Whilst Bronfenbrenner initially proposed the relationship between the different systems around a child in the late 1970's, he further developed this work, drawing upon Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory to produce a model which considered biological, psychological and time influences in addition to the relationship with the environment.

Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1993) proposed that the model is made up of four interdependent elements:

- *The human* – the person themselves is at the centre of the system, along with their own unique biological, emotional, cognitive and social characteristics.

- *The context* – the environment in which human development takes place. This is conceptualised by Bronfenbrenner using the nested systems within his model.

- *The life course* – the way in which the human and the context interact with one another to help or hinder development.

73

- *Time* – conceptualised by Bronfenbrenner as being multi-faceted and complicated, containing multiple interpretations with differing levels of transience, but almost always having an important influence upon other elements.

Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1993) centred his model on *the human.* This places the child at the centre of the system and considers their unique characteristics which influence the way in which they behave and develop. Through the use of nested systems he then conceptualised the idea that children are most heavily influenced by their immediate environment and the people within it (the *microsystems),* moving outwards through the relationships between the microsystems (*the mesosystems),* and the systems which have wider influence upon the child (*the macrosystems)* to the systems which do not directly involve the child but do have some influence (*the exosystems).*

Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested that running through all of these systems is the concept that children's development is crafted over time and that changes to their environment over time can influence the way in which they develop (*the chronosystems).* This is particularly important to this project since children often experience different levels of advantage and disadvantage at different stages of their lives and children develop their social capital over time.

3.41 The Macrosystem and the Player

The macrosystem is also vital to this project as this system is where the wider societal influences and interactions sit. The macrosystem is where the parallels between social reproduction theory and ecological systems are at their clearest. Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1993) suggests that cultural values and societal expectations sit within the macrosystem and help to construct the underlying unwritten rules and structures that

match best with those of the players who are most dominant within that particular field.

This therefore means that players who hold different cultural capital experience conflict

between their values and expectations and those required of them by the dominant players.

This can make some fields, including that of the education system, difficult to penetrate for

players who hold contrasting capital.

3.42 Emphasising the Unwritten Rules of Play

There has been criticism of Bronfenbrenner's work, suggesting that the use of linear

nested systems does not allow for the full appreciation of the intricacies of relationships and

cultures which are present in children's lives (Rogoff, 2003). Furthermore, it was argued by

Watling-Neal and Neal (2013) that the nested presentation of Bronfenbrenner's model

detracts from the importance of the social interactions which occur between the systems.

Whilst Watling-Neal and Neal (2013) do not make an explicit link between Bourdieu's ideas

on social reproduction and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological systems they do argue that nesting

the systems within one another creates an over-simplified and inaccurate view of the way in

which they are linked through the intricacies of social behaviours and expectations. Instead,

Watling-Neal and Neal (2013) argue that the systems at play in Bronfenbrenner's model

should be seen as separate, distinct systems, linked through the social interactions and

relationships forged by the person at the centre of the model (see fig. 4).
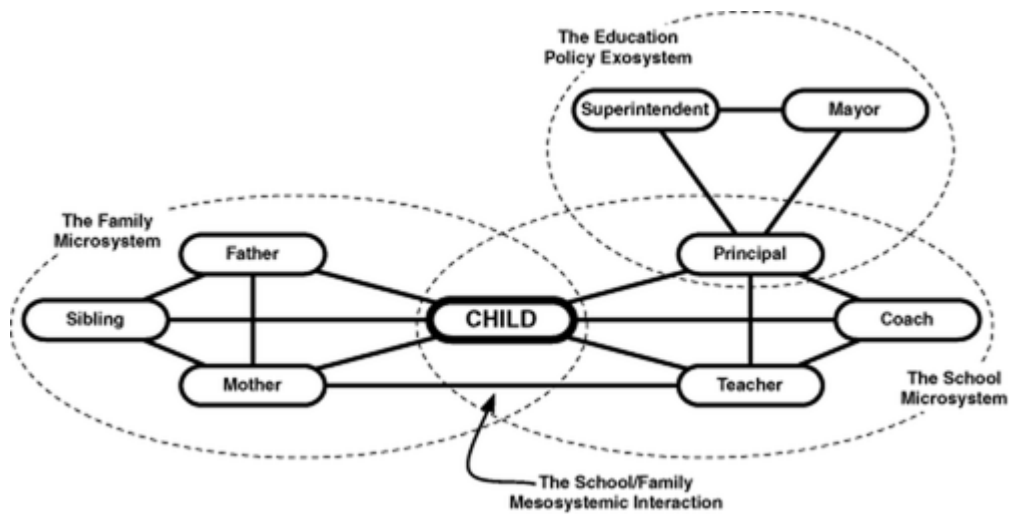
Figure 4 Adaptation of Ecological Systems Model as proposed by Watling-Neal and Neal (2013).

This view links with the concepts proposed by Bourdieu (1974; 1986), that in order

to function effectively within a field of play the player's cultural capital needs to align with

the expectations and culture of the dominant players already in the field. Therefore, an

adapted model of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory will be used in order to

emphasise the intricate nature of the human relationships and social interactions which link

the systems to one another.

3.5 Illustrating the Field and it's Players

This project has utilised the theories presented in this chapter in combination in

order to fully explain and illustrate the findings of this research. Ideas from both theories

will be combined to create an integrated model which considers wider interactions with the

environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1993) alongside the ideas of field, habitus and cultural

capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems model of concentric circles (1993) as a

starting point and the further suggestion from Watling-Neal and Neal (2013) relating to the

separation of the systems, the influence of cultural capital upon the position of the child

within their ecological systems has been emphasised in the newly devised model.

Furthermore, the influence of capital upon the way in which children are able to function

within their macrosystem has also been acknowledged and visually illustrated through the

distance between the systems in the new model.

4: Policy Context

4.1 Introduction

Early education and social welfare policy has seen the greatest level of change since the beginning of the first term of leadership by New Labour in 1997. Therefore, whilst there were policies for both early education and care and social welfare prior to this, the policy analysis which follows in this chapter will focus upon the policies employed by New Labour and subsequent governments. This chapter will also focus solely upon policies which were applied in England since this is where the participant settings for this project were located. It is acknowledged, however, that whilst some of these policies apply to the whole of the United Kingdom, other policies have also been employed by the devolved administrations in Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland.

4.2 Early Years Policy

During the period of relative political stability between 1997 to 2010, policies relating to children and families were prioritised. The government aimed to improve the cohesion of society through policy reforms that took into consideration different family structures and social equality.

Prior to 1997, previous governments had taken an approach which advocated limited intervention in children's early years and very limited support for early years education. Conversely, New Labour sought to improve life chances for children through the provision of free early years education and the implementation of Early Intervention to highlight any individual needs and provide children and families with appropriate support within the first five years of a child's life. This change in policy priorities was so radical and significant that it has since been described by Henricson (2012: 10) as a "catalogue for social change".

When a general election resulted in a change of government in May 2010, early education polices saw an almost immediate drop in priority (Lloyd, 2015). The newly formed government took over a year to publish their first policy update on early education and care and continued to give limited attention to the sector throughout their term of office (Lloyd, 2015; Stewart and Obelenskaya, 2015).

Despite this shift in priorities the government continued to honour many of the promises made by the previous government including undertaking a detailed review of the 2008 EYFS and continuing to expand the early education funding for two-, three-, and four-year olds (Lloyd, 2014). This approach has been highlighted by Henricson (2012) and Lloyd (2015) as a response to already existing legacy policy as opposed to entering "the family policy arena with a strategic programme" (Henricson, 2012: 75) thus emphasising the lack of priority given to early years policy after the change in government in 2010.

Despite a further change of government in 2014, the effects of austerity and subsequent budget cuts have continued to have a negative impact upon the early years sector (Marmot, 2020a). Prior to the general election in 2014, all three of the main political parties pledged to increase the free entitlement for three- and four-year-olds with the Conservative manifesto promising an increase from 15 to 30 hours of free early education for three- and four-year-olds (Lewis and West, 2016) and that this funding would be designed to help the most disadvantaged children (Department for Education, 2014c). However, this promise had several conditions attached to it (see section 4.21 for further discussion) and universal 30-hour funding is yet to be fully introduced.

There have, however, been significant changes made to the early years foundation stage curriculum and the assessment arrangements for early years by the government since

2014, culminating in a new early years curriculum document being published and

implemented by all providers in September 2021, with further updates added in 2023 (DfE,

2023b).

4.21 Early Years Funding

Through the National Childcare Strategy (DfES, 1998), the government pledged to provide a

free, part-time nursery place to all four-year-olds from September 1998. Whilst this began to

be implemented in 1998, the introduction of universal nursery funding covering 12.5 hours a

week during term time for all four-year-olds was not universally available until 2000.

However, by 2004 this universal funding had been extended nationally to all three-year-olds

meaning that every three- or four-year-old child in England had access to a free nursery

place for the first time in history. Despite politicians claiming that this injection of funding

was to improve the lives of young children, it is also argued that the funding was aimed as an

incentive for parents to return to work thus improving the economic status of the country

(Ball and Vincent, 2006) as opposed to a policy with the needs of the child at its forefront.

This view was further compounded by the introduction of Working Families Tax Credits in

2002 (HM Treasury and Inland Revenue, 2002) which included a subsidised childcare

element for working parents on top of the universal free entitlement thus furthering the

incentive to return to work (Blanden et al., 2016). Concerned about the lower attainment

levels of disadvantaged children upon school entry compared to their more affluent peers, in

2008 the government further extended the early years funding model to include

disadvantaged two-year-olds. This funding was initially available in 32 local authorities as a

pilot study and two-year-olds in those areas who were deemed to be most disadvantaged

were offered 7.5 hours of free early years education and care. This was further extended to

all local authorities in 2009 and increased to ten hours of funding a week for eligible children

(Gibb et al. 2011). Whilst it was insisted that this funding was implemented to improve the social and cognitive development of the child in order that they were better prepared for school, it is also argued that this too was an attempt to encourage more parents back into work thus improving the economic position and reducing welfare spending (Ball and Vincent, 2006)

Despite a change in government, in line with the promises made by the previous government, the free early years education funding was increased to cover fifteen hours of free nursery provision for all three- and four-year-olds from September 2010 (National Audit Office [NAO], 2016). Further to this the entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds was also increased to fifteen hours from 2013. The amount of early years funding allocated to local authorities was also increased to account for this more generous offer. However, the increase simply covered the increase in hours, so the average level of funding received per child per hour did not increase from 2012 to 2016 and therefore providers saw a real time funding cut of approximately 4.5% (NAO, 2016). Furthermore, evidence from the Department for Education (2014a) shows that the government target for disadvantaged two-year-old funding to reach 20% of all two-year-olds by 2014 was missed by around 30 per cent. Consequently, the funding was not having the level of impact the government had hoped it would in terms of addressing disadvantage and providing experiences to children living in the most deprived circumstances.

For children not entitled to free childcare or for families who required more than 15 hours provision the responsibility to pay for the sessions traditionally fell on the parents. However, the government continued to support a scheme of childcare tax credits for working parents which retrospectively contributed towards additional childcare costs that

had been introduced previously. This was further extended to support families with higher incomes through the Tax-Free Childcare Scheme which was introduced in 2013 (Lloyd, 2015). However, this scheme was met with negativity, suggesting that rather than making childcare more affordable, by making childcare tax free the government had invited providers to increase their profits because the price paid by parents could remain the same and providers could make greater profits. This risked potentially pricing parents on lower incomes out of the market and consequently had a detrimental effect upon the children from lower income families (Corey and Alakeson, 2014).

Despite their pledge to increase universal funding to 30 hours, once elected the government changed the conditions attached to this funding increase and revealed that the additional 15 hours funding would only be available to children from families where both parents worked and earned the equivalent of working 16 hours a week at national minimum wage (Childcare Act, 2016). This change supported the emphasis upon increasing the working population since it provided support for mothers to return to employment prior to their children starting school (Blanden et al., 2016; Brewer et al., 2014). This was further emphasised with a subtle change in the wording of the funding, changing it from funding for early education to childcare funding (Lewis and West, 2016), thus shifting the emphasis away from supporting child development and early learning to providing a childcare service to enable parents to go to work.

The increase in funded hours from the government was met by concerns from private providers within the sector since the long-term underfunding of early education had been traditionally topped up by the fees paid by parents for children ineligible for funding or for hours in addition to the free entitlement (House of Lords [HL], 2015). However, with an

increase in the free entitlement those privately financed hours would be reduced and providers shared concerns that they would see a reduction in income which would have a negative impact upon the quality of the provision they could offer (HL, 2015).

In response to this, since 2016 the government have provided an increase in funding for early years providers which translates to an increase of 8% in the per child funding received by settings (Akhal, 2019). However, since this funding has not been ring-fenced, individual local authorities have had the choice whether to pass on the full increase to providers which has led to a significant variation in funding rates across the country (Akhal, 2019).

As well as supporting settings to provide the 30-hour entitlement, the increase in funding levels was intended to also improve the uptake of funded places for disadvantaged two-year-olds since research carried out by the Department of Education in 2012 found that although 97% of three year olds and 93% of four year olds were accessing their free entitlement only 58% of eligible two year olds attended an early years setting (DfE, 2012a). However, data presented by Akhal (2019) shows that even in authorities where the funding increase has been passed on to providers, this has not necessarily influenced how many disadvantaged two-year-olds are accessing early years education. In addition, Akhal (2019) also presents data to illustrate that the increase in funding has not had a significant impact upon three- and four-year-olds accessing provision either. This finding is supported by research carried out by CEEDA (2018) who suggest that the reason for this is that the sector has been subject to long term underfunding and therefore local authorities and, ultimately settings, are using the increase in funding simply to reduce the deficit rather than to expand provision.

It could be argued that the uptake has not been heavily influenced by the increase in funding due to the attitudes and multi-generational cultural capital held by the parents of the most disadvantaged two year olds. These parents may not have the cultural capital which places value upon early education, or the capital required to arrange for their child to access the provision, thus perpetuating the cycle of social reproduction as suggested by Bourdieu (1986).

4.22 The Early Years Curriculum

The first curriculum document designed specifically for children aged between three and five was published in 2000. Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage [CGFS] (Qualifications Curriculum Alliance [QCA], 2000) was, for the first two years of it's existence, an optional document providing ideas and assistance to early years providers. However, as part of The Adoption and Children Act (2002), the National Curriculum was extended to include children from the age of three and following the CGFS document became statutory for all settings in receipt of early years funding. The aim of the document was to provide clarity to early years professionals and to acknowledge that children in the early years require a specialised curriculum and not simply a diluted offer of the National Curriculum (English, 2001). The CGFS emphasised the importance of play and exploration but provided a structure to enable settings to work towards children achieving the adapted Desirable Outcomes (School Curriculum and Assessment Authority [SCAA], 1996) which were now known as Early Learning Goals [ELGs] (QCA, 1999). Whilst the CGFS was closely linked to social constructivist ideas such as learning through collaborative play and social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978) and building upon concrete experiences (Piaget, 1957), it was feared that due to the pressure of the end of stage assessments teachers were titrating the National Curriculum down to the youngest children in order that they had more time to prepare for

assessment (Drury, Miller, & Campbell, 2000; Anning, 1998). Furthermore, the CGFS

appeared to be assessment driven and focused on achievement since the document set out

the expected 'stepping stones' children should achieve at certain ages. Despite the QCA

defending this and claiming that the document was not intended to provide a linear route to

the ELG, they were presented in a hierarchical order. Whether it was intended or not, the

inclusion of a linear route and the term 'stepping stones' implied to practitioners that it was

a pathway to be followed and no provision was made in the document for the many children

who did not follow the same logical route (English, 2001).

Following the roll out of the CGFS a separate document was then prepared and

released to cover the first three years of life. Birth to Three Matters [BTM] was released

widely in 2003 (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2002) and signified an important

milestone in recognising the importance of high-quality early education and care from birth

(David et al., 2003). The framework also saw a shift away from age-based descriptors and

milestones, instead focusing on what children can do and how they interact with the world

through four areas pitched at four broader developmental stages (DfES, 2002).

Whilst it was acknowledged that children would not necessarily fit discretely into one

of these four categories, it was hoped that by focusing on what stage a child was at rather

than their age practitioners would be able to plan to meet the individual child's needs

(Abbott and Langston, 2005). Despite the difference in design of the framework and the

insistence that it was not a curriculum for the under threes (David et al., 2003), close

references and links were made between BTM and the CGFS document. These links enabled

practitioners to move a child seamlessly from the four areas of development in BTM to the

areas of learning in the CGFS whilst also providing evidence that the BTM framework

ultimately aided a child in reaching the ELGs at the end of the Foundation Stage (Abbott and

Langston, 2005).

Another key change occurred in 2008 when the CGFS and BTM were combined to

form a new early years foundation stage curriculum for children from birth to five

(Department for Children, Families and Schools [DCFS], 2008). This was also the first time

that the Full Day Care National Standards, setting out the legal and statutory requirements

for providers, were incorporated into the same document as the curriculum for the under-

fives. The aim, as set out by the DCFS (2008) was to no longer draw a distinction between

care and education in the early years in order that the sector could work towards improving

standards across all providers. The new curriculum also sought to help every provider to

meet Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003) outcomes through their day-to-day provision and links

were made between the Every Child Matters agenda and the new curriculum document

(Palaiologou, 2009). However, despite these aims the curriculum document was separated

into two distinct sections, one essentially focusing upon the care standards requirement for

providers and the other containing the curriculum guidance. Consequently, although care

and education were combined to some degree, they remained separate within the

document itself and many providers still treated the two sections as somewhat separate

(Tickell, 2011).

As promised by the government at the time of the release of the 2008 EYFS

documentation (DCFS, 2008), a review was carried out in 2011 to assess it's effectiveness.

The review, carried out by Dame Clare Tickell and known popularly as "The Tickell Review of

Early Years" explored the implementation of both the care standards and the curriculum

guidance throughout the early years sector. Tickell (2011) found that whilst the EYFS

documentation had led to improvements across the sector in the first three years of implementation, there had also been some aspects of the guidance that practitioners found particularly difficult to implement effectively. In total Tickell made 46 recommendations to the government of ways in which to improve early years provision, primarily through adaptations to the existing guidance and documentation.

Areas with particular relevance to this project include recommendations for furthering the early identification of additional need, based upon evidence that the earlier interventions are put in place the more likely they are to counterbalance the effects disadvantage or disability. Tickell (2011) proposed that the government should introduce a requirement for a progress check between the ages of 24 and 36 months, in line with the health visitor health check carried out around the same time. This, according to Tickell (2011), allows early years practitioners to identify any barriers to learning early and to put the necessary support in place before a child begins to suffer the effects of disadvantage. Furthermore, it was also suggested that the curriculum for under-fives should be separated into "Prime and Specific Areas of Learning" (Tickell, 2011: 21) in order to acknowledge that the areas of personal and social development, communication and language and physical development are the most influential areas for the youngest children and that there should be an emphasis on developing these areas first, particularly for children under the age of three. Following these recommendations there was a revision of the EYFS and in 2012 a new early years foundation stage curriculum was published which adopted the idea of prime and specific areas of learning and continued to combine the care standards and curriculum guidance in one document for practitioners (DfE, 2012b).

Following a pilot during the 2018/19 academic year and a public consultation period in 2019, the Government announced that a revised early years foundation stage document would be published and would become statutory from September 2021 (Nursery World, 2019). The revised documents were made available to schools who had volunteered to become 'early adopters' in order that they could implement the changes from September 2020. In addition to this the new Development Matters guidance was published in Autumn 2020 (DfE, 2020a). This was followed by the new EYFS Framework statutory guidance which was publicly released in Spring 2021 (DfE, 2021), ready for implementation in all settings from September 2021. Further adaptations and revisions were made to the document in 2023 (DfE, 2023b).

The new document shifts the focus for early learning to put greater emphasis upon children developing their language and literacy skills (DfE, 2023b), with the Development Matters guidance having also been revised to reflect this (DfE, 2023b). In addition to this there have been amendments made to the Early Learning Goals and to some of the areas of learning, to encompass more language development across the different areas and to put greater emphasis on developing self-regulation skills and an understanding of healthy lifestyles (Foundation Years, 2021). In response to the announcement of a new EYFS framework, 16 early years sector organisations joined together to work on an alternative document to the Development Matters guidance produced by the Department of Education (Early Years Coalition, 2021) The resulting publication, entitled 'Birth to Five Matters' was released in Spring 2021 and is intended to bring together the expertise of professionals from across the sector to support practitioners in developing an early years pedagogy and curriculum which supports children's holistic development (Early Years Coalition, 2021).

4.23 The Early Years Workforce

The need for a well-qualified, experienced, and well-equipped workforce was a recurring theme in the Tickell Review (Tickell, 2011). It was recommended that, to make working in early years a more attractive career route, further development of training and qualifications was needed including providing a clear path for progression within the sector. Tickell also advocated a continuation of the ambition for all practitioners to be Level Three qualified and for each setting to employ at least one graduate level member of staff. However, Tickell also identified an increasing feeling of frustration and pressure within early years professionals due to the constraints of the systems they were expected to work within, and the lack of autonomy given to individual settings to adapt their provision. Consequently, it was recommended that the government support settings to make appropriate adaptations and that any new policy provided greater flexibility for providers, in particular for those in the private and voluntary sector [PVI] (Tickell, 2011).

Following on from the recommendations in the Tickell Review, the government commissioned an independent review of qualifications in early education conducted by Cathy Nutbrown (Nutbrown, 2012). The Nutbrown Review (2012) supported the ambition to ensure that all early years practitioners were qualified to at least NVQ Level Three. Further to this, longer-term recommendations were made that all early years staff in leadership roles should hold, or be working towards, a new specialist qualification called the Early Years Teacher Qualification and that these leaders should be supported by a team of Level Three qualified 'Early Years Educators' (Nutbrown, 2012). Use of these new terms for the early years workforce was intended to raise the profile of those working within early years to challenge the public perception of early years simply being a provision of childcare as opposed to important early foundations in education (Hillman and Williams, 2015).

However, the government response to The Nutbrown Review caused a degree of controversy when it was suggested that the development of the new 'Early Years Teacher [EYT]' and 'Early Years Educator [EYE]' roles would mean that settings could operate under lower levels of adult to child ratio (DfE, 2013). This proposal came despite Tickell (2011) and Nutbrown (2012) both expressing concerns that reduced adult to child ratios would have a negative impact upon child development as they would have less one to one interaction with staff, something which both reviews deemed vital in the development of social and language skills. Nutbrown (2012) highlighted that this concern was particularly worrying for the most disadvantaged children who did not experience high quality interactions with adults elsewhere. The proposal to reduce the adult to child ratios was abandoned by the coalition government in 2013 and never came into force (DfE, 2013).

Despite this Nutbrown herself expressed concerns that many of her key recommendations made in 2012 (Nutbrown, 2012) were ignored by the government despite her review having been commissioned by them (Nutbrown, 2013). The government response was influenced more significantly by financial implications than by the development and wellbeing of young children and left "vulnerable young children to bear the costs" (Nutbrown, 2013: 10). Further to this the coalition government policies were criticised by several experts, suggesting that there was little evidence of the impact of the policies and that policies were aligned to the marketisation of the childcare sector as opposed to supporting the proven benefits of early years education upon children's welfare and development (Brewer, Cattan, and Crawford, 2014; Lloyd and Penn, 2012; Nutbrown, 2013).

4.24 Datafication of Early Years through Assessment and Bold Beginnings

In the early part of the 2010's a greater emphasis began to be put upon assessment and progress in primary schools by Ofsted. The government introduced methods to track progress which began with assessment at the end of the EYFS during the Reception year and tracked children through to their end of key stage two assessments in year six (DfE, 2014d). After the general election in 2014 the government continued to promote this as a way to measure school effectiveness and school leaders became increasingly focused upon creating an evidence base to reflect this progress (Bradbury, 2015). This has made the need for accurate and robust data, including the use of reception baseline testing, phonics screening checks, end of EYFS profile information and key stage one and two statutory assessments [SATs], increasingly important in order than schools are able to show 'value added' (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016). From one perspective this was helpful for schools with a high number of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds since Ofsted and the government suggested that judgements on school effectiveness would consider the starting point for the children in order that progress could be judged as opposed to simply the attainment at the end of year six (Ofsted, 2014). However, the introduction of this formal use of early years data put additional pressure upon EYFS practitioners and children and involved formal assessment of our very youngest children with school leaders reporting having to devote a significant amount of time to assessment and data management (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2017; Bradbury, 2015; Williamson, 2018). Bradbury (2018) suggests that this has led to a 'datafication' of early childhood education and has meant that the reception year at school is largely focused upon data collection and tracking, with many schools assessing children every 6-8 weeks to track their progress. School leaders have reported that this

tracking is necessary throughout primary school in order that the school can produce the evidence of progress that Ofsted expect to see during inspections (Bradbury, 2015).

The datafication of the reception year was further emphasised in 2015 by the introduction of a Statutory Baseline Assessment which had to be completed with all children within six weeks of entry to primary school and aimed to provide a true, accurate assessment of a child's starting point. However, this initiative was short lived since in 2016 it was abandoned due to inconsistencies between the three approved assessments and the difficulty with standardisation across the different methods. Despite its short period of implementation, the introduction of this assessment further emphasised the government's focus upon formalising the early education of young children and their drive to make early years quantifiable (Bradbury, 2015; Bradbury, 2018).

Following this unsuccessful introduction of a statutory baseline assessment the National Foundation for Educational Research [NFER] were commissioned by the government to research and produce one, standardised baseline assessment test to be used in all schools from September 2020. However, due to the restrictions and disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic the implementation of this new test was delayed, and it instead became statutory in September 2021. There has been considerable criticism (More Than a Score, 2021; Robert-Holmes et al, 2020) of the introduction of this assessment largely since it is carried out on a one to one basis and follows a scripted and prescribed formula with marks awarded for correct answers (Standards and Testing Agency [STA], 2020), thus putting a young child into a pressurised testing environment which does not support the play based ethos that the foundation stage curriculum (DfE, 2014b; DfE, 2020a; DfE, 2023b) advocates. Following a pilot of the proposed baseline assessment carried out in 2019 it was found by

Robert-Holmes et al. (2020) that only 3% of reception class teachers felt that the baseline assessment had had a positive impact upon their classroom and the experiences of the children when starting school. Furthermore, it was also reported that the baseline assessment does not consider any variables which may affect a child's ability to complete the test such as summer born children, children for whom English is an additional language or children with special educational needs or disabilities (Robert-Holmes et al., 2020).

This datafication of the sector was further emphasised by the Ofsted document 'Bold Beginnings' (Ofsted, 2017a). It was designed to showcase best practice in a selection of Reception classes in Good and Outstanding schools. The report was intended to highlight the importance of the foundation years in providing the opportunity to develop the early skills needed to achieve well throughout life and was designed to provide schools with evidence from schools where all children achieved well (OfSTED, 2017a).

However, the report focused solely upon children developing reading, writing and maths skills, highlighting the gap in disadvantaged and more affluent children reaching 'good level of development' in these three areas. This was directly linked to the government focus upon greater social mobility and economic prosperity (see social policy section) as it was reported by Ofsted (2017a: 10) that developing "the ability to read, write and use numbers is fundamental to lifelong success".

In addition, due to the introduction of formal assessments it was reported in Bold Beginnings that school leaders expected a greater emphasis upon English and Mathematics within the Reception year than previously seen in the EYFS. Ofsted (2017a) reported that in a lot of schools the headteacher held the opinion that reaching the Early Learning Goals was not sufficient preparation for the phonics screening in year one and SATs in year two and so

they expected further Mathematics and English teaching beyond the requirements of the EYFS (Ofsted, 2017a). This issue was highlighted and focused upon in Ofsted's 2017 annual report (Ofsted, 2017b), with the suggestion that the EYFS curriculum was not fit for the purpose of preparing children for learning in year one. This finding was widely criticised and was attributed to the rising political agenda of 'schoolification' and 'datafication' of early years education (Pascal et al, 2017; Bradbury, 2018; Lewis, 2020). This idea is further supported by previous suggestions made by Walsh et al (2006), Brown (2015) and Wood and Hedges (2016) that a rigid, formal curriculum at such a young age used simply as a 'school-readiness' model can have long term negative implications for children's wellbeing, their relationship with learning and their self-esteem.

Despite there having been multiple suggestions that age four is too young for children to begin their primary education (OECD, 2006; 2015; Hofkins and Northern, 2009; BERA/TACTYC 2014) the 'Bold Beginnings' report did not acknowledge this, instead choosing to focus upon attainment of maths and literacy skills which further supports the notion of a school-readiness political agenda (Kay, 2018).

Research by Bradbury (2018) and Kay (2018) suggests that the shift towards an emphasis on English and Maths was linked closely to the beginning of judging schools based upon progress from Reception to year six and that the focus on the two subjects had simply been pushed down into early years since they are the areas of the curriculum which are formally assessed in primary schools and beyond and so it is those two subjects that school performance is based upon.

The standardised assessment of children's maths and literacy skills in the early years and beyond does not take into account their social background and the influence that their

cultural capital could have upon their holistic development (Robert-Holmes et al., 2020). The standardised approach promoted by the Bold Beginnings document and the assessment requirements for children in their reception year fail to take into account the different cultural capital that children possess when they enter the setting and how the type of capital they hold can affect the extent to which they are able to understand the nuances, routines and processes within an educational setting. This therefore puts some children at an immediate disadvantage. Such disadvantage is likely to follow the child through their education and is difficult to overcome (More Than a Score, 2021).

4.3 Social Welfare Policy

Between 1997 and 2010 there was great emphasis placed upon social equality and policies to support those who were less advantaged members of society. Multiple reviews and reports were commissioned to explore different aspects of life, primarily focused on identifying disadvantage and reducing inequalities.

Further policies were implemented between 2010 and 2014 such as Pupil Premium funding and universal infant free school meals. However, as the focus shifted from inequality to reducing national debt and the country entered a period of austerity, there were fewer initiatives tailored to tackling disadvantage than there had been previously.

Austerity has continued since 2014 and therefore there has been less of a focus on social welfare. However, the government have rolled out the universal credit system which has changed the way in which low income and unemployed families are supported financially. There has also been a 10-year review carried out by Marmot (Marmot et al., 2020a), based upon his earlier research into health inequalities and some limited support was put in place for vulnerable families during the Covid-19 pandemic.

4.31 Under Fives Public Health Policy (Sure Start)

In order to overcome this barrier, in addition to the introduction of funding the National Childcare Strategy (DfES, 1998) pledged to create a network of neighbourhood centres provide nursery places, parenting support and family activities in the most deprived neighbourhoods. This initiative was launched under the name of Sure Start in 1999 and by 2001 £450million of funding had been used to provide services in the 20% most disadvantaged electoral wards in England (Bouchal and Norris, 2017). Research by Nuffield Foundation and the Institute for Fiscal Studies (Cattan et al., 2019) has since found that the Sure Start local initiative had a major positive influence upon the longer-term health of children living in deprived neighbourhoods but with access to a Sure Start centre in the first five years of their life. Initially the funding for Sure Start was designed to be phased out after ten years but in 2003 it was announced that this would no longer be the case and that the Sure Start local programme would be converted to a local government responsibility and that funding would continue indefinitely (Cattan et al., 2019). This announcement was quickly followed by the release of the Every Child Matters Green Paper (HM Treasury, 2003) and an updated Children Act (2004) which followed a comprehensive review of children's services carried out by Lord Laming in 2003. Laming (2003) reported that better multi-agency communication was required and in response to this in was proposed that different children's services should be brought together into a combined 'children's trust' based within local hubs situated in children's centres or Sure Start centres. To facilitate this, it was announced as part of the Ten-Year Strategy for Childcare in 2004 that Sure Start would be universalised in order that every child under five, regardless of where they lived or their socio-economic status, would have access to a Sure Start Centre or Children's Centre by 2010 (HM Treasury, 2004). This aim involved creating 3,500 children's centres before 2010,

an ambitious target that was ultimately met but that was accused of being too demanding and deadlines too tight (House of Commons Children, Schools, and Families Committee, 2010).

Alongside the Ten Year Strategy the first specific framework related to children's health and maternal health, the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services [CNSF] (DfES, 2004) was published, setting out standards for children's and family services was also published in 2004.

The CNSF was further developed and superseded in 2008 by the Child Health Promotion Programme [CHPP] (DCSF, 2008) which aimed to promote health and high standards of care in pregnancy and the first five years of life. The CHPP advocated for the need for good multi-agency communication and joined up working between all those involved in young children's care and education in order that their health and wellbeing could be promoted successfully. This, as proposed by the CHPP, could be achieved through the implementation of Children's Trusts based within Sure Start Children's Centres.

The implementation of Sure Start children's centres with integrated children's trusts not only provided child care but a central community hub for parents to seek advice and support and for families to attend a wide range of services (Cattan et al. 2019). This meant that parents no longer needed to rely on their cultural capital being developed in a specific way in order to know how to access services for their child since the service providers were all accessible in one place. Sure Start centres, particularly those located within the most deprived neighbourhoods, were highly effective in breaking down barriers to children accessing early education, health and social support services (Cattan et al., 2019).

Following a review of spending in October 2010 the government announced huge budget cuts for nearly all areas of public spending, including early years. These plans also involved removing the ring fencing around the funding of children's centres which allowed local authorities to spend the money elsewhere if they felt that this was necessary (HM Treasury, 2010). It was reported that cuts of £81bn over four years would be implemented and that spending on local government and communities would be cut by a disproportionate 51% (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012). These cuts were projected to have significantly greater impact upon the most disadvantaged areas and on the most deprived families due to cuts in both financial and practical support, real time salary cuts for public sector workers and an increase in unemployment levels (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011). These projections were confirmed to have been accurate in 2016 in research by Hall et al. Despite this, many children's centre closures were seen quickly after the removal of ring fencing and the cut in funding thus removing vital support networks for disadvantaged families (Smith et al., 2018). By 2016, 30% of Sure Start and Children's Centres had closed completely and 55% of local authorities had reported a reduction in opening hours of remaining centres to save money on staffing and overheads (Smith et al., 2018). Consequently, it was reported by Torjesen (2016) that the benefits gained by the investment in Sure Start were quickly eroded during the subsequent period of austerity.

However, whilst Sure Start centres faced a huge cut in funding, leading to many of them closing, the CHPP now known as the Healthy Child Programme was adopted by the government and is still used to inform practice in child public health. The government also commissioned a review into "Early Years Healthy Development" (HM Government, 2021) which led to the production of a piece of guidance entitled "The Best Start for Life" (HM Government, 2021). This document focuses on the first 1001 days of a child's life and

proposes that a joined-up approach is needed to ensure children and families receive the

support that they need. This echoes what the CHPP advocated previously but suggests that

it has not yet been adequately implemented into practice. Furthermore, it is proposed that

"family hubs" (HM Government, 2021:8) are needed as a welcoming space for families to

access the joined-up services they need. This implies that despite not providing sufficient

funding for Sure Start centres to remain open the government are now going to fund the

creation of family hubs which will have the same purpose as a Sure Start centre. In a follow

up report, it is reported that the government have pledged to invest £300 million into

developing new family hubs and Start for Life programmes across England before 2025 with

work having already begun in fourteen local authorities (HM Government, 2023).

4.32 Free School Meals, Healthy Start Vouchers and School Milk

Although the first National School Meals policy was introduced in 1941 outlining

nutritional standards for school food, the provision of food in education settings remains

variable to the present day (Halliday & Howard-Drake, 2015; Kitchen et al., 2013; School

Food Plan, 2015).

Following a period where school food was largely unregulated and significant cuts

were made, including the removal of free milk for all junior aged children in 1971 (Stepney,

2013), between 1997 and 2010 school food was made a central priority. In 2001 a new set of

statutory regulations for the standards of school food were introduced (Department of

Health [DoH], 2001). Alongside this, the Department of Health and the Department for

Education and Skills jointly launched the Food in Schools Programme (DoH 2001), designed

to raise standards and promote healthy lifestyles. This was quickly followed in 2002 by a

change to the eligibility criteria for free school meals, meaning that more children became

eligible to receive a free school meal (Education Act, 2002). Despite this, it was reported that

the uptake of free school meals was relatively low, with under 50% of eligible primary age pupils actually taking up the opportunity to have a free meal (Nelson, 2011). In an attempt to improve uptake of school meals and promote healthy lifestyles, the government introduced the Food in Schools toolkit (DoH and DfES, 2005), as part of the Food in Schools programme and issued revised standards which became compulsory for early years and primary settings in 2008 (School Food Trust, 2007).

In September 2014 universal free school meals for all children in Reception and Key Stage One were introduced (Children and Families Act, 2014). However, this provision does not entitle children attending pre-school settings to a free school meal and has not been extended to include those children over the age of seven. Children attending pre-school settings are not eligible for any form of free meal, either through the means tested scheme or the universal provision, which therefore means that parents are required to pay for meals until their child begins compulsory education the September after their fourth birthday. It has been argued that further expansion of the means tested scheme to include younger children attending educational settings, and to increase the number of eligible children, would have been preferrable to the introduction of a universal offer for all infant aged children since one in three children living in food poverty are not currently eligible for free school meals (Child Poverty Action Group, 2022; Dimbleby, 2021; Parnham, Millett and Vamos, 2022).

During the Covid-19 pandemic government policy came under significant criticism due to the inconsistencies experienced by families in receipt of free school meals. The government produced policy guidance outlining the delivery of free school meals during the pandemic (DfE, 2020b) but the implementation of this policy was varied, and local

authorities and schools faced significant challenges, particularly early in the first national lockdown when it is estimated that half of eligible children were not able to access the scheme (Parnham et al, 2020).

Alongside their investment in school food, in 2006 the government also introduced the Healthy Start Scheme (The Healthy Start Scheme and Welfare Food Regulations, 2006). The scheme provides vouchers to households with a pregnant woman or a child aged 0-3 years which can be exchanged for milk or fruit and vegetables. The initial uptake of the scheme was good, but it has been declining, with uptake more recently sitting at around 50% of those eligible (Healthy Start, 2021). Subsequent governments continued this scheme and, whilst they did not increase the value of the voucher for 11 years, in 2021 the government provided funding to increase the voucher amount from £3.10 to £4.25 per week (Department for Work and Pensions, 2020).

Although the free entitlement to milk for junior aged pupils was removed in 1971 (Stepney, 2013), provision of subsidised milk in schools and free milk in early years settings has continued. Subsidised milk is available to all pupils in primary and secondary schools through the School Milk Scheme Strategy (Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs [DEFRA], 2023). All children who attend an early years setting are entitled to a free 1/3 pint serving of fresh milk each day under the Nursery Milk Scheme (Department for Health and Social Care [DHSC], 2023). The provision of milk products is a requirement within the previously mentioned school food standards in order to ensure that all children, regardless of their family situation receive the daily requirement of calcium to promote healthy bone and tooth development (School Food Trust, 2007).

4.33 Independent Government Reviews into Social Inequality

In 2010 there were two key independent reviews published which both explored the issue of social inequality. The Marmot Review (Marmot et al., 2010), commissioned by the government to investigate health inequalities in England, suggested that there is a clear social gradient in health. Marmot et al. (2010) reported that health inequalities are a direct result of social inequalities, and that policy should focus on reducing social inequalities through "proportionate universalism" (Marmot et al., 2010 p. 15) whereby initiatives are universal but are targeted more intensively at the most socially disadvantaged.

Whilst Marmot et al (2010) explored health inequalities at every stage of the life course, they reported that disadvantage begins before birth and that initiatives to reduce inequalities should be focused upon the first five years of a child's life in order to be most effective at reducing lifelong inequality (Marmot et al., 2010). Marmot et al. (2010) called for greater spending on the early years sector to provide high quality support, healthcare and education for all children under five.

Also published in 2010 was The Field Review (Field, 2010) which specifically explored the links between poverty and disadvantage experienced in childhood and longer-term life chances. Field (2010) made recommendations that the first five years of a child's life are the greatest indicator of their future prospects which is in line with the findings of Marmot et al. (2010). Field suggested that whilst interventions implemented later in life can be helpful, these tend to be more expensive and less effective than those targeted at the youngest children in society. Field (2010) reported that although the government had pledged in 1999 to halve child poverty by 2010 and to eradicate it by 2020 (Blair, 1999), the levels of child poverty were largely similar to those seen in 1999 (Brewer et al., 2010; Field, 2010). Furthermore, Field (2010) proposed that the government's strategies to improve the

child poverty rates had been largely unsuccessful due to them focusing wholly upon household income. Field (2010) suggested that in order to improve child poverty a more comprehensive package of support is required to change families' attitudes towards work, education and parenting and proposed a multi-disciplinary approach through an initiative known as "The Foundation Years" (Field, 2010). Whilst elements of this were implemented, the full set of recommendations were never developed further since there was a change in government in 2014 and spending cuts meant a reduction in funding for such projects.

In 2020 Marmot et al. carried out a review of their independent report to assess the progress made since it's publication in 2010 (Marmot et al, 2020a). Unfortunately, the review found that the health gap between the most advantaged and least advantaged members of society had widened and that more people were living in poor health than ten years previously. When considering children, Marmot et al. (2020a) reported that due to funding cuts and the closure of Sure Start centres and other similar services (see previous section), the gap between children living in the most affluent neighbourhoods and their peers in the least affluent areas had widened. Marmot et al. (2020a) also reported a continuation of the under-funding of early years provision and the low rates of pay and low qualification levels in the sector as important factors affecting the persistence of inequalities for young children. Marmot et al. (2020a) recommended that in order to address the inequalities caused by social background, more investment was needed in the early years sector, including reintroducing the provision of children's centres and upskilling the workforce. These recommendations were further reinforced by Marmot et al. (2020b) in a review of health inequalities following the Covid-19 pandemic. Marmot et al. (2020b) suggested that Covid-19 restrictions had disproportionately affected children from disadvantaged backgrounds and that inequalities had grown. Therefore, they presented

their proposal to reintroduce children's centres and to upskill and further develop the early

education workforce as key elements of the "build back fairer" plan (Marmot et al., 2020b p.

25)

4.4 Conclusion

Education and social policy relating to the youngest members of society has

undergone great changes since 1997. Current education policy promotes early years

education for all children but there are shortcomings in the policy which means that the

uptake of free nursery places for disadvantaged children is low. This could perhaps be

explained by the closure of the majority of children's centres, meaning that parents need to

possess an amount of cultural capital in order to know how to access provision for their child

since support is not easily accessed in every neighbourhood. In social policy there are

concerns that social disadvantage contributes to a strong social gradient in health and that

the first five years of a child's life is crucial in safeguarding lifelong wellbeing. Families with

underdeveloped capital and living in disadvantaged communities are more likely to

experience poverty than ever before (Marmot et al., 2020a) and it is proposed that

children's centres are reintroduced in these neighbourhoods in order to overcome the

barriers experienced by people trying to access education, health and social support

(Marmot et al., 2020b).

5: Methodology and Methods

5.1 Methodology

5.11 Interpretivist, Qualitative Approach

The purpose of this research is to explore the complex and multi-dimensional relationships between cultural capital, children's wellbeing and their experiences of early years education through the lens of the adults closest to them. Therefore, an interpretivist paradigm was adopted for this project since interpretivism addresses the idea that reality is constructed socially (O'Donoghue, 2018; Sparkes, 1992). Adopting a qualitative approach also allowed for the words of the participants to be contextualised and analysed through 'thick description' and interpretation (Denzin, 2001; Geertz, 1973) thus following the interpretivist paradigm. A qualitative study is open to criticism from quantitative researchers who argue that due to the subjectivity of the interpretivist paradigm research done in this way is not reproduceable and is therefore specific to a particular setting (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). However, since it was the aim to discover the way in which participants view the world from their perspective as opposed to proving a hypothesis or to produce wide ranging reproduceable data (Kincheloe, 2005; O'Donoghue, 2018) an interpretivist paradigm was entirely appropriate for this project. This idea that reality is interpreted and constructed in different ways by different individuals and groups is in direct contrast with the idea of positivist research where it is assumed that there is one objective truth which can be measured to prove or disprove a hypothesis (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Furthermore, positivist methodology has been criticised in the social sciences field as it largely ignores the influence of human behaviour and experiences on the outcomes of research (Crossan, 2003). In addition, in this area of study there has been quantitative research carried out to identify which areas of the region are the most deprived and which schools have the most children who are eligible for pupil premium (Birmingham City

Council, 2019) and therefore it was not necessary to repeat this quantitative study but instead to provide professionals and parents an opportunity to discuss and share their own interpretations of the relationships between health, class and children within their own settings.

5.12 Epistemological Stance

When research is situated in an interpretivist paradigm it is important to acknowledge the differences between 'social constructivism' and 'social constructionism' (Gubrium and Koro-Ljungberg, 2005). It is suggested by Schwandt (2001) that the two terms are inextricably linked but signify different things. According to Schwandt (2001) social constructionism focuses upon the construction of knowledge through the interaction between people whereas social constructivism focuses more upon the way that interactions with others can help individuals build their own knowledge and ideas. Therefore, since this project was seeking to discover the individual ideas and meanings of participants but also how these ideas link to the ideas of other participants to produce a shared meaning, this project has followed the principles of social constructionism. There was limited opportunity for participants to build their own knowledge and ideas since all data collection was carried out on a one-to-one basis using online methods (see subsequent sections) and therefore following a social-constructivist epistemology was not appropriate for this project. However, through the manipulation of the data using a social constructionist epistemology it has been possible to use the ideas and experiences of individual participants to construct a social, shared meaning for different groups of participants (Schwandt, 2001; O'Donoghue, 2018).

5.13 A Case Study Approach

A deep, thoughtful investigation into one specific, unique case emerged as a useful design for this project, therefore a case study approach has been adopted (Simons, 2009). In

this project the case could have focused upon one specific "person, classroom, school, authority or programme" (Stake, 1995 p.2) and therefore initially the geographical area of the West Midlands was selected as the case study for this project. In support of this, MacDonald & Walker (1975) posit that a case study should be focused upon one insight into the phenomenon under study and therefore, taking this into consideration, identifying the West Midlands as the case study would have been entirely appropriate. However, it could also be said that a case study which focuses on a large organisation, or a complete programme is too broad and that by selecting a case study in this way researchers risk the case study title being applied to projects which are not true case studies in terms of the methods that they use (Yin, 2004). Further to this Stake (1995) suggests that there are multiple ways to approach the case study method and that a case study can have an over-arching theme which links several individual, smaller cases thus creating a "collective case study" (Stake, 1995 pp. 3-4). Consequently in this instance it was decided to use the geographical region as the overall 'bounded system' (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014) and then to take each participant type (practitioner, trainee and parent) as an individual case within that system in order that each individual participant type was studied and interpreted as an "instance in action" (MacDonald and Walker, 1975 p.2). This was important in order that differences in individual participant groups' views were accurately represented and analysed. Therefore, after collecting data, the participants were categorised into specific groups depending on their role and the data was analysed within these distinct groups, or cases, in addition to looking for links between the cases.

Furthermore, the decision to use a case study method for this research was closely linked to the development of the interpretivist methodology discussed earlier in this chapter. According to interpretivist theory participants construct their own realities through

interpreting the world in their own unique way (Simons, 2009) and research conducted through the case study method values multiple perspectives and interpretations from a range of participants (Simons, 2009) who, in this research, hold the same job title but who may have interpreted the workings of their setting in entirely different ways. Simons (2009) stresses that for a case study to be successful, the researcher must undertake deep analysis of the data and produce robust interpretations of what they have seen, heard and experienced. Therefore, since the researcher was instrumental in conducting this case study research, the interpretivist methodology has also been embedded in the analysis due to having to produce interpretations of the participant data.

In addition to the epistemological and ontological links between case studies and the interpretivist paradigm, case studies also have a practical suitability for a project such as this one. Case studies are a very useful tool when conducting research in an educational context as they create easily disseminated findings which can have a much wider influence than simply within the research community (Bassey, 2001; Merriam, 1988; Walker, 1974). Therefore, since it is hoped that this research will be shared with those responsible for educational reform and policy making, focusing the findings through employing a case study approach means that it has been possible for the researcher to create a coherent and detailed story of cultural capital and wellbeing and the ways in which these interact with children's experiences of early years settings.

5.2 Data Collection Methods
5.21 Online Parent, Practitioner and Trainee Practitioner Survey
The primary reason for conducting an online survey was to collect some broad and basic parental and practitioner views whilst also identifying potential interview participants for the second part of the project. The use of online qualitative surveys enables the researcher to view the research phenomenon with a wide lens as it enables them to capture

the ideas and views of a wider range of participants than is possible using traditional qualitative methods such as interviews (Braun et al., 2017; 2021; Marks et al., 2017). The use of the internet in gathering survey responses enabled the gathering of responses without immediately pressuring them to agree to an interview which often encourages a higher level of participation, particularly within harder to reach groups (Denscombe, 2011). This allowed participants time to find out about the study, volunteer as much information as they wished to and then to decide in their own time whether they wished to continue to participate in the interview schedule to provide greater detail. Online surveys as opposed to a paper-based approach are preferable in terms of the speed of response (Marks et al., 2017; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009) and, due to the restrictions imposed due to Covid-19, an online approach was easier to administer.

The final versions of all three surveys are included as appendices for reference (see appendices 5.1 – Practitioners, 5.2 – Parents and 5.3 – Trainees).

5.22 Individual Practitioner Interviews

The interview is a very powerful way of gathering the ideas, feelings and perceptions of individual or groups of participants (Jones, 1985; Punch, 2014; Simons, 2009). Furthermore, the use of interviews enables the researcher to gather the views and interpretations of participants in great detail and, since different participants interpret the phenomenon differently the interview allows the researcher to gather multiple views and formulate an analysis which accurately portrays "multiple realities" (Stake, 1995; 64). Initially the decision to carry out semi-structured interviews with practitioners and parents was made as this approach would have allowed the participants to share their ideas but would have also allowed the researcher to guide the discussion to ensure relevant information was collected (Kvale, 1996; McNeill & Chapman, 2005; Patton, 2002). However,

after further consideration, the researcher decided that episodic interviews would be more appropriate since, whilst they needed to be able to guide the participant in terms of the topics they talked about, the participants also needed time to be able to present their thoughts and experiences as a contextual narrative (Flick, 2000; 2008; Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000). The research questions for this project demand both the narrative responses and more abstract answers to questions in order that the different elements of the questions can be explored fully. As suggested by Flick (2000; 2011; 2018) and Denzin (2001) participants often need to be able to answer questions with their own experiences and concrete examples before they are able to make more abstract generalisations about a topic and therefore by using an episodic interview participants are allowed the opportunity to offer information in both forms and to make links between the two. Initially the preferred data collection method was to conduct interviews face to face since this allows the researcher a greater insight into the non-verbal cues that a participant may give such as facial expression and hand movements (Simons, 2009). However, due to Covid-19 and the subsequent social distancing rules in place the decision was made that it would be safer to conduct interviews remotely. Therefore, the researcher considered the possibility of telephone interviews but due to the lack of face to face content through telephone calls (Irvine, 2011) and the rise in the use of online audio-visual platforms (Janghorban, Latifnejad Rousardi and Taghipour, 2014; Lo Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016) the decision was made to employ one of these platforms to conduct interviews. This enabled the researcher to have visual contact with participants and to create a more natural conversational setting for interview (Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Seitz, 2015). No parent participants volunteered for the interview element of the project despite attempting to reach them through a variety of methods and therefore in-depth episodic interviews lasting between one hour and one hour

twenty minutes were ultimately carried out with seven early years practitioners. This means that the detailed responses for this project have largely been collected from practitioners and they are supported by survey responses from parents, trainees and a wider pool of practitioners. The findings are consistent with greater practitioner involvement as opposed to the other two participant groups.

5.23 Design of Online Survey and Interviews

Changes to Terminology

When this project was initially conceived the focus was on social disadvantage and inequality. The term 'play' was also used initially to describe the educational element of the project (see chapter one, section 1.53). Therefore, participants in the survey element of the data collection were asked to think about their perceptions of social inequality and children's experiences of play. Subsequently the focus of the research has shifted to include a wider range of social backgrounds, to look more closely at the cultural capital that children possess and to consider the broader experiences children have in early years settings. The interview questions were adapted prior to commencing this phase of data collection to reflect this change. However, in order to be true to the data and to maintain trustworthiness and accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ryan, Coughlin & Cronin, 2007; Tobin & Begley, 2004) the responses to the original questions about social inequality and play have been included in each section of the survey findings chapter (see chapter six).

Designing the Survey

The structure of the survey was created by taking each of the key aspects of the study in turn. This method ensured that all the questions asked were directly related to the study in question whilst also ensuring a simple, logical survey for participants to follow (Denscombe, 2011). However, using online methods relies upon participants having a basic

level of literacy which can risk excluding some potential participants. Whilst the decision to undertake research online was based upon the Covid-19 restrictions imposed at the time and was not avoidable, this risk was mitigated by including a statement which reassured participants that their spelling, grammar or structure of their answers was not important and the inclusion of several multi-choice questions which did not require the participants to write their responses (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Terry & Braun,2017).

The questions used in the surveys were designed using existing literature and empirical research on each of the key aspects of the project. Participants were encouraged to draw upon their own experiences both personally and professionally and were reminded that the researcher was interested in their thoughts and ideas (Braun et al., 2017; Denzin, 2001; Flick, 2000). Questions related to wellbeing drew upon literature relating to the indicators of child wellbeing (NICE, 2012; The Children's Society, 2020; ONS, 2020; UNICEF, 2007; 2020). These pieces of empirical research were also used to formulate the options provided to participants in the multi-choice questions related to wellbeing. Similarly, the questions asked about play and children's experiences of play were formulated using literature about play (The Children's Society, 2020; Neilsen, 2020; Stirrup et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2020) and those related to social class and inequalities drew upon existing literature (Collishaw et al, 2011; Fairchild, 2019; Mattheys, 2018; The Children's Society, 2020) and key research carried out on behalf of the government (Field, 2010; Marmot et al, 2010; Marmot et al, 2020a).

Pilot Study

Oppenheim (1992) argues that no survey is ever created perfectly and that pilot studies, however small, are vital to identify issues and problems before the survey is rolled out to a larger audience. Therefore, the survey was initially piloted with five parents, two

trainees and four practitioners recruited through personal contacts to ensure that the

language used was appropriate, the technology used to create the survey was easy to

navigate and to test the rate of response to individual questions. The pilot study participants

were also asked to comment on whether they felt the options for the multiple-choice

questions provided sufficient choices or if there were any additional options they would like

to see included. This led to additional options being added to some questions on both the

practitioner and the trainee survey (see appendix 5.4).

Designing the Interview Questions

The interview phase of the data collection for this study utilised semi-structured

episodic interviews (Flick, 2000). The researcher compiled a list of broad questions covering

the three key aspects of the project. They used this broad structure with each participant to

guide and steer the discussion. However, since the nature of the semi-structured interview is

conversational and not controlled tightly by an interview schedule, the questions asked to

each participant varied slightly depending upon the topics raised by the participant (Denzin,

2001; Flick, 2000). The methodological decision to use episodic interviews required the

researcher to ensure that all participants were encouraged to recall specific events and

personal stories in relation to the three key aspects of the study (Flick, 2000). This was done

through regular prompting by the researcher, asking the participant to 'talk about their own

experience' or 'tell a story about a time where you have experienced…'. The phrases used

were created based upon the ideas suggested by Flick (2000; 2011; 2018) and Denzin (2001)

for maximising the richness of the data offered by participants.

5.24 Participant Sampling and Recruitment

The recruitment of participants for this study became a complex, multi-step process

as it involved the initial sampling and recruitment of settings in an attempt to produce a

collection of case study settings in which to situate the study, to provide context and depth (Simons, 2009). However, the recruitment of settings as participants was not successful (see section 5.25) and therefore a different approach was required to recruit further individual participants.

Practitioners, parents and trainees were sampled initially as participants for the online survey and then a second sampling and recruitment was carried out to recruit participants for the interview phase of the study. Given the complex nature of the recruitment for this project it was imperative that an effective and time-efficient recruitment method was identified in order that the collection of data could begin shortly after recruitment. Therefore, since traditional participant recruitment methods such as face to face contact were not possible due the Covid-19 pandemic and social distancing measures in place, the internet was utilised as a tool to recruit both the practitioners and parents (Illingworth, 2001; Marks et al., 2017). As Denscombe (2011) suggests, the internet and more specifically the use of email and online communication platforms, allowed direct contact with a large number of potential participants who may otherwise have been hard to reach due to their busy schedules. It allowed the recipients of the messages time to read and consider the materials concerning the study before responding at a time that was convenient for them. Furthermore, sampling in this way allowed for snowball sampling to be adopted to widen the potential participant pool (Browne, 2005; Heckathorn, 1997). This method allowed for initial contact to be made with potential participants and then those participants shared the study information and invitation to participate with their eligible contacts which enabled the researcher to reach a wide audience and to recruit participants from across the region, from different setting types and with different job roles.

5.25 Recruitment of Participant Settings

In order to ensure that a range of settings were recruited and that all eligible settings were included in the initial recruitment phase a comprehensive analysis of the early years provision across one local authority in the geographical region was conducted. An initial search to identify all providers was carried out using the local authority website directories of maintained and private early years settings. Following this, since the demographic of the participant settings was important for this study, all settings were entered into a database and categorised by the electoral ward in which they operate, whether they are private or maintained and the age range of children they have on roll. The electoral ward was chosen as a demographic marker as the local authority produce deprivation information which is organised by electoral ward and therefore this method would have allowed for comparison between settings using the secondary data produced by the authority. However, it is important to consider that children do not necessarily attend a setting in the same ward as the one in which they live and therefore the authority information was used as a basis for selection of participant settings but more detailed demographic information specific to the settings was sought from the practitioners during the practitioner interviews.

Following this analysis purposive sampling was conducted in order that appropriate participant settings were selected based upon their ability to produce a specific insight into the project topic in a meaningful way (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A double layer method of purposive sampling was employed in order to ensure that a narrower but richer contextual base was created since "you cannot study everyone everywhere" (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 27) but it was important that the sample included a range of cases that had a connecting element (all early years settings in the local authority) but that also provided a range of contrasting elements (Punch, 2014). The first layer of sampling was carried out as maximum

variation purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) (see Fig. 5 for inclusion criteria) and identified a

number of settings of different types (maintained schools, local authority nurseries, private

day nurseries, childminders and children's centres) from a range of electoral wards in order

to achieve as heterogenous a sample as possible since this allows for comparison and

analysis of the variety of opinions and experiences in the population (Flick, 2011; Patton,

2002).

Inclusion criteria for participant settings:
- Must be situated within the target local authority (subsequently widened to the wider West Midlands region)
- Must provide education and care for children within the EYFS (0-5)
- Must not be situated within the same electoral ward as another participant setting
- Must have been operational for at least one year prior to recruitment to the study.
- Must have at least one practitioner specifically designated to early years

Figure 5 Inclusion criteria for participant settings

Unfortunately, this approach was unsuccessful in recruiting any participant settings.

Therefore, the invitation to participate was shared more widely with every early years

setting within the authority. This attempt recruited one setting. Following this, the

geographical area was widened to include the whole of the wider West Midlands region

and, again, all early years settings in the target area were contacted. This resulted in a

further two settings being recruited. These three participant settings were geographically

spread out across the region and were of three different types, one specialist provision, one

private day nursery and one holiday food programme setting.

Individual parents and practitioners within each setting were recruited to participate alongside participants from the wider early years community in the survey and interview phases using the methods described in the next section.

5.26 Recruitment of Parents as Participants

During the design of this research project, the researcher carefully considered the involvement of parents and whether their involvement was necessary for the project. However, when the researcher was considering removing parents from the study, they found themself feeling that parental voice was important and that removing them entirely would create a very clear power imbalance between the researcher, the practitioners and the parents. Therefore, the decision was made to include parents in the study but then the researcher had to address the potential of stigmatisation when selecting parent participants for interviews. It was initially decided that focus groups would offer parents the opportunity to participate and that by using focus groups the inclusion criteria could be broad enough not to create a stigmatising situation (Bloor et al., 2001). Furthermore, focus groups have the potential to encourage parents to participate since they can attend with friends which is less intimidating than agreeing to a one-to-one interview with a researcher (Acocella, 2012). However, following the outbreak of COVID-19 in the United Kingdom and the introduction of strict social distancing it became clear that focus groups with multiple parents from different settings would be very difficult to conduct safely and effectively. The involvement of parents was still important to the study and therefore an alternative method was sought in order that parents could still participate. It was decided that the same approach as was being used with practitioners should be used with parents. Parents were initially invited to participate in an anonymous online survey, with the option to volunteer to take part in a follow-up one to one interview on Microsoft Teams.

Since convenience sampling alone can result in a large degree of bias (Etikan et al., 2016), the researcher decided to counter this by providing a set of eligibility criteria. In order to ensure that all participants were eligible for the survey they formulated a set of inclusion criteria for potential participants to self-check against before completing the survey (see Fig. 6). These criteria were included in the participant information (see appendices 2.5 & 2.6) which was given to all parents at the start of the survey via online communication platforms in order that potential participants could check that they were eligible prior engaging with the survey questions. Convenience sampling was then employed whereby all individuals who accessed the survey and met the inclusion criteria were invited to participate (Simons, 2009). Following the completion of the survey all participants were invited to participate in a one-to-one online interview. Since the inclusion criteria remained the same all those who expressed an interest in participating in the interview were included in the interview schedule.

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Inclusion criteria for individual parent participants:
- Must be the main caregiver/parent of at least one child attending an early years (Birth to Reception) setting in the West Midlands region.
- Child must have been attending the setting for at least six weeks prior to the completion of the survey.
- Must be able to complete a written survey in English.
- Must be prepared to anonymously share basic information about themselves (age, number of children, ethnic origin, self-identified social class, gender) and their child's setting (area of the region it is situated in, type of setting).
- Must have access to the internet (on a mobile device or computer) in order to complete the survey.

</div>

Figure 6 Inclusion criteria for parent participants

5.27 Recruitment of Practitioners as Participants

Practitioners were recruited using online methods including the circulation of survey information (see appendix 2.3 for participant information) on social media and direct messaging of existing contacts. To reach a wider audience of practitioners, snowball sampling (Frey, 2018) was utilised where contact was made with known teachers and

practitioners in the researcher's network, and they then shared the information with other

personal and professional contacts. All eligible interested participants were invited to take

part in one to one online or telephone interviews with the researcher. It was important that

the participants were willing to share a small amount of personal information in order that

their responses could be situated correctly within the wider study and therefore participants

were asked to share the type of setting they worked in (for example maintained school,

private day nursery, childminder etc.), their broad job title (teacher, early years

assistant/teaching assistant or manager/headteacher) and the geographic area in which

their setting is located (electoral ward or name of town/village). In addition to this

requirement a set of inclusion criteria was adopted to ensure that all participants met the

requirements of the study (Fig. 7).

Inclusion criteria for individual practitioner participants:

- Must be in paid employment at a setting within the wider West Midlands region.
- Must have access to the internet (on a mobile device or computer).
- Must be contracted to work at the school/setting for at least one academic year.
- Must spend at least 75% of their working time working with early years children (Birth to 5 years) or be the manager or headteacher of a setting with an early years department.
- Must be prepared to share the following information about themselves and their setting:
  - The type of setting (maintained school, private day nursery, childminder, private school etc.)
  - Broad job role (teacher, early years practitioner, manager etc.)
  - Geographic location of setting (electoral ward or the name of the town/village
- Must be employed in one of the following job roles (or equivalent):
  - Teacher
  - Early Years Practitioner/Assistant
  - Teaching Assistant
  - (Assistant) Headteacher
  - (Assistant) Head of Early Years
  - (Assistant) Nursery Manager
  - Nursery Owner
  - Childminder

Figure 7 Inclusion criteria for practitioner participants

5.28 Recruitment of Trainee Practitioners

Following the release of the online survey to practitioners and parents it was decided that it would also be useful to capture the views of current trainee practitioners since they would shortly be entering the field of working with children in early years settings and would therefore be involved in the care and education of young children. The decision to involve trainees was made to involve the next generation of practitioner to gather the views of people entering the profession in order to understand their interpretations prior to working in the sector.

Inclusion criteria for individual practitioner participants:
- Must be enrolled at the participant higher education institution.
- Must have access to the internet (on a mobile device or computer).
- Must be in either the second or third year of an undergraduate course or on a PGCE course.
- Must be studying one of the following subjects (or equivalent) as their main degree subject:
  - Early Childhood
  - Early Years
  - Primary Education
  - Education Studies

Figure 8 Inclusion criteria for trainee practitioner participants

Therefore, invitations to participate were circulated to universities within the West Midlands region offering teacher training courses or courses in early years. One institution agreed to participate in the study and information (see appendix 2.4) was then provided to all students in their second or third year of primary education, early childhood or education studies courses and students on postgraduate teacher training courses using inclusion criteria similar to those for parent and practitioner participants (see fig 8). Initially trainees were invited to participate in an adapted version of the online practitioner survey, and they

were offered the option to also volunteer for an interview although no trainee participants took up this opportunity.

5.3 Working with the Data

5.31 Thematic Analysis Approach

Thematic analysis seeks to identify and describe a series of underlying themes emerging from a given data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis provides a flexible approach to analysing data which is well suited to qualitative projects (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2014; Braun et al., 2014) and as the approach itself is not grounded in specific theory it ensures that the report and it's findings remain accessible to professionals working in the field as well as academics (Braun and Clarke, 2014). This is particularly important in close to practice research such as this project. Whilst thematic analysis is often poorly understood and under-valued as a method of analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Boyatzis, 1998; Roulston, 2001), through the use of robust processes and thorough analysis it can provide a very useful approach to analysing and interpreting qualitative data (Boyatzis, 1998). In order to ensure that the depth of analysis is achieved, and that thematic analysis is carried out properly and thoroughly it is important that a six-phase process is followed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This process was adopted for this project and is outlined below.

5.32 Familiarisation with the Data

Since all of the data was collected by the researcher, they already had some knowledge of what was contained within it. However, as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) it was still important that they listened back to the recordings of the interviews and read the survey responses multiple times before moving on to transcription in order that they could begin to take notes and form preliminary ideas of the themes and ideas that may be extracted from it during coding. This step was continuously revisited throughout the

coding process as the patterns and ideas emerging from the data became more apparent

(Braun and Clarke, 2006).

5.33 Transcription

Following this the researcher completed the transcription process themself. Cohen,

Manion and Morrison (2017) suggest that the process of transcription is vital and that it is

not simply a technical and administrative task but rather a process of transforming a

conversation into an analytic text and that during this process there is inevitably a degree of

data loss unless the transcription is carried out by the interviewer themselves. Through

transcribing all of the recordings the researcher was able to ensure that all relevant data

was included in the transcription and that notes were also made about body language and

facial expression where necessary. This helped to ensure that the inevitable loss of data

through transcription described by Cohen et al. (2017) was kept to a minimum.

Furthermore, transcribing the data allowed the researcher to become increasingly familiar

with the data (Riessman, 1993) and begin to extract meanings and patterns from the data

sets (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999).

5.34 First Coding Cycle

Following transcription, coding of the interview and survey data was carried out by

highlighting and drawing out themes from within the data sets, a process described by

Glesne (2011) as a "progressive process of … putting like-minded pieces together into data

clumps to create an organisational framework" (p.133). Multiple coding cycles are required

to fully analyse the data as different cycles produce different codes and the more cycles the

data is put through the greater the depth of the analysis (Saldana, 2016). Therefore, the

data gathered from interviews and surveys in this project was processed through a series of

coding cycles.

Through the transcription process some clear key ideas began to emerge from the data and the researcher became drawn to words and phrases within the data that called for highlighting and emboldening. Therefore, during the first coding cycle In Vivo coding was utilised to use the participant's voices to produce codes in order to accurately capture and preserve the meanings of the experiences the participants talked about (Charmaz, 2014; Stringer, 2014). As suggested by Saldana (2016) these codes were carefully recorded using quotation marks to attribute them clearly to the participants rather than them being presented as ideas constructed by the researcher. Once a series of In Vivo codes had been identified further processing occurred to organise the codes into clusters using provisional overarching themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldana, 2016).

5.35 Second Coding Cycle – Searching for Themes

Following the In Vivo coding carried out in cycle one it was important to develop an organisational structure to highlight the major and minor themes emerging from the data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In order to achieve this Focused Coding (Charmaz, 2014) was employed to assign representative codes to the In Vivo codes and to organise the existing code clusters from cycle one into a structure of major and minor themes.

To further process the data, Axial Coding was utilised to reorganise the themes and to create dominant representative codes (Boeije, 2010) in order that the "the code is sharpened" (Glaser, 1978 p. 62) and any synonyms or inappropriate codes are removed. This process created the titles and subtitles used during analysis by re-assembling the codes and themes that were separated during the first coding cycle (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to create an interwoven, complex interpretation of the key ideas and themes emerging from the data set (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This process created a collection of major and minor themes arising from the data which were vital for the next stage of analysis.

5.36 Reviewing the Emerging Themes

This stage involved evaluating the major and minor themes that had arisen from the coding process and refining them to produce the final themes appearing in the report. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), this process was conducted in two stages. Initially the themes were reviewed individually, and the data extracts coded against each theme were revisited to check that they were relevant and that they provided enough information to form a robust theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It was important at this stage that the themes and the data within them created a "coherent pattern" (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 20) and this was checked in the first review stage. At this point a mapping of the themes was carried out to visually represent the emerging themes.

Once this had been ascertained the second stage involved reviewing the data set as a whole. The theme map was used to check that the mapping of the entire data set accurately represented the raw data. Consequently, it was necessary to re-read the entire data set again to check the accuracy of the themes and to ensure that no themes had been missed from the initial coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

5.37 Refining the Final Themes

Using the map of themes from the previous stage each theme was refined and finalised versions of each theme were created which then formed the titles of the analysis chapters in the report. At this stage it was also important to highlight any sub-themes within each theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006) which then formed sub-headings for sections within the analysis chapters.

5.4 Research Integrity

5.41 Trustworthiness

It was important that this study was conducted in a way that ensured that it was trustworthy. Corbin and Strauss (2008) suggest that this can be done through the way in

which the report is presented and that for it to be effective there must be enough detail for the reader to feel a part of the study in addition to comprehensive information about the methods used to undertake the research and analyse the data.

Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 restrictions the researcher was unable to visit participant settings to build relationships and collect detailed information on a face-to-face basis. However, by inviting participants to complete the online survey prior to volunteering for an interview this helped the researcher to gather some information about each participant prior to interview. During the interviews an in-depth episodic narrative technique was used to elicit as much detail as possible from each participant in order that the researcher was able to analyse each set of data as thoroughly as possible. This detail has been included in the report in the form of vignettes and quotations to build a true reflection of each participant's contribution.

The concept of trustworthiness in the research context is comprised of four key elements; credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Patton, 1999). This section will explore each element in turn and explain it's relevance to this study.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the truthfulness of the findings of a qualitative project (Lincoln and Guba, 1989). There are multiple strategies available to researchers to ensure the credibility of their findings. For the purpose of this study the researcher used the strategies of prolonged engagement, member checking and triangulation (Lincoln and Guba, 1989; Patton, 1999).

The researcher engaged in a prolonged period of data collection which was split into two main phases. Firstly, the online survey was conducted with a wide sample of

participants. This was followed by the second phase where the researcher conducted interviews with a small number of participants. There was an intentional gap between the two phases of the data collection in order that the researcher could process and respond to the data from the first phase before commencing the interview phase, something which is vital when conducting studies with multiple methods (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989).

Member checking was then used to ensure that the interview findings were consistent with the true thoughts and experiences of the participants. All interview participants were invited to review their own interview content and to make changes if they felt their views had not been captured accurately (Bryman, 2012; Lincoln and Guba, 1989). Four participants took up this opportunity and entered into constructive professional discussions with the researcher (Bryman, 2012).

In order to address credibility, triangulation of the data across the individual participants and the different participant groups has been used. This approach was selected since the data collection methods are the same across the participants, meaning that method triangulation (Gray, 2014) was not possible, but the presence of multiple individual participants and participant settings enabled me to carry out multi layered data triangulation. Initially triangulation of individuals within each setting was conducted, followed by wider triangulation of the data output from each setting. Whilst it could be argued that triangulation is carried out to contribute towards validity (Denzin, 1970), it is suggested by Flick (2008) that it is in fact an alternative to validity as opposed to a component of it. Therefore, in this study triangulation was carried out to add rigour and to ensure the accuracy of the data.

Dependability refers to the degree to which the findings of the current study are likely to be consistent across different time periods or conditions (Billups, 2021). Whilst this study has not been subject to formal external review in the sense that Billups (2021) advocates, there have been multiple opportunities for other researchers in a similar field to evaluate and assess the findings. This is crucial to ensure that the interpretation of the researcher is consistent with that of others in the field (Miles, Huberman and Saldana, 2014).

In addition to the formal examination provided by the internal reader and internal and external examiners of this study, the findings have also been disseminated in a variety of ways. The early findings were presented by the researcher in the following publications:

- *Birmingham City University - We are All Born Equal? The importance of tackling social inequalities in the first five years*. (Malpass, 2021)

- *Centre for Research into Early Childhood - Rising Social Inequality Post Covid-19 – an individual or societal concern?* (Malpass, 2022a)

In addition, the findings of the project have also been presented at the following national and international conferences:

- British Early Childhood Education Research Association Annual Conference - *Exploring the Perceptions of Early Years Professionals of Social Inequality in the Early Years.* (Malpass, 2022b)

- European Early Childhood Education Research Association Annual Conference - *Exploring the Perceptions of the Relationship Between Social Inequality,*

Wellbeing and a Child's Affordances to Play Through the Lens of Practitioners and Parents. (Malpass, 2022c)

Furthermore, the findings from this study which relate to social background and its relationship with wellbeing were presented at one of the participant settings as part of an early years educators networking event:

- *Wellbeing in the Early Years Setting and Beyond.* (Malpass and Kettle, 2023)

There has been considerable interest in the findings of this project from both academic and early years practitioner audiences alike. The researcher now plans to prepare the findings of this project for publication in both academic journals and practitioner publications.

Transferability

It is important to acknowledge that, since this project is a small-scale qualitative research project with limited numbers of participants, it is not possible for this research to be statistically generalisable (Billups, 2021). Further to this there has been criticism of the case study method as it is seen to produce non-generalisable and narrow evidence (Denscombe, 2011). Despite this, since this research was carried out with participants from multiple settings and interviews were carried out with more than one practitioner from each job role in addition to surveying multiple parents across different setting types and across the geographical area of the West Midlands, it is possible to make 'fuzzy generalisations' (Bassey, 2001) or naturalistic generalisations (Stake, 1994; Stake and Trumbull, 1982) even within small scale projects such as this one.

To achieve this, it was important that the data provided sufficient detail to be able to produce 'thick description' and detailed analysis (Denzin, 2001; Geertz, 1973). According to Geertz (1973) thick description involves the researcher using detailed notes and in-depth

data collection techniques in order that they can suggest whether the results of a study are likely to be reproduced in a different context, with different participants or at a different time. These suggestions form the fuzzy generalisations (Bassey, 2001) or naturalistic generalisations (Stake, 1994; Stake and Trumbull, 1982) important to qualitative research studies.

It is acknowledged that due to conducting interviews with several practitioners from each job role category and with multiple parent survey responses, the researcher was able to use their professional knowledge and the evidence that had been collected to make a judgement of transferability in the case of this project (Bassey, 2001).

Confirmability

Confirmability in qualitative research often involves the researcher engaging in reflexive practice (Patton, 2015). Reflexivity is an important component of qualitative research (Bannister et al., 1994; Bonner, 2001; Simons, 2009) as it allows the researcher an opportunity to consider the ways in which they might have influenced decisions made within the research process and to employ strategies to address these in order to remain transparent and to ensure research integrity. Denscombe (2011) suggests that reflexivity is important to address the idea that researchers working within the social world cannot be objective since they are living within that same social world as the participants and consequently, they have their own assumptions and interpretations that influence their decision making.

Therefore, reflexivity was adopted in this study since the researcher has close connections to the research area in terms of their previous professional experience (see Chapter One, sections 1.2 and 1.3). This means that they have their own interpretations and ideas about the relationships between social structure, wellbeing and early years and

therefore it would be impossible for them to have remained entirely objective. In order to address this, a statement of subjectivity is included at the beginning of the project (Simons, 2009) in order to remain transparent about their personal and professional connections to the study (see Chapter One: Introduction). Further to this, in order to remain reflexive throughout the process the researcher completed a reflexive diary which gave them the opportunity to reflect upon their decisions and how these decisions might influence the research (Coffey and Atkinson, 1966). It also provided a way in which to separate their own thoughts, assumptions and perceptions and to minimise the effect of these on the research. They completed the reflexive diary throughout the data collection and analysis period on a daily basis, as suggested by Bannister et al. (1994) in order to acknowledge thoughts but to ensure that they remained separate from the study itself.

5.42 Ethical Considerations

Before any participant recruitment or data collection took place an application for ethical approval was submitted to the Birmingham City University Ethics Committee. This submission was considered by the committee and approval was given on 10th September 2020 (see appendix 1.1). Throughout the project careful consideration was given to ensuring that the project remained ethically sound. Any changes to the initial research design were communicated with the Ethics Committee and further approval was sought before continuing. Approval of the amendments made to the participant recruitment and data collection methods for this study was received on 2nd March 2021 (see appendix 1.2). The British Educational Research Association [BERA] Ethical Guidelines (BERA, 2018) and The British Sociological Association [BSA] Ethical Guidelines (BSA, 2017) were followed throughout the project.

Prior to giving consent, it is important that participants understand that they are

giving someone permission to involve them in a piece of research (Faden and Beauchamp,

1986). Further to this, as identified by Simons (2009), it is vital that all participants have free

access to enough information about a research project before they decide whether they are

happy to participate or not. Therefore, in order for the settings and each individual to make

an informed decision comprehensive information was provided before asking for consent.

Each potential setting was provided with a full information pack giving details about the

project and their commitment should they choose to participate (see appendix 2.1). The

manager or headteacher of the setting or a senior member of staff in the case of training

providers was then asked to complete a permission of access form (see appendices 3.1 –

Early Years Settings and 3.2 – Training Providers) which granted permission for the

researcher to access the setting or institution for the purposes of carrying out the research.

As suggested by Stake (1994) information sheets were also supplied to be circulated

amongst relevant members of staff and parents within the setting to inform them of the

project and to invite them to participate should they wish to (see appendices 2.2 -

Practitioners and 2.5 - Parents). These information sheets contained a summary of the full

pack with details on how the full pack could be accessed should an individual wish to view it.

Any practitioners and parents who were contacted individually through internet contact

were also given the information sheet and details of how to access more information should

they wish to (see appendices 2.3 – Practitioners and 2.6 - Parents). As suggested by Punch

(2014) consent is best obtained through a procedure where participants have to actively

sign to confirm they wish to participate and therefore, since this project involved adult

participants who were able to give written informed consent this is the approach that was

taken for all interview participants (see appendix 4.1). Taking into account the suggestion from BERA (2018) that researchers should be sensitive to participants wishing to withdraw this initial consent, further recorded verbal consent was sought at the beginning of every interview. For practitioners, trainees and parents taking part in the online survey, information about the project was provided on the introduction screen to the survey and this was followed by a screen requesting consent from the participant prior to them answering any of the survey questions (see appendix 4.2). This provided participants with the option of not continuing with the survey after reading the introductory information. In line with BERA (2018) and BSA (2017) requirements, all participant information provided participants with the reasons why they had been asked to participate, their commitment if they chose to participate, what would happen to their information and how it would be used.

Right to Withdraw

All participants were provided with written confirmation that they had the right to withdraw from the project and that they could do this without providing a reason. They were also informed of how to exercise this right, and a range of contact details were provided including the researcher's email address and telephone number. Participants were also made aware that, in line with BERA (2018) and BSA (2017) guidelines, their data would not be used in the data analysis should they choose to withdraw prior to the data analysis and report writing stage. Participants were given information about when this stage was likely to occur and that whilst every effort would be made to remove their data from the study, once this point had been reached it may not be possible to entirely remove their data. It was, however, made clear that no new data would be sought from them at any point after they had made the decision to withdraw.

In line with guidance from BERA (2018) and BSA (2017) great care was taken when using online social media platforms to recruit participants and these platforms were only used as a recruiting tool and not to collect data in order that participants' anonymity could be safeguarded. All participating settings are referred to using pseudonyms throughout in order to protect their anonymity. These pseudonyms bear no resemblance to the actual name of any of the participant settings and other identifying information such as their location has not been included in the report. Individual participants were also anonymised at the point of transcription in order to protect their anonymity at the earliest opportunity. Individuals were fictionalised using pseudonyms since this is the advised method of anonymisation in guidance from both BERA (2018) and BSA (2017). In line with the General Data Protection Regulation [GDPR] (2018) and the subsequent Data Protection Act (2018) participants were fully informed on the participant information sheet and subsequently verbally reminded during the project, about what information was held about them, for what reason and how long it will be held for.

During data collection online survey participants remained anonymous unless they chose to share contact details to participate in the interview phase of the project. If these details were provided, they were separated from the survey responses immediately upon receipt in order that the participant was not identifiable. Individual interviews were conducted on the online audio-visual platform, Microsoft Teams, using a BCU encrypted laptop. Individual participants were asked to provide consent to recording prior to the interview and were given the opportunity to turn off their video camera in order that their face was not recorded should they have wished to. All interviews were recorded using the recording software embedded in the audio-visual platform and in line with university policy

and the Data Protection Act (2018) recordings were stored on an encrypted BCU device and in the safe storage One Drive folder provided by the university. Once transcription of each interview had taken place recordings were destroyed and transcriptions were stored on the encrypted device and in the safe storage folder. Any physical copies of data were stored in a locked drawer at all times.

6: Survey Findings

6.1 Introduction

The survey element of this study was conducted using Online Surveys software. This allowed the researcher to comply with all relevant Covid-19 rules surrounding data collection whilst also progressing with this project. Survey participants were recruited using online methods, through a combination of social media posts and direct messages to known practitioners and parents. There were also pieces placed in online bulletins designed for practitioners. Potential participants from each of the three participant settings received email invitations from the manager of their setting which included the participant information and consent forms provided by the researcher. The findings which follow are a combination of the responses from participants from the participant settings and the wider early years community.

6.2 Professionals Survey Findings

6.21 Context

The survey was circulated widely using a range of channels (see Chapter Five: Methodology and Methods). There were 21 responses to the early years practitioner survey. Of these responses, eight were from members of staff within the participant settings and thirteen were from the wider early years community. Respondents were based in a range of different types of setting although almost half of the responses came from staff in private day nurseries (see table 1). However, 16 out of 21 respondents had previously worked in an alternative type of setting and of those, seven had worked in more than one different type of setting previously.

Type of Setting	Number of Respondents
Private Day Nursery	9
Pre-school	3
Maintained Primary	1
Primary Academy	2
Childminder	1
Specialist Provision	1
Independent School	1
Multiple settings	3

Table 1 Respondents Current Setting

Practitioners worked with children throughout the target age range of birth to five (see table 2), with the most responses coming from practitioners working with toddlers (defined as age 2-3) or pre-schoolers (defined as children in the academic year before starting school). The majority of respondents (18 of 21) indicated that they worked with more than one age group as part of their role. Three respondents stated that they worked with all ages from birth to age seven but most respondents who indicated that they worked with different ages stated that they worked either with both toddlers and pre-schoolers or with babies (children under the age of two), toddlers and pre-schoolers. Those practitioners who worked with children outside the target age range (those in key stage one) also worked with at least one age group within the target range.

Age Group	Number of Respondents
Babies (Birth – 2)	7
Toddlers (2-3 years)	15
Pre-School (3-4 years)	9
Reception (4-5 years)	8
Key Stage One (5-7 years)	8

Table 2 Respondents Current Age Group(s)

Of the 21 responses 20 were completed by practitioners who identified as female. This is representative of the disproportionate number of females working in the sector.

There was one response from a practitioner who identified as male. This respondent indicated that they worked within a maintained primary school as a class teacher. Therefore, there were no responses from males working within pre-school provision of any kind either in the private or maintained sector. The majority of respondents were aged between 31 and 50 (12 of 21) and 14 out of 21 had been working with children from birth to five for five or more years.

Respondents held a range of different job titles (see table 3) and seven out of 21 respondents held Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) or Early Years Professional Status (EYPS). Of the remaining respondents, 11 held at least a level three qualification in a related subject and four of the 21 respondents held postgraduate qualifications (Level 7) in Education.

Job Title	Number of Respondents
Class Teacher	3
Teaching Assistant/Higher Level Teaching Assistant	2
Childminder	1
Nursery Manager	3
Deputy Nursery Manager	2
Nursery Practitioner	5
Associated Health Professional (SALT, OT, Health Visitor etc.)	2
Early Years Advisor/Specialist Teacher	3

Table 3 Respondent's Current Job Titles

6.22 Social Inequality

When asked what social inequality meant to them some practitioners gave very detailed responses showing a deeper consideration of the term whilst others gave more general, simplistic answers such as "social differences" and "not having fair access compared to peers". There were some common ideas in most respondents' ideas. All participants agreed that people were at the centre of social inequality and several

respondents also mentioned education, society and access as key terms linked to social inequality. Whilst the practitioners held different views of what social inequality meant to them, 19 of the 21 respondents agreed that household income and parental childhood experiences contribute to whether a child experiences social inequality.

Additionally, 16 respondents also identified parental occupation and parents' level of education as factors affecting social inequality. Fewer practitioners (nine of 21) suggested that educational and social policy and the national economic situation had an effect.

When asked which factors social inequality influences, all respondents agreed that child mental health is affected by social inequality. 20 of 21 participants also identified adult mental health, adult self-image and levels of happiness and satisfaction as factors affected by inequality. Interestingly, despite 20 respondents identifying household income as a factor contributing to social inequality, only 15 participants indicated that income was affected by inequality. Less commonly identified factors also included infant mortality rates (11 of 21) and life expectancy (12 of 21).

6.23 Wellbeing

When asked about wellbeing practitioners had a wider range of views in terms of the factors which affect a child's wellbeing. Respondents were asked to select three factors from a list of 14 options formulated from a review of the current literature available on wellbeing indicators for children in the UK (National Institute for Clinical Excellence [NICE], 2012; The Children's Society, 2020; Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2020; UNICEF, 2020). 19 respondents agreed that a child's relationship with their parents or main care giver was important for their wellbeing. This was closely followed by 17 participants identifying children having their basic needs met as important for safeguarding wellbeing. However,

remaining responses were much more mixed, with at least one respondent selecting all of

the other available options, with the exception of 'other' (see table 4 for detail).

Factor	Number of Responses
Relationship with parents or main care giver	*19*
Basic needs met (e.g. food, clothing, sanitation etc)	*17*
Home environment (e.g. overcrowding, basic facilities etc)	*13*
Relationship with Peers	*12*
Parental involvement in substance abuse	*9*
Happiness at school/nursery	*7*
Mental health difficulties	*6*
Access to outdoor play	*6*
Access to funded early years education	*5*
Long term health condition/disability	*3*
Household income	*3*
Access to cultural activities	*1*
Premature Birth/Low Birth Weight	*1*
Other	*0*

Table 4 Spread of Responses to "Factors which affect a Child's Wellbeing"

Alarmingly, nine of the 21 respondents answered either disagree or strongly disagree

to the statement 'Early years settings do a good job of promoting children's wellbeing'. Of

these, one respondent strongly disagreed with the statement citing that whilst "early years

settings, childcare before school is fantastic, children are then badly let down in their first

years at school so whilst pre-school settings do promote wellbeing, the same cannot be said

for schools which is where children end their early years" (Participant AC). A common theme

arising from this statement is that of a lack of time and one to one attention. Several

respondents mentioned that many early years settings are large and "impersonal", that they

struggle "to meet needs with too much structure and not enough free play" (Participant AA)

and that "it is hard to deal with each child as an individual" (Participant AD). Interestingly

only two respondents (Participants AB and AD) referred to insufficient funding as a reason

for not promoting wellbeing, although others did mention poor ratios and underqualified staff which are both factors affected by funding levels. Of the participants who selected a negative response to this question six were members of staff working in private day nurseries in non-managerial roles.

In contrast nine respondents also either agreed or strongly agreed that settings do a good job of promoting wellbeing. Of these, three participants explained selecting this option, giving three differing reasons. Participant AG suggested that settings promote wellbeing by "teaching resilience" which gives children "the confidence to try". Similarly participant AM mentioned that early years settings "give children the opportunity for developmental success through adult time in a non-competing environment giving them the chance to develop skills for life-long learning". All those who agreed with the statement were either nursery managers, class teachers or early years advisors which indicates that those in more senior roles perhaps hold different opinions to those more junior staff.

When asked about the signs that indicate a good level of wellbeing 19 respondents included "persistence and engagement in activities" in their responses. 20 out of the 21 participants also selected "showing trust and affection to adults and peers" and 17 selected "curiosity to explore new things". Conversely only seven participants selected "body movement", eight chose "facial expressions" and eight opted for "level of development" as important factors when assessing wellbeing. Despite this, two of the participants who selected these elements indicated that they felt that body language and physical appearance were the most important factors when assessing wellbeing. Of the rest of the participants nine suggested that relationships were the most important, with eight using the word "trust" in their response. This word, used in the context of adult-child relationship

suggests that these participants place value on the attachments that the children in their care make to significant adults. This idea will be explored further in the discussion of these findings. The remaining respondents gave a range of responses, but all were related to self-regulation of emotions, resilience and holistic development. These responses suggest that practitioners place more value upon a child's behaviour, attitude and relationships than their physical appearance when using these factors to determine levels of wellbeing.

Within these responses it is important to consider the relationship between the roles that the professionals hold and their response to the question. The professionals who selected physical appearance as the most important indicator both identified as Nursery Practitioners, and both held a Level Three qualification in Childcare. In contrast, all respondents who held either QTS or EYPS selected an emotional aspect as the most important indicator. Responses from these participants were varied, with engagement, relationships, resilience and levels of happiness all mentioned but all responses were related to a child's emotional and social development as opposed to physical appearance.

The importance of positive relationships continued to be mentioned by 19 out of the 21 respondents when asked what their setting does to promote wellbeing. 19 participants reported that their setting promotes a positive emotional climate through a happy and caring environment. Further to this, 18 respondents also suggested that their settings observe children closely to learn about their strengths and weaknesses and support children to explore their feelings and behaviour. Interestingly, although participants were free to select as many options as they wished for this question, only 12 out of the 21 reported that their setting planned to reflect children's interests and provided stimulating interventions for children who needed more support. This is worrying given the emphasis placed upon

child led learning and planning based on children's interests within the early years foundation stage document (DfE, 2023b). Some of the reasons given by respondents for not being able to adopt these strategies included time constraints, a high child to adult ratio, management expectations and financial pressures. These issues will be explored further in the discussion of these findings.

6.24 Play

When practitioners were asked to think about factors which affect children's ability to play 16 out of 21 respondents selected availability of space and parental support as two of the five most influential factors. Access to early education and access to toys were also selected by several respondents (14 each) and parental education, child's language development, cognitive ability and family socio-economic status were all selected by at least three respondents (see table 5). Practitioners did not feel that a child's gender or ethnicity or their parent's disposable income was influential on their ability to play as these options all received zero selections.

Factor	Number of Responses
Availability of space	16
Parental support	16
Access to toys and resources	14
Access to early education	14
Child's language development	6
Child's cognitive ability	5
Parents level of education	4
Media influences	4
Family socio-economic status	3
Other (role models, modelling of how to play)	3
Parents' disposable income	0
Child's gender	0
Child's ethnicity	0

Table 5 Factors which affect children's ability to play (Options formulated using evidence from literature on play (The Children's Society, 2020; Neilsen, 2020; Stirrup et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2020))

The majority of practitioners (16) reported that the increase in availability of toys and resources has had a positive or very positive influence on children's play experiences over time. In addition, 14 out of 21 practitioners reported that they felt that the availability of toys was either very influential or somewhat influential on children's experiences of play. Practitioners were clear in their responses, however, that whilst toys are important it is also important that children are taught how to use resources appropriately in order that they are beneficial to a child's experience. Conversely three practitioners suggested that they felt availability of resources has had a negative effect upon children's play. These three practitioners all reported that toys are important but that too many toys can limit children's creativity and imagination.

Similar results were recorded when practitioners were asked about the influence of the availability of outdoor space. 13 practitioners reported that the availability of outdoor space was either very influential or somewhat influential upon children's play experiences. 14 respondents selected either that outdoor space had a positive or very positive influence and only three practitioners suggested a negative or very negative effect. Practitioners commented upon the importance of outdoor play for the development of gross motor skills and the benefits of risky outdoor play for building resilience and problem-solving skills.

When practitioners were asked about the influence of early education on play experiences all participants reported a positive (10), very positive (9) or neutral (2) effect upon children's experience of play in the early years. However, only eight practitioners felt that early education was either very or somewhat influential in children's play, with six giving a neutral response and seven practitioners suggesting that early education is not particularly influential upon children's play experiences. Two practitioners commented

further upon the importance of early education, both suggesting that early education is important in order that children have an opportunity to learn how to play through careful modelling and structured support.

In contrast to this, when asked about the influence of technology on play, 12 practitioners indicated that technology is very or somewhat influential upon children's play. Four practitioners reported a negative effect and five a neutral response. Only six respondents suggested that technology has had a positive effect on children's experiences of play. Of those who recorded a negative response, five practitioners reported concerns surrounding the over use of technology and the over reliance upon technology by parents. Four practitioners also commented on the risk that a reliance upon technology means that many children are entering their setting without basic social skills and without knowing how to play. However, two participants reported that positive interactions with technology can provide key learning experiences for children and an opportunity to communicate with friends and family that they wouldn't normally see, and that adult supported technology use is encouraged within their settings.

A more mixed response was given when practitioners were asked about safety, with seven practitioners reporting a negative effect, nine a positive or very positive effect and five a neutral influence. When asked to expand upon these responses four practitioners reported concerns that parents and settings were too worried about health and safety and litigation and that this has had a negative effect upon how much children are encouraged to engage in risky play. Another two practitioners mentioned that they thought the world was a less safe place for children to play and that they felt that this limited children's freedom and space to explore and play freely.

When practitioners were asked to think about the three most important benefits that are afforded to children who have rich play experiences in their early years, 13 out of the 21 participants highlighted that play is beneficial to children's speech and language development. Further to this, 10 practitioners selected mental health and wellbeing and 12 chose development of lifelong learning skills as important benefits of play. A smaller number of responses (see table 6) were collected for social skills, development of creativity, cognitive development and physical development and interestingly no participants selected physical health as an important benefit of play.

Benefit	Number of Responses
Speech and Language Development	13
Developing skills for lifelong learning	12
Mental Health and Wellbeing	10
Social skills development	9
Development of creativity and imagination	9
Cognitive development	4
Physical Development	4
Other (processing experiences)	1
Physical Health	0

Table 6 Practitioner responses to benefits of rich play experiences (formulated using evidence from literature on play (The Children's Society, 2020; Neilsen, 2020; Stirrup et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2020)).

When asked to explain their choices practitioners have commented upon the importance of these factors as foundations for later development and one practitioner in particular discussed their importance for development through to adulthood. Two practitioners commented upon these areas being more difficult to attain at home, particularly for children who come from "chaotic homes" (Participant AC) and that a lack of these skills "seems to be the biggest barrier to getting on in life" (Participant AF).

Participants were asked to think about the effect that the Covid-19 pandemic had had upon the wellbeing of the children with whom they worked. All participants indicated that children's wellbeing had been negatively affected by the pandemic. Furthermore, 13 practitioners reported that they had observed increased signs of anxiety in the children that they worked with during the pandemic. When asked to select possible reasons for this, all participants selected the limited access they had to parent and child groups and classes during the pandemic as an important factor. 19 participants also indicated that children had been negatively affected by parental stress over finances and health, limits placed upon spending time with family and friends and limited access to leisure facilities such as swimming pools and sports centres.

17 practitioners indicated that they had experienced some negative effects on children's wellbeing due to parental job insecurity and 17 practitioners commented that the limited access to education and mother and toddler groups had a negative effect upon children. Although 13 participants indicated that most children had benefitted from the increase in time spent with their parents and siblings, 12 out of 21 respondents had seen children affected by a fall in parents' income and seven reported that for some children the increase in the time spent at home negatively affected their wellbeing. Interestingly only seven practitioners reported that the children that they worked with asked questions about the pandemic which suggests that young children have been affected but have been unable to articulate their fears and worries, perhaps due to their young age and underdeveloped speech and language skills.

When asked to comment generally upon Covid-19 and their setting, six participants expressed concerns that there are many children now starting at settings with delayed

speech and language and social skills due to staying at home for so long during the lockdowns. Further to this participant AE also reported that parents, particularly from the lower socio-economic backgrounds, have struggled with behaviour management and the nursery has seen an increase in behavioural issues and parental anxiety and fatigue since returning after lockdown. However, three participants highlighted that the children had been "more resilient than we give them credit for" (participant AF) and more adaptable than they had expected them to be and that they had settled back into a routine much more easily than many of the adults.

All participants were asked to indicate whether their setting had been closed at any point due to Covid-19 restrictions. Of the thirteen respondents, just five worked in settings that had seen closures although all settings had been open only to children of key workers during national lockdowns. Seven participants also reported a reduction in the number of children attending their setting regardless of whether it was open or not, stating parental anxiety as the reason for five out of those seven settings and fewer enquiries from new families for the other two.

6.3 Trainee Survey Findings
6.31 Context

Opportunities to participate in this study were circulated on three separate occasions, both through internal online course pages and, once Covid-19 restrictions eased, through face-to-face presentations made by the researcher. Whilst only one university was involved in this project, approximately three hundred students were invited to participate across three courses and two different year groups but disappointingly only eleven responded to the invitations. Of those who responded, five participants were studying on a specific early years course, three on an Initial Teacher Training (ITT) course and three on a

broader Education Studies course. Seven of the participants were in their final year of study with the other four in their second year of three.

Of the eleven respondents nine identified as female and two as male which is reflective of the disproportionate number of females in the early years sector. Seven respondents identified as White British, with one identifying as being from a Mixed background, two Pakistani and one Indian. This is not representative of the university cohorts since there are a larger proportion of students from a BAME background on each course than this sample shows. Ten of the eleven trainees identified as being under the age of 30, with four aged 18-20, four aged 21-23 and two aged 24-29. The final student identified as being aged 50 years or over. It is also important to note that all eleven trainees declared that they are not parents of any children under the age of 18 themselves.

Trainees had experience of a variety of early years settings, either from previous employment or from placements on their course. Seven trainees indicated that they had experience of a maintained primary school and five of a maintained nursery school. In contrast only three had experience of a private day nursery. A small number had also had experiences in secondary schools, community playgroups, special schools and specialist SEND provision for Post 16's (see table 7 for details). This shows a much wider spread of experience than that shown by the practitioner responses in the previous chapter (see practitioner findings). Additionally, whereas the majority of the respondents in the practitioner survey were working in private day nurseries, only a small number of the trainee respondents have had experience in a private setting.

Type of Setting	Number of Participants
Maintained Primary School or Academy	7
Maintained Nursery School	5
Private Day Nursery	3
Independent School	0
Childminder	0
Community Playgroup	2
Special School	1
Other (Post 16 SEND provision)	1

Table 7 Previous experience of trainees broken down by type of setting

Trainee respondents also reported experience of working with a wider range of year groups than the practitioner participants. Trainees reported working with children ranging from birth up to year six, with the most common age groups being 3-4 years (7 participants) and 12months – 3 years and Reception (both 5 participants). This contrasts with the practitioner participants of whom more reported experience of children from birth to Year One, but fewer participants had experience of children from Year Two onwards (see table 8).

Age Group Worked With	Number of Trainee Participants	Number of Practitioner Participants
Birth to 12 months	2	6
12 months to 3 years	5	6
3-4 years	7	7
Reception	5	9
Year 1	2	6
Year 2	3	4
Year 3	1	1
Year 4	1	0
Year 5	2	0
Year 6	2	0

Table 8 Age groups worked with broken down by participant type

149

6.32 Social Inequality

When asked what social inequality meant to them, ten out of the eleven participants gave detailed responses, drawing upon ideas about social class, wealth, opportunity and background. The eleventh participant gave a more simplistic view that social inequality means people "don't have equal rights" (Participant BF) but did not choose to expand upon this. All participants were clear that people are at the centre of social inequality and eight respondents included reference to accessing opportunities within their response.

These responses were also reinforced when trainees were asked to select factors which contribute towards social inequality. All eleven participants suggested that household income and parental occupation have an influence on social inequality with nine also suggesting that parental education has an influence. Fewer trainees indicated that wider societal influences such as globalisation (2 participants), political attitudes (4 participants) and the national economic situation (5 participants) influence social inequality.

When asked what factors social inequality influences, all eleven participants agreed that adult mental health and community crime levels are affected. Eight participants indicated that levels of happiness, school leavers' attainment and household income are influenced by social inequality and seven selected life expectancy and child mental health. Fewer trainees indicated that physical wellness (6), self-image (5) or infant mortality (3) are affected by social inequality.

6.33 Wellbeing

Participants were asked to identify three factors which most affect children's wellbeing from a list of fourteen options. Ten out of the eleven respondents selected "basic needs" and nine indicated "home environment" and "relationship with parents" are important factors for wellbeing. Just under half of the respondents (five of eleven) selected

happiness at school/nursery and parental involvement in substance/alcohol abuse as most influential factors. Other options were selected less frequently (see table 9 for detail).

Factor	Number of responses
Basic Needs	10
Home Environment	9
Relationship with Parents	9
Happiness at school/nursery	5
Parental involvement in substance/alcohol abuse	5
Household income	4
Participation in cultural activities	3
Participation in outdoor play	2
Premature or low birth weight	2
Presence of disability or long-term health condition	2
Access to funded early years education	2
Relationship with peers	1
Mental health concerns	1
Parental education levels	0

Table 9 Spread of Responses to "Factors which affect a Child's Wellbeing" (taken from literature on child wellbeing factors (NICE, 2012; The Children's Society, 2020; ONS, 2020; UNICEF, 2020)).

When participants were asked why they had selected these options eight participants commented upon the importance of parents in a child's early development and wellbeing. Other reasons included parental income being important to allow children to have a wide range of experiences and being happy at school or nursery as a vital pre-cursor to effective early learning.

Alarmingly, in line with the opinions expressed by practitioners, only six out of eleven trainees indicated that they thought early years settings do a good job of promoting wellbeing. The overwhelming reason given for this (four of the five trainees who selected 'disagree') was that some settings are too focused on outcomes and data and often settings are too large to treat each child as an individual. Conversely ten trainees felt that they had learnt sufficiently about children's wellbeing on their training course and eight felt well

prepared to support children's wellbeing after they qualified. The three remaining trainees selected 'neither agree or disagree' for this statement and their reasons all detailed ideas around confidence and lack of experience due to being early in their careers.

The focus on strong bonds with adults and a secure home life continued when asked which factors the trainees look for when assessing wellbeing. All eleven trainees identified that they would look for children to "show trust and affection towards adults and peers" and ten out of eleven selected "interactions with peers" and "interactions with adults" as important. In contrast only four out of eleven participants identified "body movement", "facial expressions" and "ability to take risks" as important. Despite the focus of responses on interactions with others, only three selected these as the most important factor. Six trainees suggested that a child's levels of engagement and ability to learn is the most important marker of wellbeing. One trainee selected physical factors as being the most important and the final trainee was unable to make a choice, instead saying that all the factors "are as important as one another" (Participant BG).

Despite a focus on relationships and interactions in responses to previous questions, when asked what early years settings do to promote wellbeing the most popular response (nine out of eleven) was "providing an interesting and stimulating environment". However, this was closely followed by "promoting a positive emotional climate", "supporting children to follow own interests", "helping children explore their feelings and behaviour" and "observing children closely to gain insight into their strengths and weaknesses" which all attracted eight responses. Although trainees were free to select as many options as they wished for this question only three out of eleven selected "providing a happy and caring environment" which is a very interesting contrast to the responses to previous questions

where they placed value upon developing caring relationships between practitioners and children.

6.34 Play

When asked to consider factors which affect a child's ability to play all trainees selected "availability of toys and resources" as an important consideration. Furthermore, nine of the eleven participants also selected "availability of space" and "parental support" as important factors. In contrast no trainees identified "gender" or "ethnicity" as a factor and only one trainee selected "parents level of education" and "media influences" as being important. Very few trainees felt that parental income (two of eleven) or socio-economic status (four of eleven) were important factors affecting play which is significant to this study (see table 10).

Factor	Number of Responses
Access to toys and resources	10
Parental support	9
Availability of space	9
Access to early education	6
Child's cognitive ability	5
Family socio-economic status	4
Child's language development	3
Parents' disposable income	2
Parents level of education	1
Media influences	1
Child's ethnicity	0
Child's gender	0
Other (role models, modelling of how to play)	0

Table 10 Factors which affect children's ability to play (formulated using evidence from literature on play (The Children's Society, 2020; Neilsen, 2020; Stirrup et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2020)).

Eight out of eleven trainees indicated that they thought that they increase in availability of toys and resources over time had been positive for children. Of the three other participants, two selected a neutral response and one stated that they "didn't know"

so there were no negative responses recorded for this question. However, trainees were clear in their explanations that whilst the increase in availability was overall a positive influence, it is important that there is not an over-reliance on prescriptive, mass-produced toys and that children should be encouraged to explore open ended and non-specific resources too. Three trainees commented on the cost of toys being prohibitive for families on low incomes and consequently how toys can become divisive but that children with fewer toys are more likely to play imaginatively and physically.

The responses given by trainees regarding technology were more mixed. Five trainees indicated that technology has had a positive influence on play, whereas three suggested a negative effect and three selected a neutral response. The reasons given for these choices focused upon the over-use of technology and all participants who discussed technology acknowledged it's importance in society but also expressed concerns about children having free access to technology from too young an age and it's use as a "babysitter" (Participant BA).

Eight trainees indicated a positive response to the influence of the availability of outdoor space on play. A further two participants selected a neutral response. When explaining their reasons for these indications trainees referred to the importance of children learning to manage risk, the positive influence the outdoors has on physical development and the availability of outdoor spaces to all, regardless of socio-economic status. However, this set of responses needs to be considered in conjunction with the responses to the influence of safety on play. Trainees indicated a very mixed response to this question, with four suggesting it has had a negative influence, four a neutral influence and three a positive influence. However, in the free text explanations eight trainees mentioned adults having an

increased awareness of safety as a limitation to risky outdoor play and that "children now aren't allowed to do a lot of what we did as children because of safety concerns" (Participant BH).

Ten trainees suggested that access to early years provision has improved children's ability to play over time. Trainees commented upon the variety of opportunities that early years education gives children from lower socio-economic backgrounds and the opportunity it gives every child to interact with other children of their own age. However, one trainee commented that early years education can limit what children are able to do as they are "constrained by a system" from a very young age. These ideas will be explored further, in conjunction with ideas from other participant groups, in the discussion chapter.

When trainees were asked to think about the most important benefits of having access to rich play opportunities (see table 11) eight out of eleven trainees reported improved social skills as a benefit. Further to this seven trainees selected development of lifelong learning skills and development of creativity as important benefits. In contrast no trainees linked play experiences to improved physical health and only one trainee selected improved mental health and wellbeing as a benefit.

Benefit	Number of Responses
Social skills development	8
Development of creativity and imagination	7
Developing skills for lifelong learning	7
Improved Physical Development	4
Speech and Language Development	3
Cognitive development	3
Improved Mental Health and Wellbeing	1
Physical Health	0
Other	0

Table 11 Trainee responses to benefits of rich play experiences (formulated using evidence from literature on play (The Children's Society, 2020; Neilsen, 2020; Stirrup et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2020)).

When asked to explain their responses to this question trainees predominately focused on the acquisition of skills that are needed for lifelong learning and developing social skills to help children communicate with peers and adults. Trainees also identified that learning to interact with others is a skill required for lifelong learning, thus linking the two areas to one another. Participant BC commented that the development of these skills then "have a knock-on effect on the holistic development of the child which influences their physical development, speech and language, health etc.". Several participants considered the future functioning of the child in society with participant BJ commenting that "play provides opportunities for children to practise the skills needed to become part of society" and participant BF suggesting that "the play environment challenges and enables growth of the mind and an understanding of the world around them".

6.35 Covid-19

Trainees were asked to think about whether the Covid-19 pandemic had affected children under five in any way. Ten out of the eleven trainees indicated that they felt that children had been negatively affected by the pandemic. When asked about factors related to Covid-19 which have had had an effect upon wellbeing all eleven trainees indicated that reduced contact with family and friends has had a negative effect. Ten of the trainees also suggested that reduced access to leisure facilities, reduced access to education, limited child support groups and parental worry about finances will all have had a negative effect upon child wellbeing. Fewer trainees indicated a link between parental worry about health, parental job insecurity, increased time at home (seven responses each) and limited support groups for parents and reduction in household income (six responses each).

Trainees reported a degree of uncertainty when asked specifically about how children have responded to the pandemic. Five trainees selected a neutral response to

"children have shown signs of increased anxiety' and 'children ask questions about Covid-19'. The remaining six trainees all selected 'agree' or 'strongly agree' on both statements but the relatively large numbers of neutral responses may be due to the limited placement experience that the trainees have had, meaning that they are not in a position to comment specifically on children's experiences of Covid-19. Despite this, all eleven trainees were clear that children have been negatively affected by the limited contact they have had with family and friends and that children's early development has been negatively affected by the pandemic.

Trainees were also asked to reflect upon their own experience of Covid-19 as a trainee practitioner. Six of the trainees indicated that their placement experience had been disrupted by the pandemic, with the main reason being setting closures during lockdown. Three trainees also commented upon the experience they have had being different to usual due to only being able to teach small groups of key worker children rather than a whole class. Consequently, perhaps unsurprisingly, seven of the eleven trainees reported feeling nervous about working in an early years setting following the pandemic and only five felt excited about working in educational settings. Despite this, nine trainees indicated that they were looking forward to supporting children's wellbeing and only three suggested that they were concerned that they would not be able to support children's wellbeing adequately. One trainee (Participant BL) expressed concerns that upon return to work they were "so ready and eager to get back to work after the lowering of restrictions" but upon their return felt that they "felt like a bad practitioner as I'd never experienced this before" and the children were "not wanting to come into the setting, becoming shy, play regression, not remembering their friends or the practitioners". However, this trainee reported that, as a team, they devised a plan for children and staff to adjust gradually to being back in the

setting and "just over a year from re-opening we are back to where we were before Covid closed our nursery".

6.4 Parents Survey Findings
6.41 Context

As with the practitioners' survey detailed in the previous section, this survey for parents was circulated widely on social media as well as directly to parents in each of the three case study settings (see Chapter Five: Methodology and Methods). Despite this there were just 16 responses to the survey, with five of these from parents in case study settings and the other eleven from parents accessing the wider survey.

Of the respondents, 14 identified themselves as female and two as male. This means that the results of this survey are almost certainly unavoidably biased towards the views of female caregivers but since the survey was open equally to all genders this is not an issue with research design and more a result of individual choice to participate. All participants fell between the ages of 21 and 50, with the majority of participants (12) sitting in the 31-40 age bracket. 13 parents indicated that they lived in a household with two adults and three identified themselves as the only adult in their household. All 16 parents self-identified as being White British.

Parents who participated in this survey came from the wider West Midlands region. Within the sample five parents lived within the city of Birmingham, one in Wolverhampton, four in Worcestershire, five in Warwickshire and one in Staffordshire.

When asked about their occupations five parents indicated they worked in professional roles, with four of these working as teachers of a variety of age groups. This places these parents in the highest of the socio-economic groups identified in the five-point scale by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2024). A further four parents identified

themselves as working in roles which place them in group two of the socio-economic

groupings, with one parent in group three and four in group five. Two parents identified

themselves as non-working. This means that despite the survey being open to all, the

majority of the responses came from parents who identified themselves as being in the top

two socio economic groups based on occupation which may have had an influence upon the

results of this survey. This becomes an even greater consideration when the occupation of

the main income earner is taken into account. With these responses nine of the 16

households surveyed were situated within the top socio-economic group, with just two each

in groups two and three and one each in groups four and five.

Participant	Survey Respondent Socio Economic Group (ONS)	Main Earner Socio Economic Group (ONS)
CA	1	1
CB	2	1
CC	1	1
CD	2	2
CE	1	1
CF	2	2
CG	2	1
CH	1	1
CJ	1	1
CK	3	3
CL	5	4
CM	5	5
CN	2	1
CO	Non-Working	1
CP	5	3
CQ	Non-Working	Non-Working

Table 12 Socio-economic Groups of Parents and Households according to Office for National Statistics (2024)

Nine parents indicated that they had two children under 18, with two parents reporting that they had one child under the age of 18, four saying they had three children and one parent reporting that they had four children under 18. Of these, nine were parents to one aged five or under, five to two aged five or under and two were parents to three under the age of six. Parents had children of a variety of ages; when asked how old their youngest child was parents gave answers ranging from 'under one year' to '5 years 1 month or older' (see table 13 for details).

Age of Child	Number of Responses
Under One Year	3
1yr 1mth – 2yrs	1
2yrs 1mth – 3yrs	4
3yrs 1mth – 4yrs	5
4yrs 1mth – 5yrs	1
5 yrs 1mth or older	2

Table 13 Responses to "How old is your youngest child?"

Parents in this survey had children who were attending a range of different educational settings at the time they completed the survey. Nine parents had children attending private day nurseries, three attending pre-schools and one attending a maintained nursery school. In addition, seven parents had children attending a primary, infant or first school. As this question asked about all children in the household, not just those aged five or under, some parents also highlighted the educational settings their older children attended. Therefore, there were three responses indicating children attending secondary schools and another with a child at a further education college.

When asked about what types of early years providers families had used, 14 out of the 16 parents reported that at least one of their children had attended a private day nursery. Eight families had used a childminder, six had attended a maintained nursery

school or nursery class within a school and five had used a pre-school setting. There were no families who participated in this survey who had used specialist provision, alternative provision or independent school nurseries for their children.

6.42 Social Inequality

When asked what social inequality meant to them the responses from parents were varied. Some parents gave detailed explanations whereas others responded with only one or two words. However, there were some common strands running through all the responses relating to differences and access to opportunities. One parent (CH) interestingly chose to focus their response on the social interactions that a person has and how these might be influenced by other factors such as "mental health, self image or surroundings" as opposed to the traditional view of social inequality. The other parents all responded to this question with ideas in relation to wealth and opportunity which follows a more typical view of social inequality. This will be explored in more detail in the discussion chapter.

Despite the range of ideas presented in the previous question, 13 out of the 16 participants agreed that levels of parent education have an influence upon whether a child experiences social inequality. In addition, 14 parents indicated that parent's occupation and the family situation or history has an influence. Interestingly, in a shift away from the views held by practitioners and trainees, only 11 parents suggested that household income influenced whether a child faced social inequality. In line with other participants, fewer parents identified wider societal issues such as political attitudes (six), the national economic situation (two) and globalisation (zero) as issues affecting child social inequality.

When asked to consider the factors which social inequality influences, all parents agreed that it has an adverse effect upon adult mental health. Further to this, 15 participants also indicated a link to adult self-image and levels of happiness, and 14 parents

linked it to child mental health. Over half the participants also selected life expectancy (10), community crime levels (nine), adult physical health (12), child self-image (12) and child physical health (11) as being influenced by social inequality.

6.43 Wellbeing

When asked which factors contribute most to a child's level of wellbeing all 16 parents indicated that a child's relationship with their parents is important. 15 parents also indicated that a child's basic needs were important. These two factors were the most widely selected, with other factors being selected by between one and ten parents, with the exception of "participation in cultural activities" which was not selected by any of the participants (see table 14 for details).

Factor	Number of Responses
Relationship with parents or main care giver	16
Basic needs met (e.g. food, clothing, sanitation etc)	15
Happiness at school/nursery	10
Home environment (e.g. overcrowding, basic facilities etc)	10
Relationship with Peers	6
Access to funded early years education	6
Parental involvement in substance abuse	4
Access to outdoor play	3
Mental health concerns	2
Long term health condition/disability	1
Household income	1
Premature Birth/Low Birth Weight	1
Access to cultural activities	0

Table 14 Spread of Responses to "Factors which affect a Child's Wellbeing" (taken from literature on child wellbeing factors (NICE, 2012; The Children's Society, 2020; ONS, 2020; UNICEF, 2020)).

In contrast to the results from the professional and trainee surveys, 15 out of the 16 participants reported that they thought that early years settings did a good job of promoting

children's wellbeing. This was further reinforced by 13 participants suggesting that attending an early years setting is important for a child's wellbeing. Of these 13, 11 reported that their child's wellbeing had improved through attending a setting, with the others recording a neutral response to this question. Parents gave a range of explanations when they were asked to explain how they thought their child's setting had contributed to their wellbeing but 11 out of 13 parents who chose to respond to this question commented upon the happiness of their child. Five parents also commented upon the social skills and relationships that their child has built with other children, with participant CG commenting that their child "has developed into a very confident, happy girl" through attending nursery and mixing with children of her own age. Seven parents also commented upon the positive relationships the children have with the staff at their setting with participant CF reporting that their children "talk affectionately about the staff" at their setting and participant CH commenting that although their older children have now left early years they "still keep in touch with the individuals and the staff at their old settings", indicating a long term relationship has been built between that particular family and the setting(s) that their children attended.

When asked to indicate which factors help to show a child's level of wellbeing 14 out of the 16 participants selected "curiosity to explore new things" and "confidence". 13 participants also indicated that "interactions with adults" were important and 12 parents also selected "persistence and engagement" and "relationships with peers". In line with the findings in the professional and trainee surveys, fewer parents indicated physical factors as an indicator of wellbeing. Only two parents selected "body movement" and physical appearance" and five chose "facial expressions". When parents were asked to indicate the most important of these factors eight out of the 16 participants selected "interactions".

Three parents indicated that "engagement" was the most significant factor and three others

selected "confidence". There were just two parents who indicated that "curiosity" was the

most important factor in establishing a child's level of wellbeing. When asked to explain

their reasons for selecting their answer five parents referred to a child feeling secure within

their environment and four commented upon the importance of children being able to

communicate effectively. Other responses included references to feeling happy, motivation

and showing confidence. This is broadly in line with the findings in the practitioner and

trainee surveys but it is interesting to note that these opinions are similar, despite many of

the parents having little or no formal training in childcare or education which indicates that

these perceptions are not necessarily driven purely by theoretical knowledge but rather by

practical experience. This will be explored further in the discussion chapter.

The theme of emotions and behaviour continued when parents were asked to

identify what settings did to promote high levels of wellbeing. 15 parents suggested that

settings work to help children understand their own feelings, emotions and behaviour and

13 indicated that wellbeing was fostered through a caring and supportive environment with

a positive climate. 13 parents also placed value upon the learning experiences offered by

settings by indicating that they promoted wellbeing by offering a stimulating learning

environment and helped children to explore their own interests. Just six parents indicated

that settings identify children who require extra support and provide interesting and

engaging additional support for those who need it. It is somewhat concerning that parents

do not feel that settings support children with additional needs but the responses to this

question may have been completed by parents who do not have children who require such

support and consequently parents may be unaware of what settings do to support children.

When asked if there was anything they felt their child's setting could improve upon in terms of supporting children's wellbeing three parents indicated that they and their child were very happy with the setting. Six parents raised issues surrounding the need for more individual attention and care, with participant CL explaining that they had moved their child from a childminder to a nursery so that they could mix with other children but that "I feel that you have to choose between individual support for children like you get at a childminder and your child mixing with other children which is really hard". Two parents also indicated that they felt communication with parents could be improved and, similarly, two parents reported that they didn't know what could be improved because "I don't know what goes on there day to day" (Participant CF) and "due to Covid I have not been able to visit school with my daughter or go into nursery with my son so I feel quite detached from the whole experience" (Participant CE). These comments are concerning, particularly with the emphasis placed upon working effectively with parents within the early years foundation stage documentation (DfE, 2023b) and this will be explored further within the discussion chapter of this report.

6.44 Play

When asked to consider the factors which affect a child's ability to play 12 parents agreed that parental support is an important factor. 12 parents also identified availability of space, and the availability of toys and resources as being influential. None of the parents indicated a link between a child's gender and a child's ability to play and only one parent reported a child's ethnicity or the family socio-economic status as important factors affecting play. All other options were selected by between two and ten parents (see table 15 for more details).

165

Factor	Number of Responses
Parental support	12
Availability of space	12
Access to toys and resources	12
Access to early education	10
Parents level of education	4
Child's cognitive ability	4
Parents' disposable income	4
Child's language development	2
Family socio-economic status	2
Media influences	2
Child's ethnicity	1
Child's gender	0

Table 15 Factors which affect children's ability to play (formulated using evidence from literature on play (The Children's Society, 2020; Neilsen, 2020; Stirrup et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2020)).

13 parents agreed that the availability of toys over time has had a positive or very positive influence upon children's ability to play. Of the remaining three participants, only one recorded a negative response to this question. Of those who indicated a positive relationship, reasons included "children can access a wider range of resources safely now through play" (Participant CC) and "different toys are useful to help give variety" (Participant CO). However, parents also commented upon the idea that "children can make a game out of anything, they do not need toys" (Participant CA) and "children can play pretend and use their imagination, it just depends on adult support" (Participant CG). The one participant who recorded a negative relationship between availability of toys and play cited that "sometimes feel that I don't have the knowledge or skills to support my child as well as some other parents who are cleverer and have more money than me. Sometimes I can't get my children things because we can't afford it" (Participant CL). This suggests that an increase in the availability of toys may have put additional pressure upon parents who are less able to afford to purchase the more expensive items that their children are now expecting to have access to. This idea will be explored further in the discussion chapter.

The responses were similar when parents were asked about the availability outdoor space with 11 parents indicating a positive or very positive relationship between availability of outdoor space and play and just four negative responses. One parent commented upon the benefit of outdoor space, "giving time for fresh air and space to run which can help with concentration and develop play in different environments" (Participant CP). However, other parents suggested that "there is less outdoor space now and parents are worried about safety so children don't spend so long outside as before which is a negative thing" (Participant CK) and "the availability of parks and things outdoors is good in the area we live in but we only have a very small garden so we have to make it a trip to the park to be outside which is a shame" (Participant CL).

In contrast, when asked about the influence of technological advances, six of the parents indicated either a negative or very negative response with just three parents suggesting that technology has had a positive effect upon play. Several parents were concerned about the amount of time children spend using technology and the effect that this can have on other skills. One parent suggested that "children spend too much time using technology rather than building social skills and relationships" (Participant CJ) and another commented "that they *(children)* are too keen to sit on their games all day instead of playing outside or with friends" (Participant CL). Other parents were concerned about an over-reliance on technology by parents and one parent (Participant CQ) felt strongly that "children under five do not need subjecting to technology as in order to start interacting with the world they need to interact and play pretend with real things. There is plenty of time later for them to learn to use technology".

Similarly, ten parents reported that safety has had a negative effect on play, with only three parents indicating a positive response to this question. Reasons for this were mainly around the idea that parents are more worried about safety now than ever before which limits what children are able to do. The focus for this was mainly on outdoor play and the risks involved in that with participant CB suggesting that "parents are more worried about safety now so some children can't do things that we used to do so they miss out on things like playing out all day with friends and only coming back when it gets dark!"

However, the participants were more positive in relation to the influence of the provision of early years education over time, with 14 out of 16 parents suggesting either a positive or very positive influence upon play and zero negative responses to this question. Parents reported that early years settings give children "time for the child to communicate with people other than close family and without the back up of a parent for comfort" (Participant CG) and "a space where they are able to access a range of resources safely means children are able to play" (Participant CC).

When parents were asked to consider what the three most important benefits of high quality play experiences are, 13 out of the 16 parents selected "development of social skills" and 11 indicated "speech and language development" as important. The least popular choices were "development of cognitive skills" (one parent), "physical development" (three parents) and "physical health" (three parents). Other options which attracted a response included "mental health and wellbeing", "life long learning skills" and "development of creativity" (see table 16 for more detail).

Benefit	Number of Responses
Social skills development	13
Speech and Language Development	12
Developing skills for life-long learning	7
Mental Health and Wellbeing	4
Development of creativity and imagination	4
Physical Health	3
Physical Development	3
Cognitive development	1

Table 16 Parent responses to benefits of rich play experiences (formulated using evidence from literature on play (The Children's Society, 2020; Neilsen, 2020; Stirrup et al., 2017; UNICEF, 2020)).

Parents' reasons for selecting these benefits were focused around two main themes; the importance of becoming a clear communicator and learning to function within society. Parents commented upon the way that "play helps children to learn language and to learn to share resources and play with others" (Participant CB) and how "learning to socialise from early stages will help them to be confident, aspiring individuals" (Participant CD). Four parents also commented upon the importance of early skills in developing a good ethos for life-long learning with "play experiences producing 'practice' events for life-long experiences" (Participant CG) and "experiences give a child a strong sense of self and positive internal self-view …. meaning a better ability to deal with what life throws at you" (Participant CA).

6.45 Covid-19

Parents were asked to reflect upon the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on their own children aged five and under. 12 out of the 16 participants indicated that they felt their children had been negatively affected in some way by the pandemic, with 10 of these reporting that they had observed higher levels of anxiety in their children during the Covid-19 pandemic than previously. Of the remaining participants, three reported a neutral response and one suggested that they did not think the pandemic had affected their

children negatively. 11 parents reported that their children asked questions about Covid-19 and only one participant reported that their child had shown no signs of being affected by the pandemic at all.

13 parents indicated that they thought their children had been negatively affected by not being able to see family and friends and of the remaining three parents just one reported that their child had not been affected by the limits on social mixing. All parents gave either a positive (13) or neutral (three) response when asked to think about whether their children had benefitted from increased time with parents and siblings during lockdowns. Despite parents acknowledging that Covid-19 has had an effect upon their children, only seven felt that their child's development had been negatively affected and one parent indicated that they felt the pandemic, and the increased time at home, had had a positive effect upon their child. Half of parents (eight) felt that the pandemic had not had a positive or a negative effect upon their child's development and reported a neutral response to this question.

When parents were asked to think more widely about the influence of Covid-19 upon the wellbeing of children under five in general their responses were more varied. All parents agreed that reduced contact with family and friends had a negative influence on wellbeing. 14 parents also indicated a relationship between limitations on the use of leisure facilities and reduced levels of wellbeing for young children. 12 parents reported that parental anxiety about finances and adult anxieties about health have had an effect upon children's wellbeing. Fewer parents made connections between child wellbeing and limitations on support groups, reduced access to educational settings, increased time at home and reduction in household income (see table 17 for detail).

Factor	Number of Responses
Reduction in contact with family and friends	*16*
Limitation on use of leisure facilities (e.g. swimming pools, sports centres, museums)	*14*
Parental stress and anxiety about finances	*12*
Parental stress and anxiety about their own or others' health	*12*
Parental job insecurity	*12*
Reduction in household income	*10*
Reduction in access to educational settings	*10*
Limitations on access to support groups for child (e.g. speech and language, baby and toddler etc)	*7*
Limitations on access to support groups for parents (e.g. parenting classes, ante natal groups and mother and baby groups)	*6*
Increased time spent at home	*6*
There has not been an effect on child wellbeing	*0*

Table 17 Parent responses to "Factors affecting wellbeing during Covid-19"

Of the parents surveyed, 11 reported that their child had been unable to attend their usual early years setting for a period of time during the Covid-19 pandemic. The length of time that they were not able to attend for ranged from six weeks to six months and only one of the parents cited personal choice as the reason for their child not attending their setting "due to protecting shielding grandparents who were helping with childcare" (Participant CJ).

Parents indicated a range of feelings about parenting during the Covid-19 pandemic. Some parents had worked during the lockdowns as key workers so "I have worked long hours and my partner has been home with the children most of the time but my children have definitely shown signs that they are aware that something is different" (Participant CA). Another parent felt that they have had a positive experience due to their own personal circumstances but are aware that it may not be the case for others; "We live on a farm and I

have been off on maternity leave so I feel we have been very lucky. I'm glad I didn't have my first child during this time though!" (Participant CJ). However, for two of the participants the Covid-19 pandemic has not been a positive experience and participant CD feels "sad that my child has missed out on so many milestones educational and personal because we have not been able to do normal day to day things" and participant CL found that "the pressures have been huge, especially financially. My income was massively reduced during lockdown … this meant we were all at home but we couldn't afford to do anything and I felt guilty because I knew other children were getting lots of experiences and mine were not."

7: Interview Findings

7.1 Context

The three participant settings for this part of the project, which will be referred to using the pseudonym names Early Beginnings Day Nursery, Shooting Stars Holiday Provision and Bouncing Bears Alternative Provision, were located in three different local authorities, all from within the wider West Midlands area. Within the Shooting Stars Holiday Provision staff worked in a range of local early years and primary settings during term time and then worked together at Shooting Stars in the school holidays (see Table 4.1 for details).

Early Beginnings Day Nursery is situated in a semi-rural location and offers full day care for children aged between three months and five years of age. The nursery can care for up to 30 children at any one time and operates from a converted house. They have separate rooms for different age groups as well as some shared areas and a shared outdoor space. Early Beginnings is open all year round, from 8am until 6pm five days per week. Children attend on a sessional basis so not all children attend every day.

Shooting Stars Holiday Provision operated as part of the Government Holiday Food Programme after the Covid-19 pandemic. It was designed to offer activities and healthy food to children who would usually qualify for free school meals during term time. Shooting Stars operated from a school building in a rural location and recruited staff from local early years and primary settings to work during the school holiday. Four members of staff from Shooting Stars participated in this research, from three different originating settings. Two members of staff were from the same small primary school and the other two members of staff came from different local day nurseries, one a very large setting caring for up to 80 children at any one time and the other from a small 20 place day nursery.

Bouncing Bears Alternative Provision is a specialist provision for children with physical disabilities based in an urban area. They offer sessions for children and their families to receive targeted support with specific issues and they support children with transitioning into mainstream or special school settings. They currently work regularly with seven children aged between three and five years. They also provide occasional or ad-hoc support for other families who cannot visit the provision regularly.

Participant Number	Participant Pseudonym	Job Role	Participant Setting Pseudonym	Usual Setting (if different)	Setting Age Range	Number of Children
1	LAURA	Deputy Manager/Baby Room Leader	Early Beginnings		3 months – 5 years	30
2	JENNY	Early Years Teacher	Early Beginnings		3 months – 5 years	30
3	LISA	Manager (toddler and pre-school)	Shooting Stars	Large Day Nursery	3 months – 11 years	80
4	SUSAN	Manager and Owner	Shooting Stars	Small Day Nursery	2 years – 11 years	20
5	KATIE	Class Teacher (Reception/Yr 1)	Shooting Stars	Small Primary School	4 years – 11 years	25
6	EVA	Class Teacher (Nursery)	Shooting Stars	Small Primary School	3 years – 11 years	25
7	EMILY	Leading Specialist Practitioner	Bouncing Bears		3 years – 5 years	7

Table 18 Interview Participant Information

As detailed in table 18, interview participants worked with children throughout and in some cases beyond, the target age range. Three participants usually worked in settings which catered for babies as young as three months of age and two participants worked in

primary schools with children up to age 11. Two of the participants who worked in day nurseries indicated that their nursery also offered wraparound care to school aged children up to the age of 11.

All eight interview participants identified as female. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 64 and all had worked with children aged between birth and five years for at least three years prior to being interviewed, with some having worked with children for significantly longer than that (see table 19).

Participant Pseudonym	Age Range	Years of Experience	Worked in other Settings	Highest Qualification
Laura	35-44	10 years	No	Level 3
Jenny	25-34	4 years	Yes	Qualified Teacher Status
Lisa	35-44	18 years	Yes	Level 4
Susan	55-64	30 years	Yes	Qualified Teacher Status
Katie	25-34	3 years	No	Qualified Teacher Status
Eva	45-54	25 years	Yes	Qualified Teacher Status
Emily	45-54	25 years	Yes	Masters Degree

Table 19 Participant Details

Semi structured episodic interviews were carried out with each participant. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, and all interviews were carried out using Microsoft Teams. Broadly the same main questions were asked of each participant with different clarifying and follow up questions depending upon the information offered by each participant. Participants were asked to recall stories or anecdotes to illustrate their thoughts as part of the interview process and some of these will be presented alongside the findings in the following sections. The findings from the interviews have been organised into seven

major themes and then broken down further into sub-themes to form the sections in the

rest of this chapter (see table 20).

Theme Number	Major Theme	Sub-Themes
One	**The Chronosystem - Changes Over Time**	Digital Divide
		A Behavioural Shift – Consistent Boundaries
		Play Over Time – Bringing them Back to Being Children
		"Social Background and the Prejudice that Comes with It is My Biggest Problem Now"
Two	**Is An Opportunity Enough?**	Extra-Curricular Experiences
		Equal Opportunities
		Bridging the Gap
		Targeted Support
Three	**A Fish Out of (Or In) Water**	Fitting In
		Blurred Lines
		Instagram Perfection
		Engagement and Social Class
		Engagement and Wellbeing
		(Dis)advantage and Speech Development
Four	**Habitus Starts at Home**	Parents As Role Models
		Parental Understanding
		Children Recreate What They Know
		Adults' Own Experiences Shape Their Attitudes
		Parental Support…or Pressure?
		Material Rich, Time Poor
Five	**Knowing Children Well is Important**	It Can Be Any Child in Any Class
		Supporting Wellbeing As a Setting
		Children Need to Know they are Loved
		Positive Staff Attitudes are Vital
Six	**The Exosystem - Structural Systemic Pressures**	"Is it Covid…or has your sandwich gone down the wrong way?"
		EYFS Limits Meaningful Play
		Pressure from Above
		Stigma – "I didn't know class existed until I worked in a middle-class area"
Seven	**Covid-19 – The Elephant in Every Room**	Starting Points are More Equal
		Unequal Impact
		Family Stress and Tension
		Why Can't You See Grandma?

Table 20 Major and Sub-themes arising from Interview Data

7.2 Major Theme One – The Chronosystem - Changes Over Time

Participants commented repeatedly on their perceptions of the way in which

children's lives and their interaction with their learning has changed over time. This section

will be concerned with four main sub-themes linked to the idea of changes happening over

time (see Fig 9).
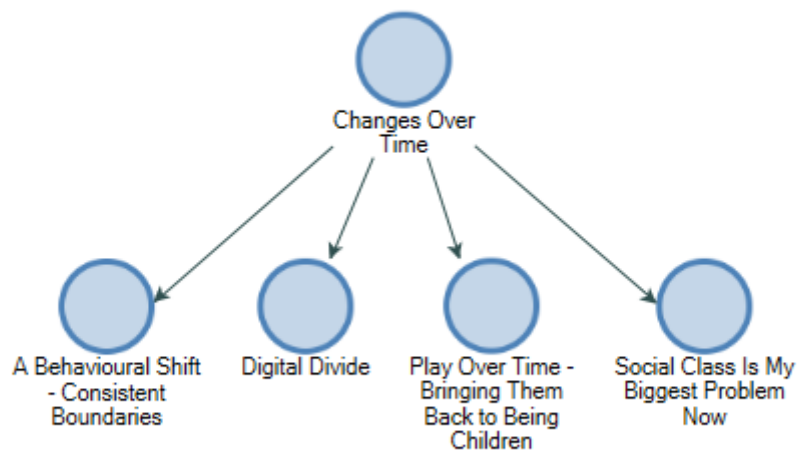
Figure 9 Extract from Coding Map showing Theme and Sub-themes for Changes Over Time

7.21 Changes to Play Over Time

Five practitioners referred to a change over time to the way that children play and interact with their environment and one another. The findings from this theme will now be presented under the four sub theme titles.

7.22 Digital Divide

Two of the practitioners commented upon the clear differences between children from different social backgrounds in terms of their engagement with "screen time" and the cultural capital they develop around technology. Susan reflected on the changes to family practices with young children that have occurred over time and the influence she perceives this to have had on the way in which children play. She suggested that parents from all social backgrounds are now over reliant upon technology to entertain their children, especially when waiting for things in public.

Participant Four - Susan

> *"It boggles my mind that children can watch TV programmes on a parent's phone*
> *while they're waiting for the bus to come or, you know, sitting in the doctor's*
> *surgery or in a restaurant. When I was a child, we might have been read a story*
> *while we were waiting in the doctor's surgery, or you just had to sit and behave*

177

yourself, you know? We had to learn to be bored and not kick off, children now
don't understand boredom because as soon as they show signs of boredom some
device or another gets put in their hands. When I was a parent with a young child,
25 years ago, you took a colouring book with you to amuse them when you went
to places, certainly it wasn't an option to just whip your phone out and get them
playing a game on the phone"

Susan believes that this means that children are engaging less in creative play and are, in some cases, being exposed to things that are inappropriate for their age through the games that they play on their devices. She also commented that by providing children with instant entertainment through devices, adults are preventing children from ever feeling bored which means that they will never learn to manage this feeling. Susan suggests that this could have a negative effect on a child's wellbeing in the long term.

Despite this Susan recalls that during the Covid-19 pandemic families from less advantaged backgrounds tended to find it more difficult to support home learning because "even people who have very little money seem to manage to have a smartphone that can stream TV programmes but they don't always have a tablet or laptop to complete work on". Susan explained that in her experience this has widened the gap between the children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from more affluent households because the children without access to appropriate technology did not benefit as much from home learning.

This view is shared by Jenny, who recalled that she experienced similar difficulties in her previous setting with engaging children from more disadvantaged backgrounds in online learning. She acknowledged that the issue for the families that she was working with was not one of motivation or drive but simply a problem with having the right equipment to support their child at home, especially in households with more than one child working on different things at the same time.

> *"Particularly during the pandemic I was delivering home learning when we got shut down and the only children and parents who were engaging were those in higher social classes. Those in lower classes parents weren't engaging at all and not because they couldn't be bothered, some parents couldn't afford a device for their child to work on, it was a shame. Some families had two or three children trying to log on to different lessons at the same time and they only had one smartphone between them. We did send out some laptops for families to borrow but obviously we've not got enough for every single child and particularly in a bad catchment area which is where I was teaching where 80% of the class were from lower social classes as much as we tried to be inclusive sometimes it wasn't enough"*

7.23 A Behavioural Shift – Consistent Boundaries

Two practitioners commented on the change in expectations that adults have of children's behaviour that they have experienced over time. Both practitioners have been working with young children for many years (Susan = 30 years, Eva = 25 years) and both perceive that there has been a shift in the behavioural expectations placed upon children by their parents or carers in the last five years. Eva suggested that the shift became more apparent during Covid-19 when children were spending more time at home with their parents. However, she perceives that although the pandemic magnified the situation, the shift in expectations wasn't caused by Covid-19 and that it is important that Covid-19 does not get blamed for something which has been slowly happening over the last five years. She thinks that a lack of consistent expectations is the true cause of the shift in behaviour because "too many parents don't want to say no for fear of upsetting their child" (Eva).

Susan commented upon a different element of behaviour that she has seen a change in over recent years. She suggested that the way in which practitioners and parents are expected to teach children about behaviour has changed and she perceives that this has had a negative influence on the behavioural standards within settings and in children in general. She recalled a recent event where she and her staff were discussing their policy with an advisor on behaviour management, and it was suggested that children should not be taught that behaviour is good or bad.

Participant Four - Susan

> *"We've had a debate about this recently with an external advisor from the county about good and bad behaviour and how you term the terminology that you use. We are very much in favour with such young children of talking about what is good and what is bad so that they understand that some things are fine and some things are not whether it's actions they take or whether it's words that they use. The advisor was suggesting that we shouldn't say that some behaviours are good and others are bad because this is unnecessary labelling and is unhelpful to the child. She couldn't really give us an alternative though in terms of teaching the children about appropriate behaviour. I think that is where standards have declined, adults are so worried about saying the wrong thing or upsetting a child that they don't set the standards and then children don't know what is ok and what isn't."*

Susan strongly believes that it is important that children understand what is acceptable and what is not in order that they can learn how to behave appropriately, and she perceives that this shift in teaching is one of the biggest causes of a decline in behavioural standards.

7.24 Play Over Time – Bringing them Back to Being Children

Five practitioners commented on ways in which play has changed over time. Dominant themes in all five discussions were the changes in the ways that children interact with the outdoors and the increasing reliance upon specific resources and prescriptive toys.

Lisa and Jenny both perceive that children spend less time outside than previous generations and that this is mainly due to an increased reliance upon technology and screen time. Lisa suggested that when children do go outside, their time outdoors tends to be very controlled, and adult led because adults are much more concerned about safety and risk than they were in the past. She suggested that children used to have more freedom to play outdoors without adults but that recently children have not been afforded these opportunities for fear of them being injured or abducted.

In contrast, Eva commented that during the Covid-19 pandemic she saw her 13-year-old son become more engaged in outdoor play than before and less reliant upon adult intervention. This is something she hopes will filter down to the younger age groups and will help to foster greater resilience and independence.

Participant Six- Eva

> *"I mean last year after the lockdown once we were free to meet six people, my*
> *13-year-old was never at home. We kept joking that they became the Famous*
> *Five him and his four mates because they kept going off, they were in the woods,*
> *on their bikes… now I don't think they would have done that had there not been a*
> *pandemic, but I think that suddenly, they were building BMX tracks, playing in the*
> *woods, getting muddy, actually that did bring them back to being children."*

Eva also suggested that the value of jigsaw puzzles has been lost and that jigsaws can still provide an important opportunity for children to work independently or collaboratively towards a goal and then feel a sense of achievement when they complete it. She felt that jigsaws have been undervalued for several years due to the rise in popularity of more exciting interactive toys, but she hopes that given the huge interest in adult jigsaws during the pandemic, adults will begin to see their value for children again too.

7.25 "Social Background and the Prejudice that Comes with It is My Biggest Problem Now".

Five practitioners commented on changes to the way that people view social background that have occurred over time. Four practitioners perceive that social background is still important but that the boundaries between people have become less clear over time. Just one practitioner (Lisa) suggested that it is less important now than it used to be. She suggested that although some people might still place themselves in one social group or another, it doesn't have an influence on their life and is simply "a label".

However, the other four practitioners who commented on this topic all suggested that social background has not changed in importance or influence but that the boundaries between people and groups have become blurred. Three practitioners (Eva, Katie and Jenny) commented on the very structured system that was in place historically in the UK, but that society now does not follow this pattern. Jenny perceives that people don't fit neatly into one of the three classes (upper, middle or working class) now and that social background is much more heavily influenced by the cultural capital people develop and possess rather than their financial position.

Katie agreed with this idea but also suggested that there are people who do not fit into one neat background and who possess some cultural capital from one group and some from another. She also perceives the existence of "a group of people now who do not work and that was very unusual in days gone by because of the benefits system. Now though we have a group of adults who for whatever reason don't work and claim state benefits and that creates a kind of separate group of their own." She also commented that migrant workers contribute to the blurring of the lines between social backgrounds because she suggests that migrants may have been functioning in one social group in their home country because they had really well developed cultural capital in that environment but that they

then move to the UK and often they find it difficult to build the same capital in a new environment because of the language barrier and the manual, unskilled work they tend to begin doing when they first arrive.

This idea was also suggested by Eva, who commented that refugees might have been from one social background in their home country but then when they move to the UK, they rely on benefits which places them in a disadvantaged situation here. She also agreed that the boundaries between the different groups in society have been "muddied" considerably and that most people "now find themselves in the middle somewhere" (Eva). She also commented that her perceptions of social background have changed considerably over the last few years and that until she worked in her current setting, she would have said that it wasn't really an issue but now that "this is the first time I've worked in middle class suburbia, and I would say that background and the prejudice that comes with it, is my biggest problem" (Eva).

7.3 Major Theme Two – Is an Opportunity Enough?

All interview participants commented upon the importance of wide-ranging opportunities and experiences in childhood. However, several participants were also keen to express their perception that simply having access to an opportunity isn't always enough and that there are other factors at play which influence whether a child is able to benefit fully from the opportunities available to them. This section will explore these perceptions in greater detail, using four key areas as sub-themes (see fig 10).
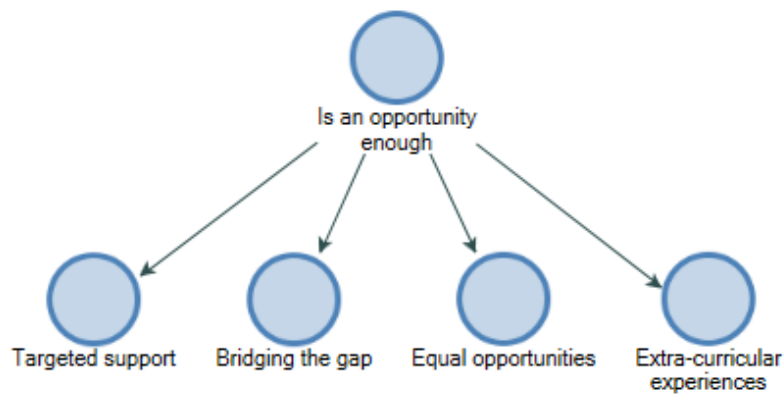
Figure 10 Extract from Coding Map showing Theme and Sub-themes for "Is An Opportunity Enough?"

7.31 Extra-Curricular Experiences

All interview participants commented on the inclusion of extra-curricular activities in their setting and the importance of children being able to access a rich range of opportunities both in and out of their early years setting.

Emily, who was based with a specialist provision for children with physical disabilities commented upon the difference between children who have parents who can pay for additional targeted therapies and extra-curricular support and those who cannot. She also suggested that some parents are better placed to push for the support and activities that their child needs, perhaps due to their levels of education and awareness of the way that the system works. It could be said that parents who are better placed are in this position because they possess the capital required to understand the system. This idea will be explored in more detail in the discussion chapter.

Participant Seven – Emily

> *Nowadays we know the system and we know that those who shout louder and knock loudest on the door are the ones who get the support. We are also talking about financial background, if they are able to pay for example £100 an hour to a physio then that has to have an impact on the child than those who haven't got money and then they can't pay for anything extra.*

184

Three participants, Eva, Katie and Laura, commented on the number of extra-curricular activities attended by children from more affluent backgrounds. All three suggested that children from middle class backgrounds tended to have a wider breadth of experiences outside of school which helps them to build capital. They agreed that this was primarily due to the out of school clubs that they were encouraged to join. They all acknowledged that the clear barrier to children from less affluent backgrounds joining these activities is that most clubs and societies have fees attached to them. Katie suggested that this puts children from lower social classes at an obvious disadvantage which Eva and Laura agreed with to some extent. However, Eva and Laura both expressed concerns that children were often spending all day at nursery or school and then going straight to after-school activities virtually every day which meant that they spent little time with their parents at home. They both explained that they felt that these clubs enhanced the children's experiences and the development of their cultural capital, but that going to too many different clubs came at a cost in terms of family relationships and quality time spent together as a family unit.

Lisa suggested that her usual setting placed great emphasis upon extra-curricular experiences, and she explained that she felt that a broad range of extra-curricular activities was vital to develop as a well-rounded individual. Lisa's setting offers a full selection of extra-curricular activities within the nursery day and charges parents an additional fee for each of these. Lisa explained that "parents who are looking for free childcare to use their government funding sometimes prefer to go elsewhere so they don't have to pay the top up" but generally parents are pleased for their children to have the opportunities we offer. Lisa explained that there is a hardship fund available to those parents who may find it

challenging to meet the payment demands for such activities. This will be explored in more detail in the "Equal Opportunities" section.

Aside from paid extra-curricular clubs, three participants, Katie, Jenny and Susan, suggested that the breadth of experiences that children have outside of nursery or school is primarily dependent upon the priorities that parents place upon certain experiences and opportunities. Whilst they all acknowledged the financial constraints that parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds might have, they also commented upon the importance of parental attitudes towards different activities and experiences. Katie recalled that her own upbringing was within a single parent family with little disposable income but that her mother had high expectations and aspirations for her and that she prioritised cultural and social experiences like classical music concerts and visiting museums. She suggested that whilst her family would have been in one of the lower socio-economic groups, her mother's attitudes were very middle class and she believes strongly that attitudes are more influential than the financial situation of families on the breadth of experiences that a child has. This view supports the idea that children's cultural capital is built based upon parental expectations and the capital which they hold, rather than the family income level.

Susan spoke about extra-curricular activities from a different perspective. She focused upon the activities that children experience within their home environment and the effect that these have upon the way that they learn at nursery. She explained that children with parents who have a higher level of education generally have more experience of playing educational games and completing activities which require concentration and focus such as craft and baking activities at home, perhaps because the parents hold cultural capital which values and understands the importance of these experiences.

> *"So those from one area of society who have perhaps been fortunate enough to*
> *have experienced a lot more than others will obviously bring with them different*
> *knowledge, having different understanding of the world and a very different*
> *starting point to their nursery education. That's where we see the difference is*
> *really that the children who come from the backgrounds with more educated,*
> *more professional parents have done that. Even if it just craft activities that take*
> *some time to come together or the playing of Snap or Lotto or something. But the*
> *good thing is that I think that can be overcome because, you know, I've seen year*
> *in and year out at nursery so many times that children who haven't experienced*
> *particularly playing games, old fashioned things like bingo and lotto and what I*
> *would call board games, they can develop an absolute love for that. They can*
> *develop a love for doing jigsaw puzzles that they may never have done before*
> *nursery."*

However, Susan also commented that for children who do not have these experiences at home it is possible to compensate for this at nursery. She explained that children who might never have played a board game or completed a jigsaw can develop a love for those activities through frequent experience of them at nursery or school.

7.32 Equal Opportunities

Four participants referred to offering the same opportunities to all children regardless of their backgrounds and family circumstances. All four participants felt that it is important to ensure that children are not treated differently due to their background and that all children have the opportunity to access the same experiences. However, the approach that is taken by different settings to achieve this varies greatly.

Jenny explained that her setting, a day nursery, provides additional free hours for parents who are on certain benefits on top of the universal free entitlement for all three and four year olds. She believes that this helps to ensure that all children can have access to the same opportunities to build cultural capital, regardless of whether their parents can pay

for it or not. Jenny also shared her experience of teaching Reception in a maintained primary school during the Covid-19 pandemic where she had a class with a wide range of backgrounds. She suggested that although the school provided devices for some families and work for all children, not all children engaged with the activities set and that often it was children from more disadvantaged backgrounds who didn't engage. This suggests that simply providing the resources, or the opportunity, perhaps is not always enough to ensure that all children have equal experiences. This idea will be explored in greater detail in the discussion chapter.

Participant Two – Jenny

> *Particularly during the pandemic I was delivering home learning when we got shut down and the only children and parents who were engaging were those in higher social classes. Those in lower classes parents weren't engaging at all and not just because they couldn't be bothered, some parents couldn't afford a device for their child to work on, it was a shame. We did send out some laptops for families to borrow but obviously we've not got enough for every single parent and particularly in a bad catchment area which is where I was teaching where 80% of the class were from lower social classes we, as much as we tried to be inclusive of everything sometimes it wasn't enough and they just weren't engaging. Some families who had the devices, the work and everything, they still just didn't engage and, you know, you can't force people.*

Katie, who was working within Shooting Stars Holiday Provision at the time of her interview, commented that at the holiday setting and at her permanent setting, a primary school in a very diverse community, they have a clear ethos of "everybody is worthy of the same opportunities as everybody else and we don't point out differences between people". She explained that they work to create a community where everyone feels a part of the community and that they provide support, in whatever form it is needed, in order for children and families to be able to access the opportunities on offer. She suggested that for

some families this support might be in the form of financial assistance to ensure that a child can attend a school trip, whereas for another family it might be support for a parent to learn to read so that they can support their child with their homework. She explained that they treat each family individually and tailor their support depending on individual needs. Katie was keen to emphasise that she feels that financial support and simply providing opportunities can only go so far. She suggested that families need "multi-dimensional support to ensure that children can get the best from the experiences that are on offer to them, not just money thrown at them all the time."

In contrast to Katie's interpretation, both Laura and Lisa focused their responses on the financial assistance that their settings provide to families. Laura shared that her setting helps to keep the basic fee prices as low as possible by asking parents for a voluntary contribution towards additional activities at various points during the year. She explained that children are able to participate in the activities regardless of whether their parents pay the contribution or not but that by asking for the contribution they are able to offer more interesting opportunities to the children whilst also covering some of the costs of these activities. She explained that, depending on the activity and the amount requested, approximately 75-90% of parents pay the contribution each time but that there is no pressure placed upon anyone and no parent or child is singled out because they have or have not paid.

Lisa, who was interviewed for this project as a member of staff at Shooting Stars Holiday Provision, described a different approach taken by the setting in which she was normally based. She explained that her setting provide a range of additional enrichment activities such as ballet, Little Kickers and Forest School, which parents pay for and only the children whose parents have paid can participate in the activity. She explained that her

189

setting try to ensure that all children have the same opportunities and that they do this through the provision of hardship grants to those most in need. Lisa explained that parents have to apply to this scheme and that, unfortunately, "there are more families in need than there are grants available and I wish we could support more children but we can't support everyone". Lisa also admitted that "we have families who are prepared to pay for additional activities so we can offer the very best to the children in our setting but parents who are looking for free childcare to use their government funding sometimes prefer to go elsewhere so they don't have to pay the top up". This is a troubling narrative which will be considered in more detail in the discussion chapter.

7.33 Bridging The Gap

Four participants made reference to "bridging the gap" between children from less advantaged backgrounds and their peers. All four of these participants commented upon the importance of providing the same opportunities to all children, regardless of their background or ability.

Two participants, Susan and Katie, suggested that their work to "bridge the gap" was focused more upon working with parents to support them in becoming involved in their child's learning. Katie expressed concern that some parents are reluctant to engage with their child's education due to their own experiences of school.

Participant Five – Katie

> *I started my teaching career in quite a deprived area we had a lot of children who*
> *had English as an additional language and a lot of children coming from working*
> *class backgrounds or non working parents so that was quite an experience in*
> *terms of those children. The school I worked in was Ofsted outstanding but*
> *there's only so much you can do in school hours, you need the support of parents*
> *at home too to give children the best chance. A lot of parents in that particular*

190

setting seemed to have had quite a negative experience of education themselves

so it was difficult to get them involved in supporting their child's learning so we

had to work quite hard at getting them involved in parent workshops and things.

Once parents overcame their own anxieties and negative views they had a really

positive impact on their children's learning.

This perception was shared by Susan who suggested that in order to bridge the gap it is important to work with parents to support them in overcoming barriers to supporting their child, such as being unable to read and write themselves.

Susan and one other participant, Eva, shared that they don't treat the children any differently, that all children are given the same opportunities and that they believe that all children have the potential to achieve regardless of their background. Eva also explained that the school in which she works uses the idea that "it could be any child" and that they are careful not to make any positive or negative assumptions based on a child's background. She explained that they complete trauma assessments for every child in every class to try and pick up anything that is going on in the background.

The final participant to mention bridging the gap, Lisa, focused upon bridging the financial gap in order that children could still access the setting regardless of their parents' income. She spoke about a financial hardship grant that her setting has set up to subsidise nursery fees for families on the lowest incomes. However, the grant "cannot cover the full cost and isn't enough to cater for all the families in need" and therefore the nursery must assess who is most in need. Lisa was interviewed for this project as a member of staff from the Shooting Stars Holiday provision, but she works in a large 80 place day nursery in term time where fees are relatively high and multiple extras are charged which makes a fund such as this one important for those families on lower incomes. However, it could be argued that

financial support on it's own is not enough to "bridge the gap" because it doesn't automatically help children or parents build the type of cultural capital required to fully benefit from the opportunities available to them. This is something that will be explored in more detail in the discussion chapter.

7.34 Targeted Support

In addition to working to bridge the gap, three practitioners also directly discussed the importance of providing targeted support to families who are most in need or support for topics that have been highlighted as specific issues for a particular cohort of children.

Laura shared her experiences of teaching early phonics and reading within her setting and discussed the ways in which the setting supports children from different backgrounds and abilities. She was keen to emphasise that her setting provides different levels of support in order that all children can access the same opportunities to learn and reach their full potential, regardless of how much support they get at home.

Participant One – Laura

> *We do try and do small group work when it comes to learning things like letters and sounds. So the children who perhaps don't get the same inputs at home because obviously if you can't read, you're not, you know, going to be reading stories to your children so those children will only get that experience at nursery. So those children for whom that is limited, often struggle to pick up their letters and sounds in the same way as a child whose parent is supporting that at home. We had a little girl this year whose father is a teacher, so she's done a lot more work at home than other children have. So we do split up groups according to ability, so that they are working with children of a similar ability so that nobody feels undermined by everybody else in their group.*

Susan recalled an example of targeted support to improve safety and wellbeing which was provided in her setting when it was highlighted that several children were

travelling in cars without seatbelts. She explained that they identified a need for education

for both the children and the parents and embarked upon a series of play-based sessions for

the children to teach them about road safety and the importance of using child seats and

seatbelts in the car. She recalled that they used play to create cars and then role play

getting into a car seat and fastening a seat belt. In addition to this they also held an

information event for parents in conjunction with the local police community support officer

and provided written communications for those parents who could not attend the event.

Susan suggested that this type of support is implemented regularly in her setting and that

"responding to the needs of the cohort" is really important when planning the support to

deliver.

Katie suggested that her setting has needed to work hard in recent years to provide

targeted support for children who have experienced low levels of wellbeing. She explained

that they began to notice a large number of children arriving at school not having eaten

breakfast and families struggling to purchase correct school uniform and therefore they

have set up a breakfast club which is free to access for these children and a uniform swap

shop available to all parents and carers throughout the year. She also shared the ways in

which her setting helps the youngest children in nursery and reception to process major life

events through offering them targeted play opportunities such as role play scenarios to

introduce the birth of a new sibling. She emphasised that children are not forced to

participate in these and that they are available to all children but that children are

encouraged to access opportunities that are most relevant to them.

Other participants did not offer information which directly linked to the idea of

providing targeted support. However, Eva was keen to share that the multi-academy trust in

which she works "places wellbeing at the forefront of everything they do and consequently rather than planning interventions to support where things have gone wrong, they try to develop a culture where disadvantage is prevented from the outset." This idea will be examined in more detail in the discussion chapter of this report where the effectiveness of this ethos in comparison to offering targeting support to ensure that all children are able to benefit fully from all the opportunities available to them will be discussed.

7.4 Major Theme Three – Fish Out of (or In) Water

All participants commented upon the importance of children feeling comfortable within their early years setting. Several participants also explored their perceptions of the difficulties that some parents have with feeling like they "fit in" to the setting and to society as a whole. These ideas will be presented in this section using five sub-themes (see fig 11)
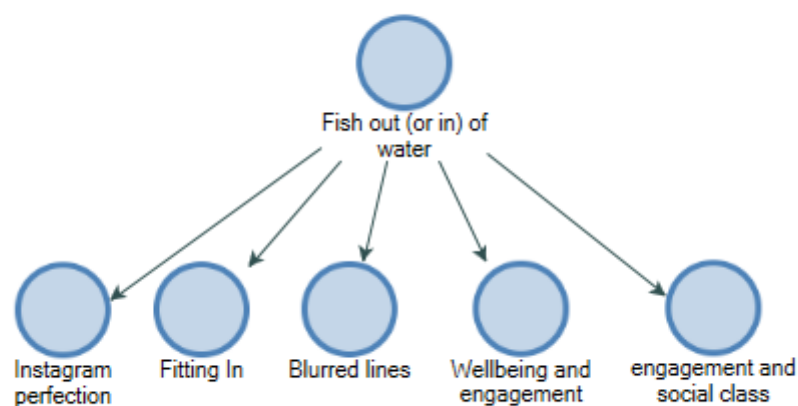
Figure 11 Extract from Coding Map showing Theme and Sub-themes for "Fish Out (or In) of Water"

7.41 Fitting In

Three participants specifically spoke about children and families feeling as though they fit in within their settings. Two participants, Laura and Lisa, admitted that their settings are not particularly diverse. Lisa attributed this to the geographical location of her setting, within a small rural village, and the relatively high fees and extra charges imposed by the

nursery which means that the setting mainly attracts working parents from middle class backgrounds. Lisa explained that the setting charges for additional activities and that "inevitably this makes us not the cheapest nursery around and some parents who don't see the value of these activities choose to go elsewhere". Lisa talked about her own background and freely self-identified as coming from a working-class background. She suggested that her social class has never been that important to her because she grew up in an area with "lots of other people like" her and she admitted that had she been at school with lots of people from different class backgrounds she "would have found it harder to fit in". Interestingly though, despite identifying this desire to "fit in" and the importance of being in an environment with people like her in her own upbringing, Lisa did not comment upon this as a possible reason for why her setting is mainly accessed by middle class families. Instead, she interpreted the low numbers of working-class families attending as simply a financial decision and being due to parents from working class backgrounds placing less value upon extra-curricular activities. This idea will be explored in more detail in the discussion chapter.

Laura, on the other hand, suggested that whilst her setting primarily attracts working parents from middle class backgrounds they also have a small pocket of working-class families "where perhaps money's tight and their family circumstances normally wouldn't lead them to (us) but they can see the benefit for their child, so they prioritise it". She admits that this group of working-class families tend to be from the upper working-class sector to be able to afford the nursery fees but that every year they have some parents who don't follow the usual demographic of the families at the nursery. Laura talked about how these working-class parents tend to "stick together" at events and when waiting to pick up and drop off and she interprets this being due to them feeling as though they fit in with people from similar backgrounds to themselves. She reported that the children, however,

mix freely with children from all backgrounds and do not seem to be aware of their parents' backgrounds.

Emily, who worked in a specialist provision, also talked about the importance of fitting in during her interview. She reported that her setting works with a very diverse group of families, both culturally and socially, and that they work hard to treat everyone fairly and with respect regardless of their background. She explained that some families inevitably need more support than others and that sometimes this is due to their background. She suggested that parents "with lower levels of education or with English as an additional language might need more help to understand what we are trying to do with their child". She also highlighted that because of the way that their sessions are structured, as adult led group sessions involving both parent and child, the "dynamics in the group have to be really good so when we put children in a group, we have to not just think about the children but also think about how well those parents will work together". Emily explained that they must think about whether parents will feel comfortable in the group because it is important that everyone feels that they fit in, otherwise the sessions are not successful and that often they spend a long time deciding which groups to place new families in.

Participant Seven – Emily

> *"As an example, sometimes having Asian families in a group works really well because they support each other really well and sometimes if you have white background families and one Asian family, maybe one Asian mum, if she is very quiet and shy she might feel out of the group and lost in this group. We have to make sure the parents can blend into the group and feel part of the group and sometimes we have to think that in another group where parents are really chatty and there are maybe other Asian families they would be more welcoming to this mum and this mum would feel better if she joined another group. We have to spend a great deal of time working out where it is best to place new families when they join us."*

196

7.42 Blurred Lines

Five participants made comments related to the blurring of the lines between social classes and the consequences of this. They found it difficult to place themselves in a specific social class group and four out of the five participants who spoke on this topic suggested that for some people the lack of clearly defined social classes has contributed to a general feeling of not "fitting in".

Eva and Katie both raised the topic of migrant workers and refugees who, in their home country may have belonged to one social class, but in their new home might be placed in a different grouping which "feels at odds to what they are used to". Katie admitted that, particularly with migrant families "it is easy to forget the backgrounds of the families we are working with sometimes" which is worrying as the family situation can have a big influence upon the child and their feelings of security and wellbeing. Interestingly Emily, as a migrant worker herself, commented that her social position has not really changed from where she was positioned in her home country but that in both her home country and in the UK, she is "somewhere in the middle but it is difficult to pinpoint where because it depends on what you base it on".

Katie suggested that her own social class was difficult to define since she came from a single parent family without a lot of disposable income, but her mum had high expectations of her academically and she went to grammar school so educationally her upbringing was more middle class. She explained that she still feels that she is "probably one of those people who is a bit in the middle" which has meant that sometimes she has felt like she doesn't really fit in because she "doesn't fit neatly into one group or the other which has caused her some upset in the past.

The feeling of sitting between classes is shared by Eva and Susan who both reported that based on their parents' occupations their families when they were children were middle class but now due to their current circumstances they would be classed as working class. Eva admitted though that she "appreciates as a middle-class white person in Britain, in suburbia I have had every opportunity available" and consequently "it's very much assumed that I won't know what it's like to experience hardship or anything like that so that's quite interesting that people perceive that". She explained that she now mixes freely with people from all classes and that, whilst she doesn't feel that she fits neatly into one group or another, unlike Katie, this doesn't cause her any negative feelings because she is happy to spend time with a diverse range of people. Susan explained that she also felt that although she didn't fit comfortably into one class or another, she didn't feel that this had caused her any significant disadvantage.

Laura reported that due to her background and the geographical location of her family home she has not ever lived in or mixed with a particularly diverse community. She commented that her family wouldn't neatly fit into one social class or another and that there are elements of working class and elements of middle class within her background. However, she explained that the area in which she grew up, and the area where she now lives, are very similar in that most people are "not really well off, not affluent but not deprived" which helps her to feel as though she fits in because most people are in a similar situation to her.

7.43 Instagram Perfection

Two participants commented upon their perception of the pressures placed on children by their parents due to their desire to appear "perfect" on social media. Eva recalled several experiences where she had witnessed parents seeking "Instagram

perfection", often, she perceived, to the detriment of their children's wellbeing and their own stress levels (see fig 12). She also commented upon the competitive nature of social media for many parents, suggesting that parents at her setting are often trying to outdo each other on social media.

"I watched this woman at Warwick Castle at Christmas. We were at one of those light festival things in the evening and it was gorgeous but there was a family in front, and they'd got a little one, 3, 4 something like that and this child had whined and whinged and actually you wonder why have you brought them out so late, yes, it's pretty lights but its half eight, it's far too late. The mother spent most of the evening telling the child off and moaning at her to "stop ruining my night out". When we were nearly at the end of the trail there was a photo opportunity, and the family wanted the child to have their picture taken but the child wouldn't play the game. So then the mother whipped out a packet of Wotsits and bribed the child with the Wotsits to have the most perfect Instagram picture taken... I mean she was stood there, phone in one hand clicking away, waving this pack of Wotsits around in the other to get the child to stay still and pose. Then she turned to her partner and said "you open these for her while I post this on my socials" ... says it all really doesn't it"

Figure 12 Vignette One, A Story from Eva

She also recounted stories of parents who posted multiple items a week during the Covid-19 lockdowns showing how inventive and creative they had been with their home learning activities. She explained that her own sister felt pressured to compete with other parents and began spending hours setting up activities for her two-year-old son which led to her "almost getting to the point of being clinically depressed". Eva perceives that the desire to compete with other parents and to achieve "Insta perfection" is most apparent within the middle-class community although she suggests that it is beginning to be problematic in other sectors of society too.

Laura focused her comments on the pressures placed upon children by social media. She commented that she worries about what children are "picking up in the background" and she shared a story of her own child hearing about something in the media and misunderstanding the meaning of it. She explained that it wasn't until she was talking to them about something else that she realised their misconception which worried her greatly. She also talked about the influence of the wider media upon the young children at her setting. She gave an example of a child who had watched a film and had recreated the story in his play at nursery so frequently that now other children are also playing the same game so "he's kind of become an influencer of a sort really". She explained that the play isn't particularly desirable and so they were having to work especially hard to divert the children to more constructive activities. Laura showed concern that this undesirable behaviour seemed to be rooted in one viewing of a film and commented that "it just goes to show how much of an influence the media has on children".

7.44 Social Class and Engagement

Six out of the seven participants commented upon a link between social class background and levels of engagement. Their interpretations of the links between these two areas were varied.

Emily, the only participant from a non-mainstream setting, reported that the majority of families who access her specialist provision, which is optional for families, come from "more socially advantaged backgrounds". She suggested that it is not necessarily due to parents having more money although that is helpful since her provision is the only one in the area and "some families travel long distances to visit". She interprets the primary reason for the provision being accessed predominately by middle class families as being due to parents from these backgrounds having a better understanding of their children's complex

needs and higher levels of motivation to support their children. She suggested that "they have a good understanding of the system, they know how to get things for their children, how they can get equipment, how to get a physio on a regular basis, how to get a speech and language therapist". She reported that this level of understanding, along with a higher level of engagement with the services her setting provides, means that children from more affluent backgrounds often develop at a faster rate than those children from less advantaged backgrounds.

Jenny suggested that children from less socially advantaged backgrounds are generally less confident, and she interprets this as being due to them having had fewer opportunities than their more advantaged peers. She explained that children from more advantaged families have the capital required to access a greater breadth of experiences and that this helps to improve their confidence, especially when they are faced by something new. She reported that during Covid-19 lockdowns her setting provided work for children to complete at home, and even loaned out devices to families who did not have access, but that the families from less advantaged backgrounds were consistently the ones who did not engage with the tasks that were set. She explained that despite trying to encourage them to participate and checking that they could connect to the work, the majority of disadvantaged families did not engage consistently during the process.

Katie reported similar difficulties in getting parents to engage with supporting their children's learning. She explained that at her previous setting, where there were a high proportion of children with EAL and a lot of disadvantaged families she had to work very hard to involve them in their children's learning. She went on to explain that her current setting works with a high proportion of families from the travelling community which also

brings challenges because parents often do not have good reading and writing skills themselves. She reported that a lot of the parents she has worked with in both settings seemed to have cultural capital which involved a negative view of education and therefore she has had to work with them to change their attitude towards school over time. She suggested that running parent workshops and parent and child activities helped to encourage a more positive partnership between the setting and these families over time but that it was not an easy process.

Susan also reported that working with parents who have developed cultural capital which reinforces a negative view of education can be a challenge. She recalled a time when she encountered a parent who had a poor educational experience and the effect that this had on his child.

Participant Four - Susan

> *"One day I was asked by the teacher to do some reading with some of the*
> *children. And one little boy came to read to me but didn't have his book with him.*
> *So when I asked him what had happened to his book, he said he's taken it home*
> *and his Dad ripped it to pieces and said, We don't have those things in this*
> *house."*

She explained that parents from more socially advantaged families have cultural capital which leads them "to see more importance and more value to education and to making sure children go to school" whereas other children are "growing up in an environment where the only input they're getting is the time they're in school with no follow up at home and no back up at home" which makes it much harder for them to make progress and learn than a child with support at home. She suggested that parents from more advantaged backgrounds tend to have a higher level of education and therefore they

have different expectations and aspirations for their own children because they have developed cultural capital which sees education as a positive thing to engage with. She explained that she perceives that parents who have been well educated themselves often have high aspirations for their children which involve them having a positive attitude towards education. She perceives that parents from more advantaged backgrounds expect their children to have greater attention spans and expect them to focus on educational activities for longer whereas children from less advantaged families spend more time engaging in physical play or technological play.

In contrast, Eva and Lisa both reported that in their experience children from middle class families are "less ambitious" (Eva) and "can be really lazy and entitled" (Lisa). Eva suggested that children from more advantaged backgrounds "seem to have a sense of entitlement and academically are the ones that don't bother, they just coast along being micro-managed by their parents" whereas children who grow up in less advantaged situations "have a better work attitude" even if they "are the least likely to get help at home because of illiterate parents or perhaps they don't have time because they are working." Eva also reported that children from more advantaged backgrounds tend to have limited experience of playing independently or interacting with other children prior to starting nursery because parents provide more structured, adult led environments at home.

Participant Six - Eva

> "Everything is very educational so they sit and draw beautiful… what I've seen a
> lot of is absolutely gorgeous pictures, colouring is absolutely immaculate by the
> Christmas of Nursery, it's absolutely fabulous, they can cut it out… but… they
> can't tell you the story behind it, there's no storytelling, no make believe because
> "we don't do that" you know, here's your letters, here's your numbers but there's

no magic in the role play, they don't know how to interact with other children particularly because everything has been led by an adult."

7.45 Wellbeing and Engagement

Four participants commented directly on their perceptions of the links between wellbeing and engagement. All four reported that they had experienced children with low levels of wellbeing finding it difficult to engage with everyday activities in the nursery or school setting.

Jenny reported that her experience has shown her that low levels of wellbeing often mean that children have lower self-confidence and that this leads to children being unwilling to try new things. She suggested that this can then lead to a "vicious cycle of negative behaviour" where the child convinces themselves that they can't do things which makes their wellbeing levels worse. She recalled a story about a specific child she had worked with in her previous setting where a negative home life had caused low levels of wellbeing and she reported that this had a very clear effect on the child's engagement in school.

Participant Two - Jenny

"When a child feels good they learn. When a child feels a bit anxious or doesn't have a good home life it does affect the way they engage and the way they learn. They might not be able to communicate properly and that does affect their feelings. I had a child in my previous setting who had really awful wellbeing, she just felt awful about herself and that all stemmed from her home life. There were a lot of safeguarding concerns coming through and she had been in care before and just been returned to her parents. She had two younger siblings so although she was only five she was the oldest of three so a lot of responsibility was on her shoulders even though she was so young. She was coming into school every day being very anxious and worried about everything. She did engage with me because we built a kind of trust so in one to one sessions with me she would feel good and engage but in whole class sessions she would sit there and not want to engage because she didn't want to be wrong or to be made to look silly."

204

Katie shared similar interpretations, suggesting that if a child doesn't have good wellbeing then they often "struggle to function well in the classroom". Katie spoke about the need for both good physical and mental wellbeing and the need to feel loved. She suggested that having secure relationships with the people around them is important to children in order that they feel supported and cared for, but she emphasised that these relationships do not have to necessarily be with the child's parent. She explained that children can form secure attachments to a range of adults and as long as they feel settled and loved their wellbeing isn't necessarily adversely affected by absent parents. She also suggested that, particularly as children get older, the wider family situation can affect their wellbeing because children pick up on adult anxieties about finances and job and home security.

Laura agreed that if a child doesn't feel secure then they won't be able to learn. She also suggested that in older children wellbeing can be affected by worries about money, family and their home life. However, she reported that at her setting one of the biggest factors that they experience which affects wellbeing and security is when a new child starts the setting. She explained that often a new child naturally feels quite unsettled to begin with because everything is new but that their anxiety and distress can also have an effect upon the wellbeing of other children in the room. She suggested that some of the other children show a temporary decrease in their levels of wellbeing because they have picked up on the upset from the new child so they have to work hard to re-settle the existing children as well as the new child.

Eva defined wellbeing as a "state which encompasses someone's basic needs but also their mindset". She suggested that she prefers to refer to it as "mindset" rather than

"wellbeing" because she feels that "the word wellbeing implies that your mindset is always positive and that's not natural". She recalled a story about her husband, who is a police officer, being called out to shops where children have been taught to sit in the pushchair and steal things of shelves and hide them underneath themselves. She also recalled a story of a group of children who she taught who lived in a trailer in a supermarket car park and the only way they were able to eat was to go into the supermarket and steal food. She explained that these children couldn't possibly have a positive mindset or good wellbeing because their basic needs were not being met.

Further to this Eva also spoke about the mindset of middle-class children. She suggested that children from more advantaged backgrounds were under pressure from their parents because there is "this need for a perfect family life". She reported that she has worked with many parents who are determined to find an external reason for why their child isn't a "straight A student". She suggested that parents are convinced that "it's obviously the school's fault, the education system's fault, there is never a reason for it in their family setup, within their child or even within their personality either. It's not a natural element of themselves, there's got to be something to blame". Eva shared a story of a family who were determined to seek a diagnosis for their child because they did not fit in to the image of perfection that they had been striving for and she reported that a lot of her time is taken up talking to parents about whether their child really needs to be assessed for special educational needs or whether they are just exhibiting normal childhood behaviours.

"Definitely we are trying to put these model lives across and that's where the labelling comes in, middle class parents where the child isn't quite as academic and suddenly, they want a label, they'll do anything. I mean, they'll pay… there's classic stories about a lady locally, £2000 and she will give you a diagnosis, you know, they'll do anything, they'll find anything "oh they lined up their cars one day so they must be autistic" they'll do anything for a label these parents. There's the wellbeing out the window because this child now feels that they must conform and then there's the constant oversharing, so they overhear "ah well he's autistic you know he lines up cars" so now they think that to please mum they have to line up cars all the time. I see that a lot, to please mum, I say, "well why are you behaving like that, you don't do it in class?" and even down into R and Nursery "you don't do that in class, you hide your dummy." We know the minute you walk into school you pocket that dummy so why the minute you walk out are you shoving in back in your mouth and refusing to talk to anyone? They're learning to please and to address these things, particularly in middle class where they are desperate for this perfection, and they honestly seem to think that its normal"

7.5 Major Theme Four – Habitus Starts At Home

All participants talked about the importance of children's home lives and the influence that their background has upon the way in which they approach opportunities at school and nursery. The ideas shared on this theme will be presented here using five sub-themes (see fig 13)
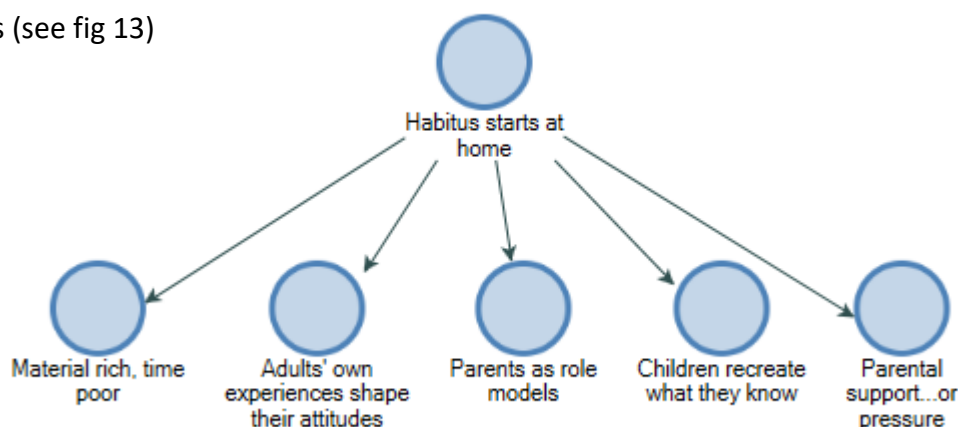
Figure 13 Extract from Coding Map showing Theme and Sub-themes for "Habitus Starts At Home"

7.51 Adults' Own Experiences Shape Their Attitudes

Four participants talked about their interpretations of how the experiences that adults have had themselves help to shape their attitudes towards certain aspects of life.

Two participants, Katie and Susan, talked about their experiences of parents who had negative memories of their own educational experiences and the subsequent difficulties they have faced when trying to encourage such parents to engage with their child's learning. Susan suggested that she sees that it is part of her job to encourage parents to realise that "whatever their educational experience, it is partly up to them to make sure that the first experience their child has is a positive one".

Katie echoed these thoughts, suggesting that whilst it is often difficult to get these parents to engage it is important to encourage them in any way that you can. She explained that at her setting one of the best ways they have found to do this is "through lots of parents workshops and activities". She also explained that her setting has a relatively high number of children from the traveller community and that in her experience the parents of children from traveller families generally have quite a negative attitude towards education because their cultural capital does not place a high value upon traditional education. She recalled a story about a particular family she had worked with to change the parents' attitudes towards school (see fig 14)

> *"We've got a family now with six children who are settled travellers. Mum and Dad went to school but only til they were about 10 and even then, it was hit and miss because they were on the road. They can't do any more than the very basics and when they came to us, they had a really negative attitude towards education and saw it as something for other people and not for them. Their children started coming to school but their attendance was really poor, and they never participated in anything that wasn't compulsory. Now though, we've worked really hard to make them part of the community and to show mum and dad that school isn't something to be fearful of and they are quite supportive now. They come to most of the workshops and things and parents evening and stuff like that and the children's attendance is much better. It's been a lot of hard work though to change their attitudes."*

Figure 14 Vignette Two, A Story from Katie

Susan also commented on the attitudes of parents from traveller communities, suggesting that whilst "the majority have quite a negative view of education because they didn't get a good education themselves, some are keen for their children to experience better. One traveller mum came to me and actually asked for help to try and learn to read before her daughter went to school because she realised she wasn't able to help a child learn to read if she couldn't read herself."

Furthermore, Susan also recalled a story about a member of staff from her setting who, when she began working for her had quite a negative view of school and had not strictly enforced her own children going to school. However, Susan explained that over time the member of staff changed her thinking "quite radically" and recently she had "admitted that had she had her time again as a parent her attitude towards enforcing her own children's attendance at school would be different now than it was then, because she sees more importance and more value now to education and to making sure children go to

school." This illustrates how the building of different cultural capital can influence an individual's thinking and decisions.

Lisa and Eva both commented on the difference between the attitudes of working class and middle class families. Eva suggested that children from working class families who witness their parents working hard "going out getting work wherever they can and sometimes working two jobs" often have a better work ethic and more resilience than children who grow up in more advantaged families. She explained that, on the other hand, children who have parents who are illiterate for example, are much less likely to grow up in a literature rich environment which inevitably affects their progress.

Lisa suggested that parental attitudes are more important than the social position of the family. She explained that she feels that children from less advantaged backgrounds can do really well at school if their parents are supportive and prioritise education and that some children from more advantaged families can have a "really lazy and entitled attitude". She explained that children develop their attitude and work ethic from their parents as a part of their habitus, so parental attitude is important.

Participant Three – Lisa

> *"I always saw my parents going out to work and my son has seen me work too and I think that's important, whatever social class you come from. The children I work with, even at nursery age are influenced by their parents' attitudes. They know whether mummy or daddy goes to work and they understand that going to work gets the pennies for nice things. If children grow up understanding that, and that the pathway towards a good job is engaging with learning and getting a good education then they are much more likely to become valuable adults with good work ethics. If they see their parents being paid by the benefits system for sitting home watching Jeremy Kyle all day then they'll think that's an ok way to carry on and obviously you don't need to go to school to learn how to do that!"*

7.52 Parents As Role Models

Five out of the seven participants commented on the importance of parents and carers being positive role models for children.

One participant, Susan, focused her responses on the ways in which adults own cultural capital and habitus are affected by their experiences and this influences their ability to act as a positive role model (see previous section). Lisa also commented upon this but in addition Lisa shared her experience of the ways in which parents can influence the way that children engage with play activities at nursery or school. She explained that some parents model a very structured approach to their children and this sometimes means that children find it difficult to engage with unstructured free play. She also recalled instances where children experienced role models who encouraged excessive use of technology which Lisa interprets as also being damaging for children's ability to engage with traditional play opportunities.

Participant Three – Lisa

> *"I remember having a child at nursery who had very middle-class parents who were desperate to do their best for their little boy but they thought that that meant taking him to every organised activity going and never spending any unstructured time together. That meant he came to nursery at 2 and a half completely unable to play either independently or with an adult apart from in a very structured adult led game because his parents had modelled that playing was done through structured activities. On the flip side I have worked with children whose parents have role modelled constantly having some form of tech in their hands and those children are so used to being sat in front of technology that they don't know what to do when they don't have a screen of some kind and sometimes some children don't know how to play outside because that isn't something they have ever done before either."*

Eva also focused on more advantaged parents in her response. She talked about a "culture of entitlement" and how that creates a poor role model for the children to follow. She suggested that parents are often determined that "there has to be this perfect family life and if there isn't then it's obviously the school's fault, the education systems fault, there is never a reason for it in their family's setup, within their child or even within their personality either." She went on to explain that the children then learn this attitude and it becomes a part of their habitus so they replicate it in their own actions and beliefs. She also suggested that the environment that a child lives in can affect whether they have a good role model to develop their resourcefulness and creativity. She explained that in her experience, children from more advantaged backgrounds live in households with "appliances that serve very specific functions, they will have a dishwasher, a coffee machine, lots of different implements for specific purposes in the kitchen and the garage and the shed" so the children don't see adults having to be resourceful or creative with what they have which means that they don't learn it in the same way.

Jenny suggested that parents serve as role models throughout a child's life. She explained that children are influenced by what they see in terms of whether their parents go out to work, whether they see their parents buy their own home and whether they encourage them to work hard at school. She explained that she felt that her own parents had "definitely been good role models because they provided me with everything I needed and I saw them work hard to get to where they are now". She suggested that children who have positive role models at home and who see adults "with a good work ethic" come from a better starting point than those who do not and that she has observed that these children are often "more controlled, more mature and more focused".

Emily talked about parents as role models from a different perspective. In her role in

an alternative provision, Emily suggested that one of the key elements of parents acting as role models is "parents having the determination to get the right help for their child". She explained that although she works with parents from all backgrounds "typically parents are better educated because they have to have an understanding of wanting something more for their child". She suggested that children who have parents who are "confident, well-educated and comfortable" have better role models than those who live with disadvantaged parents. Emily also shared her interpretation of whether parental attitudes and behaviours affect the way that children play. She explained that because of the additional needs of the children in her setting she feels that they are not particularly affected by the influence of their parental role models but she acknowledges that older children or more typically developing children may be more affected.

Participant Seven – Emily

> *"Sometimes it has an impact on what they like to use, like some children are very limited on what they choose to use because they like to stick with what they know and other times they come in and see all sorts of different toys and they are happy to try everything. I don't know, they are too young. I think that could probably affect more typically developing children's choices of toys but we are not talking about typically developing children, our children are developing slower so we are talking about age 5 years old but probably they are operating at the age of three or four and I think at that level I would say parents attitudes doesn't really affect the choice of toys or play. I think later on or in typically developing children they are affected by what parents like to do at home or by what their parents say about different toys or games but not whilst they are with us."*

7.53 Children Recreate What They Know

Following on from talking about "parents as role models" six participants shared ideas about children recreating their early experiences, both in their play and in their future decisions.

Jenny explained that she sees children make choices in terms of how sociable they are and she believes that often this is linked to the capital they have gained from their experiences at home. She recalled a child in her previous setting who was from a disadvantaged family and "she always played alone, she never chose to engage with her peers unless an adult was there to encourage her". Jenny went on to explain that the child came from a single parent family and was an only child and that the child's parent had spoken to Jenny on several occasions about feeling "isolated and alone" so she interprets that the child had not experienced a lot of social interaction at home so she didn't have the capital to know how to engage with it at school. She also shared a story about another child who came from a large family from the traveller community so "he always had people around him right from being tiny" and he was "always surrounded by friends but often engaging in boisterous, physical play because that was what he was used to".

Lisa also shared experiences of children recreating their home environment through their play. She explained that she often sees children who have a baby at home "gravitating towards the dolls and the home corner" and children who live with boisterous older siblings tend to enjoy "more physical rough and tumble play". She also recalled a story about a child who had been raised in a very structured environment, with very little opportunity for play, prior to going to nursery (see fig 15). She explained that he did not understand how to play and that it took a long time and a lot of adult support to help him to develop the capital required to interact with toys and with his peers.

> *"I remember having a child at nursery who had very middle-class parents who were desperate to do their best for their little boy but they thought that that meant taking him to every organised activity going and never spending any unstructured time together. They literally went from one class or club to another and at home they set up loads of special activities which they planned and then gave him instructions for. The poor child never had any time to do what he wanted to do. That meant he came to nursery at 2 and a half completely unable to play either independently or with an adult apart from in a very structured adult led game because his parents had modelled that playing was done through structured activities. It took a long time to show him how to engage in free play, and even longer to get him to socialise with his peers. We also had to work hard with his parents to achieve a balance at home."*

Figure 15 Vignette Three, A Story from Lisa

Susan agreed with Lisa that children tend to choose activities that they are familiar with. She used the same example of a child who has just had a new baby sibling and has experienced mum feeding and changing the baby "being attracted to the dolls to recreate that in their play". She suggested that encouraging children to play with what they know and to recreate their experiences can be "particularly useful when you're settling a child into nursery or if they're going through an unsettled period for whatever reason because it helps them work through some big feelings". She also explained that playing with something familiar makes the nursery environment less threatening so it's a good way "of getting children feeling confident, and to build good relationships, to get involved with their playing and build good relationships with them."

Using play as a tool to help process big events was also discussed by Katie. She suggested that at her setting they try to offer play opportunities linked to any major life events that a child has experienced recently. She explained that recreating their experiences can help children to work through their thoughts and feelings.

> *"If we know a child has had a particular difficulty at home or has gone through a*
> *big life change so if they've experienced bereavement, family breakdown, a new*
> *baby we try to support that with play-based activities so that they can work*
> *through their feelings with play-based activities… support themselves working*
> *through the ideas that they have about those experiences. We would support that*
> *so we set up different things that encourage that kind of thing, obviously we don't*
> *force children to access them but often if they are there, often children for*
> *example if mum has just had a new baby and we put dolls and pushchairs and a*
> *cot and a highchair out, often one of the first to go there will be the one who has*
> *the baby at home and they recreate what happens at home which helps them to*
> *work through any thoughts and feelings they have about that."*

Katie suggested that social background has a big influence on play because "so much of play is a replication of experiences a child has had". She explained that children from less advantaged backgrounds were, in her experience, more restricted in their play because they haven't had the same breadth of experiences as their peers so they "tend to recreate what they have seen on the TV or their limited experiences over and over". She expressed concern that this often leads to lots of physical play particularly by boys, who like to recreate what they have seen on TV or in films whereas "children from more advantaged backgrounds who have been taken to museums, to the theatre and on holiday recreate snippets of their own experiences which tend to be much more varied".

Eva agreed with this interpretation, recalling her experiences of working with children from both less advantaged and more advantaged backgrounds. She explained that children learn about life through recreating their experiences and seeing how other children recreate different experiences. She also explained that the children she used to work with who were from less advantaged backgrounds tended to play in a very repetitive way,

216

particularly in role play. She suggested that this was because they didn't have the breadth of experiences to draw upon, whereas the children she works with now who are from more advantaged backgrounds have a much more varied range of experiences to draw upon in their play.

Participant Six – Eva

> *"There's the classic one of the little girl, "what the f*** do you want?" as she opens the door, you know re-enacting life and your understanding of life and listening to other people that's where they learn that things can be different. Someone else might get a teapot out to make the tea, they may never have seen a teapot before so that collaboration and learning of others and for me play is just so important. Obviously, there's a lack of experience there, I go back to working in reception in a school with lots of lower classes, lots of EAL and you've got that trip to Tesco's, get the chairs out we're all going to Tesco. We never went anywhere else, always Tesco because that was the local shop whereas in a more middle-class area, those chairs suddenly become an aeroplane, or an airport, we've been in a wood, we've been to the beach... they've got many more experiences to draw on so those experiences become part of the play."*

Laura suggested that, rather than a social split, she sees a difference in the way that boys and girls recreate their experiences through play. She explained that whilst she felt that both boys and girls recreate what they know, they recreate different elements of it. She suggested that, in general, girls tend to recreate the home environment more whereas boys seem to be more physical. However, she also suggested that some children "actually go for things that are new to them, you know if they haven't got it at home then they're desperate to try it at nursery" and others "take comfort in repeating what they know so it's just repeat, repeat, repeat". She also suggested that children recreating what they know can sometimes have a bit of a "snowball effect". She recalled a story of a child who began by

217

recreating what he had seen in a film in his play and how he has gradually involved more and more children who are now recreating what they have seen him do.

Participant One – Laura

"The children in the older group… one loves lions and he's influenced the whole group now and everything has to have lions in it now, good, or bad and practitioners try to steer it to something else to extend things, but it just comes back to lions again! I think it's Lion King he's recreating things from which actually he's like an influencer of his time and he's managed to infiltrate all the children and even that they're going home and asking for it. So, I think probably children adapt to what's there, but we'll have a personal preference which might be determined by bringing all their social experiences."

7.54 Parental Support…or Pressure?

Whilst every participant agreed that it is important for children to have the support of their parents or carers, two practitioners suggested that sometimes parents can cause undue pressure for their children. One practitioner focused their comments on this area on families from more affluent backgrounds whereas one practitioner's views were about families from across the social spectrum.

Emily suggested that in her role at an alternative provision she mainly saw families where "parents are wanting something more for their child". She explained that this is usually very positive and it means that parents are "determined to help their children as best they can" but that sometimes this creates extra pressure for the children. She reported that sometimes "parents can have unrealistic expectations of what their child can achieve" and that she has to work hard with some families to manage those. She also explained that some families "are able to pay £100 an hour for a physio so they do it and they push and push to try and get their child to do things that they really are not capable of" and she

believes that "that's where it tips into being too much pressure for the children really, it's not fair on them".

A similar interpretation was shared by Eva, who reported that she had worked with a lot of more advantaged families who "competed against each other on social media" which meant that they "put huge amounts of pressure on their children". She explained that they are keen for their child to "be the best" and they will do whatever it takes to make sure that they get there. She also suggested that when a child doesn't "conform to Instagram perfection" parents will then go to great lengths to "find something to blame" and will even pay to get their child diagnosed with a learning disability. She recalled several stories of parents putting unnecessary pressure on their children, which Eva believes is detrimental to their health and their success in the short and long term.

Participant Six – Eva

> "I've had parents in year one asking me "will they get into the grammar school?", I'm like, they're six years old, let's get a grip here, let's get her to sit properly on a chair without flashing her knickers at everyone, its… you know you can see it already… Park Run… Reception two years ago… "oh they did really well, they came 10th in Park Run at the weekend". That's great but they're 5 and you're already telling them they're a great runner so now every single time they run for the rest of their life they are going to feel pressurised to do well and to do better than they did last time and be the best. Definitely we are trying to put these model lives across and that's where the labelling comes in, middle class parents where the child isn't quite as academic and suddenly, they want a label, they'll do anything."

7.55 Material Rich…Time Poor

Three practitioners commented on the issue of some families being materially rich and children being well provided for but often such families struggling to find time to spend together.

Susan recalled two families in particular who she had worked with where this was the case. She explained that whilst the children were very well provided for financially, the time that they spent with their parents was limited and that this had a detrimental effect on their wellbeing.

Participant Four – Susan

> *"Over the years we have had a child whose parents were both lawyers in London and he was basically brought up by a nanny. We also had the children of an international sales director of Rover when it was in existence, which meant that their parents were forever going off to fancy events and functions around the world and leaving the children with babysitters or friends. All these children had a great deal of material things provided for them but definitely could be time poor sometimes. The child with the nanny hardly got to see his parents because they were in London all week. The other family did have mum around a bit more but dad was hardly at home."*

She also reported that, to a lesser extent, she has seen similar instances many times over her career where children have spent long hours at nursery or wraparound care whilst parents worked. She also highlighted that, in her experience, children with more affluent and often busy, working parents "tend to have less nutritious lunches at nursery as parents rely more upon pre-packaged items for speed and convenience". She went on to comment that many of the more affluent families she has worked with place great value on their children doing a huge range of extra-curricular activities such as ballet, tennis and music lessons which broadens their cultural capital but restricts the amount of time that they can spend together as a family.

This is a view shared by Eva, who suggested that children from more affluent backgrounds have often been taken to many different organised activities since they were

very young. She explained that she thinks this influences their ability to engage in free play at nursery as "they don't know how to interact with other children particularly because everything has been led by an adult". She also commented that whilst extra-curricular activities are good for "broadening horizons" it is important to "get that balance right, you need some time at home as a family too".

Katie commented that for some children, the Covid-19 pandemic may have been a positive event in terms of their wellbeing. She suggested that children who usually would spend little time with their parents, either because their parents work long hours or because they are "carted from one after school activity to another" got to spend more time at home with their immediate family which might have been a positive thing for them. She explained that for these children, having parents who were furloughed or working from home and no holiday clubs or activities to go to might have enabled them to form "closer relationships to their parents".

7.6 Major Theme Five – Knowing Children Well Is Important

All participants talked about the importance of parents, carers and staff in their settings knowing children well. They commented on the ways in which they can use their knowledge of the children in their settings to support their wellbeing and development. Ideas expressed on this theme will be presented under four sub-themes (see fig 16).
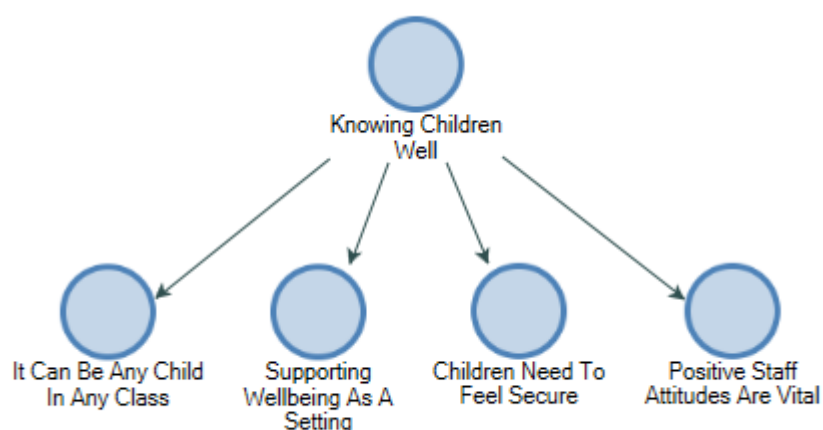
Figure 16 Extract from Coding Map showing Theme and Sub-themes for "Knowing Children Well is Important"

7.61 It Can Be Any Child In Any Class

All the practitioners talked about the importance of knowing the children and families in their settings well. They agreed that building positive relationships with families is an important part of their job. Four practitioners offered more detail about their perceptions of the prevalence of wellbeing issues within their settings. All four suggested that it is important to have the attitude that "it could be any child in any class".

Eva explained that within the multi-academy trust that her school is part of, they complete trauma assessments on every child in every class and there is an ethos of "don't be fooled, keep an open mind". Susan also talked about the importance of not making assumptions based upon the outward appearance of a family. She used the example of packed lunches to tell a story about a time where she and her staff had been mistaken about a family whose children had been in her setting (see fig 17). She explained that from that occasion they had learnt that it was vital "not to judge a book by it's cover and to have the view that it could be any child, any family that needs help".

222

We had the one family who, from the outside had it all, both parents were well educated, had reasonable jobs and they lived in a nice house. Their children both came to our setting and we, perhaps wrongly, assumed that they were a "nice middle-class family". However, when it came to mealtimes and snack times the older child particularly seemed ravenously hungry and started to show almost obsessive behaviour around food. At our Christmas party he gathered all the bowls and plates around him and refused to let the other children have food from them until he had taken what he wanted. At snack time he was always the first one there and he would eat until you took the food away from him. His lunchboxes were always super healthy, but the portions were tiny, he was given the same amount of food as his little sibling who was two years younger than him and as they grew older the amount of food they were given never increased. We spoke to parents about whether the children could be given a little more in their lunches as they appeared hungry but both parents were very defensive and refused to increase the food, saying that they wanted them to be healthy. This wasn't a case of financial issues or a lack of food availability but in time we discovered that the parents both had issues around food and body image which were being transferred onto the children. We had to work really hard with that family over a long period to change that. It taught us never to judge a book by it's cover and never to assume anything about a family based on what they looked like from the outside.

Figure 17 Vignette Four, A Story from Susan

Laura talked about the importance of knowing what is "normal" for each child and family so that practitioners are able to identify quickly any behaviours or patterns that are unusual. She explained that each child and family are different but that it is important to remember that all families experience difficult times and so different families will need more support at varying times. She stressed the importance of ensuring that staff don't "get complacent and just assume everything is ok", recalling an occasion where she had worked with a family where the mother had become very ill and subsequently passed away from cancer. She explained that "until her diagnosis you wouldn't have expected to need to

223

support that family over and above the usual but those kinds of things can happen to anyone at any time".

Lisa also talked about ensuring that staff did not make assumptions. She raised concerns that "it is easy to assume that certain families are ok because they seem like normal middle class families on the outside" but she went on to explain that "we never really know what is going on behind closed doors and often it is those families who are struggling with things like hidden domestic violence, abuse or addiction". She suggested that children living in these environments do not have good wellbeing because they live with "an element of fear" so it is important that practitioners are aware of the signs to look out for.

7.62 Children Need To Feel Secure
All practitioners talked about the importance of children feeling valued and loved by their parents or carers. All seven agreed that children need to feel secure in their home environment in order to thrive at nursery or school and feeling loved by their main carers is a major part of that security. Three practitioners offered greater detail in their responses, linking security, home life and behaviour with the role of the practitioner within nursery or school.

Lisa suggested that there are sometimes things happening "behind closed doors" which make children feel unsettled and which can have an impact upon those relationships between the child and their parents. She perceived that "when families are facing challenging times, sometimes their child's wellbeing isn't at the forefront of their mind" but that it is vital that a child feels secure at home before they are able to feel confident enough to engage in all that is on offer at nursery. She explained that it was part of the practitioners' role to identify those families facing challenges and to provide them with any

additional support they needed in order that the child can continue to engage with nursery or school.

Laura shared this view, suggesting that knowing that they are loved is the most important element of ensuring a child feels secure. She explained that, in her experience, "children are very good at sensing when something isn't right and that leads to them feeling insecure". She reported that when a child is experiencing upset at home this often manifests itself in behavioural changes at nursery, either in the form of "emotional outbursts" or "tearfulness and insecurity". She suggested that it is the role of the practitioner to identify when children are feeling insecure and to support children "through these challenging times by providing extra tender loving care".

Eva also spoke about the effect that insecurity at home can have on a child's engagement at school. She explained that "I have taught refugees several years ago, so I've seen that resilience and determination but because there is love and security and boundaries they are just fine." She went on to suggest though that "if a child doesn't know where they're going and what they're doing and the rules keep changing then they don't feel safe" and she explained that often this can manifest itself in behavioural challenges at school. She shared stories of children who she had known with insecure home lives and she explained that she perceives that it is the practitioner's role to provide consistent boundaries, support and care so that children "know where they stand" and that in time this helps them to feel more secure at school even if their home life is in turmoil.

Participant Six– Eva

> *"I've taught children that have been on the rob to get food, they lived in
> Sainsburys car park in a trailer and their job was to rob the supermarket for food.
> That child isn't going to function in a classroom, in a nursery, in anything. My*

husband (a police officer) has picked up children who are taught in the pushchair

to pull off the shelves and hide it underneath them, that child is not going to

function academically because they've not got the right mindset or sense of

wellbeing and they've not got that capacity to take on anything except their basic

needs."

7.63 Supporting Wellbeing As a Setting

As well as specific support for certain families, four practitioners also spoke about how they use what they know about the children and families to support wellbeing more generally within their settings.

Laura talked about staff in her setting having a good level of knowledge about family situations so that where children have separated parents, staff are aware when children have been to see their absent parent. She explained that this is important because often children "seem to need a bit more support after that". She also suggested that at her setting there is a general ethos of care and support and that children are given cuddles and reassurance whenever it is needed. She shared a story of a child who needs extra reassurance following a nap and explained that, because staff know the child well, they are able to provide this (see fig 18).

> *"I was speaking to a colleague about it, between those of us that work with the children and we were like "oh she's been a bit like this today" or "she hasn't been herself today" we often say that they haven't been themselves, and you say it's parents and they're kinda like, we have some of that. Knowing the children well is important, and then we know when something isn't quite right. And so last week, she was quite upset over the slightest thing, and she's nearly three, so able to articulate when she is upset and couldn't really, at this time. She didn't know what she was. She just wasn't sure. And then yesterday I didn't see it, but they said that she was really angry, very angry. And so again, not much reason other than perhaps that she was overtired. But she's not normally like that. And so today we've been quite convinced that something's not right, she could be under the weather. She could be brewing something now, but I'm one of the practitioners said that, oh, I think that she's seen her (inaudible). Oh, she never mentions her and perhaps we could speak to mum and dad to see if anything's upsetting her because generally there's something bothering her. And even if it's just they've not slept well three nights. Having the conversation with parents is the next place we go after talking to each other and just having the general chit chat at the door saying they've not been right, starts the seed of that conversation, then you can say that if not been right for a few weeks.*
> *Often their personal things don't tend to come until they've actually dealt with it themself. And a long time ago, we had a mom who was very ill, and she did ultimately die of cancer. But at the time, we didn't know, and she didn't know what was going on, and they couldn't work out what was wrong to start with. But we needed to know it wasn't right, and it was obviously having an effect on the child because they could sense. And they were quite young at the time as well, but it just shows how they do pick up on things going on around them and obviously when you know more, you can support the family better but I think you have to presume something's the matter almost and treat the child a little bit more kindly and a bit more forgiving because they're in that emotional state."*

Figure 18 Vignette Five, A Story from Laura

Emily talked about supporting wellbeing in a different way. She suggested that at her specialist provision one of the key ways that they support wellbeing is to create a supportive and non-threatening environment for children to complete their therapy in. She explained that in order to do this they use what they know about the child and the family to carefully choose activities that practise certain skills but also appeal to the child's interests and curiosities so that they "are playing without realising they are working on their individual target". She perceived that this helps to safeguard the child's wellbeing because they are not being "forced or bribed to do something they don't feel comfortable with".

Susan also suggested that her setting, a mainstream nursery, used play activities to help children to work on their targets in order to foster a good level of wellbeing. She explained that children were encouraged to take part in activities but never forced which is "key to good wellbeing". Susan also talked about using what they know about family situations to support children experiencing changes such as the birth of a new sibling, the separation of parents or a bereavement. She also explained the importance of knowing about families in order to sensitively support parents and carers with attending to children's basic needs such as nutrition, washing and bathing and providing appropriate clothing for the weather. She suggested that her setting have, when they have been aware of families who were struggling with one or more of these, put on parent information sessions, put up posters or sent out leaflets to support families. She also explained that they work with the children regularly to ensure that they begin to learn about the importance of staying healthy and safe. However, Susan expressed some concerns that, over recent years the emphasis on mental health has potentially created a problem with people "being quick to label" and an over-cautious approach to safeguarding and safety. She emphasised that "not for one minute am I saying that we don't look at safeguarding as paramount, but I think we need to be careful how we balance things."

This view was shared by Eva who expressed concerns that children are over-conscious of mental health concerns and as a society we are "too quick to use the terms anxiety and depression". She suggested that she prefers to use the term "positive mindset" rather than good wellbeing as she feels that "wellbeing suggests that we should be happy all the time". She explained that she has had to work hard to support children to understand that it isn't natural to feel happy all of the time but that it doesn't mean that you have a mental illness.

*"I think as a human being you have to accept that there are some days when you
are down in the dumps and I've spent a lot of time this year teaching children that
you can have Monday-itis, you can have Friday-itis and it's not that you've got
anxiety. I think we are at risk of over labelling emotions and I think that comes
from the idea that we've got to constantly be talking about our emotions. Its ok,
when I say to somebody I've got Monday-it is, everyone knows what I mean but
it's not anxiety, it's not a depression, it's not sadness it's just a sense of bleuurrgh
that hasn't got a name and its almost a positive because it means you've had a
nice weekend and I think that's what a lot of… we've been sold a media thing
with this whole wellbeing thing and that's really dangerous"*

She shared that her setting has done a lot of work to develop resilience and, prior to Covid, had worked closely with Springfield Mind to work with children and parents to extend their cultural capital through sessions on how food contributes to mindset. Eva explained that the main way in which her school promotes positive mindset is through a whole school ethos of care and compassion in a non-competitive and inclusive community where everyone is valued and celebrated. She explained that they don't emphasise achievement but that they place more value on effort and resilience. She reported that this ethos runs through everything that they do, including through the way in which the staff are treated by senior management.

7.64 Positive Staff Attitudes Are Vital

Five practitioners commented on the importance of positive staff attitudes in developing a supportive culture within schools and nurseries.

Emily explained that at her alternative provision setting this is particularly important given that families who come to their setting are often used to working with other professionals such as "doctors and hospitals who focus on what their child can't do rather

than what they can do". She added that their previous experience often makes parents very nervous of accessing new services and they are, in many cases "still digesting their child's diagnosis" so they don't know what to expect or what "the future will hold". Emily suggested that it is important that the staff at her setting try to be as positive as they can and that they offer practical and emotional support to the families at a difficult time.

This idea was shared by Laura who also suggested that the attitudes of the staff at her setting were vital in developing positive relationships with parents. She explained that she believes that it is important that staff offer support and a caring attitude towards all families but particularly towards those who are experiencing challenging times. She explained that "keeping that dialogue going" between the parents and the staff is vital in order that the setting is aware of "what is going on in the background". She explained that positive attitudes amongst staff are also important for staff wellbeing. She suggested that it is easier for staff to remain positive because "there are very few times where we have to work alone and that helps to keep things more light-hearted because there's always someone there to share the load".

Eva also talked about the need for staff to support each other. She explained that the multi-academy trust that her school is part of has a comprehensive programme of support for staff, including early finishes, duvet days and sympathetic sickness approaches and that wellbeing for staff and pupils is "top priority". She suggested that "it is so important that staff are in a good position to support families and if staff are not in a good place that's just not going to happen".

Susan commented that she thinks that staff attitudes towards equality are highly influential upon the children in their care. She explained that in her setting the staff are

from a diverse range of backgrounds and therefore have a wide range of experiences and capital which helps them to support children from a range of backgrounds too. She added that "within the staff and their abilities we have different experiences of education and that does shape people's thinking" but that "they are very aware of the fact that the way that we behave and the way that we treat the children in our setting will impact on those children and their emotional happiness and well-being".

Katie approached the idea of staff attitudes differently, focusing on the attitudes of reception teachers towards free play versus structured activities. She suggested that she fears that the new EYFS curriculum document which allows practitioners to make their own pedagogical decisions relies "too heavily upon the attitudes of the teachers" and there "are too many teachers who will impose too much structure in reception because that makes it easier to tick the boxes". She explained that she is concerned that this will have a knock-on effect upon children's wellbeing because they will be "put under too much pressure too soon". This idea will be explored further in the next section, Structural Systemic Pressures.

7.7 Major Theme Six - The Exosystem - Structural Systemic Pressures

All participants commented upon the different external pressures that practitioners, parents and children face from wider society and the influence that these pressures can have upon their wellbeing. These ideas will be explored using four sub-themes (see fig 19).
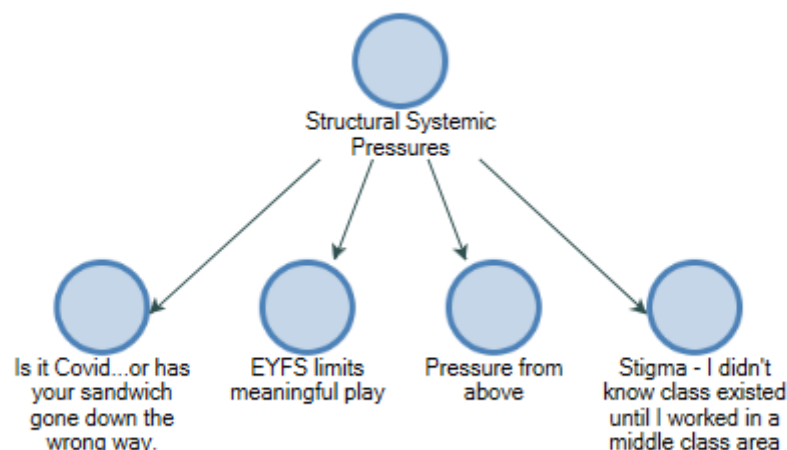

Figure 19 Extract from Coding Map showing Theme and Sub-themes for" Structural Systemic Pressures"

231

7.71 EYFS Limits Meaningful Play

Five practitioners commented on the restrictive nature of the EYFS curriculum and the limits it can place on meaningful play opportunities.

Jenny explained that she thinks that the curriculum becomes increasingly restrictive as children get older. She suggested that for younger children there are more opportunities to play whereas as children near the end of the EYFS there is a need for more structured activities to ensure that the curriculum is covered.

Participant Two – Jenny

> *"I think a lot of it, particularly from my experiences, If I'm doing an observation I won't sit down and watch a child play, it will be a set activity that tends to draw a child away from their play and then watching them doing counting for example which is a lot more structured, and adult led. Obviously occasionally you see something and think that's great they're using that in their play so I'll take a photo and write an observation up on that but a lot of the time it's sitting down and doing an activity together which definitely comes from the EYFS because you've got all this guidance to meet and most of the time it can't be met through free flow play so it's not really promoting play, its promoting observing and box ticking to meet standards. In the baby room an observation might be he could walk with his whole foot one in front of the other or he could walk down the steps holding onto the rail which you could just observe but as they get older, particularly in pre-school and reception it gets harder to observe the right things in play because its things like could they count 10 objects. Actually, the easiest way to observe that is to say come over here and let's count together but that draws them away from their free play."*

Lisa also agreed that at her nursery setting the older children spend less time playing freely than the children in the younger rooms. She explained that they often find "it's impossible to meet the requirements of the EYFS through free play alone so we have to engineer opportunities to do certain things with the older ones". She was keen to impress

that they "try to make it as play based as possible" but that activities are often "set up and adult led" rather than children being able to have free choice.

This opinion is shared by Katie who suggested that in her experience as children move into Reception, they are expected to work in a much more structured way than they are in Nursery. She explained that she thinks the freedom to choose a pedagogical approach within the new EYFS document "really opens the door for school to say ok well we will do reception like year one because that makes the transition to year one much easier and it's much easier to measure progress if we do structured lessons and we've got books of evidence". She worries that this will place greater pressure upon the children, who are already "under pressure to perform in phonics and maths" and that it will have "a negative knock-on on their wellbeing".

In contrast Susan, who runs a private day nursery, suggested that whilst she sees the change in working practises of "school teachers and state nurseries" she is pleased that in the private sector they are "still able to keep everything play based and as relaxed as possible". She perceives that "over the years there has been a huge misunderstanding of how young children learn" which has led to "great downward pressure in schools and that means that teachers don't have time to let children play". She explained that "in the private sector (we) don't have the same downward pressure which means we can be much more play based" and she believes that this is better for the staff and the children in the long term.

Despite working in a state school Eva reported that she believes that the new EYFS document allows practitioners more freedom to include longer periods of meaningful play in the day. She explained that now the requirement to document and record everything has been reduced, this gives practitioners "more time to stand back and observe or to get

involved in play". She commented that she believes that some structure at school is important as it offers "that middle ground where "like at home you can get out what you like but then there's that little middle step, you can't always get everything out at school, sometimes there are certain activities to play with or only limited numbers of children can go in one area at a time, things like that help to teach boundaries".

7.72 Pressure From Above

Five practitioners reported concerns about the pressure imposed from above on practitioners and children in early years. Only one practitioner, Eva, spoke positively about the lack of pressure placed upon her by the senior leaders in her school.

Jenny, a Reception teacher, reported that she had regular meetings with the year One teacher at her school where she was told "they (the children) need to be able to do this by year one to pass the phonics check so you need to be doing that". She went on to explain that when a child is not developing at the typical rate, especially in literacy and maths, they are immediately placed into intervention groups which often means that they miss much of the free play time in school.

Katie, who also works in a primary school, suggested that the pressure to get the children to the expected levels in reception "inevitably leads to a much more structured environment". She explained that whilst they begin the year with a very play based environment, as the year progresses they transition into increasingly more structured activities to prepare children for year one and to ensure that they are able to "meet the expectations, to tick the box, particularly in Literacy and Maths".

Similar experiences were reported by Lisa who, although she works in a private day nursery, suggested that they too feel downward pressure from reception teachers to

prepare children for school. She suggested that they are expected to teach phonics in the pre-school year so that children are "ready for reading" when they go to school, and she also reported that she has friends who are reception teachers who report downward pressure due to the year one phonics check.

Participant Three– Lisa

> *"I think that's easier to do in nursery than it is in school. I have friends who work in reception classes and they say that it is really different and much more structured so I think they would probably say there isn't much time for meaningful play once the children start school which is really sad as they are still only 4 years old. Talking to them I think that's because of the pressure from the older years teachers because of things like the phonics test in year one and SATS in year two so they have to make sure that the children are preparing for those even in reception."*

However, Susan, who works in a different private nursery, reported that at her setting they are able to maintain a more relaxed free play environment because they do not experience the downward pressure in the same way as schools and state nurseries. Despite this, Susan suggested that she knows that once children go to school often the situation is very different, and their day is much more structured. She perceives that this is "not because the teachers want to but because they need to do it because they have so many pressures to tick off the boxes" and that "a lot of that pressure comes from the expectations of teachers of older year groups and senior leaders". She explained that schools generally are under huge pressures to perform and that the first big factor is the year one phonics check, so the reception teacher is instrumental in ensuring that the children perform well in that.

Laura suggested that her setting, also a private nursery, maintain a focus on play and are "not too affected" by downward pressure. However, she reported that she is aware that

other settings who are more closely linked to specific schools have experienced a higher level of pressure from the schools since the year one phonics check was introduced. She feels that this "must have a negative effect on children's wellbeing, being put under such pressure from such a young age". Despite this Laura did highlight that she thinks that the change to the EYFS to place more emphasis upon practitioner knowledge and less upon recording evidence should have a positive influence on wellbeing for both children and practitioners. She suggested that "practitioners will have more time for the children and will feel more empowered and less weighed down by paperwork".

7.73 Is It Covid… Or Has Your Sandwich Gone Down the Wrong Way?

One participant talked extensively about the pressures placed upon practitioners, parents, and children due to over reaction by society. Eva explained that she has had to work continuously with parents and children in her setting to change their mindset from instantly assuming that any sense of upset is a mental health problem. She also talked about the over reaction from society to health concerns and how she believes this is due to the promotion of certain issues in the media. She reported that she has seen a big increase in this since the Covid-19 pandemic. She explained that the need to "label everything" then has a detrimental effect on both child and adult wellbeing because they "start to believe there is something really wrong with them". She shared that her own son had written a paper at school looking into whether developed countries had a higher suicide rate than lower income countries and he found that they do. Eva perceives that this could be because "we actually have time to over think whereas in the lower income countries they are so busy living they don't contemplate suicide".

> *We've just had all that about the menopause, being a woman in my forties I'm*
> *like oh no is this the menopause, not actually, no its not this is a bad headache*
> *because it's really sunny and I haven't drunk enough. It's the same with the*
> *pandemic as well, we've all been guilty of that… you have a headache, and you*
> *think is it Covid? Is it this? And no, it's because its hot and I haven't drunk enough*
> *water, or it's because I'm tired or I've sat in front of a screen for too long. It's the*
> *same when you cough in public, everyone looks at you as if you've got the plague*
> *and actually all it is is that your throat is dry, or your sandwich has gone down the*
> *wrong way. We have gone a bit bonkers as a society, we are absolutely obsessed,*
> *I don't even know what it is, but we are really obsessed about panicking about*
> *absolutely everything.*

7.74 Stigma – I Didn't Know Class Existed Until I Worked in a Middle Class Area

Four practitioners commented on the issue of stigma or prejudice related to social background. All four explained that they had either experienced or witnessed some form of prejudice or disadvantage due to social background in their personal or professional lives.

Eva reported that in a previous role where she had worked with many immigrant families, she had seen other parents and some staff members make unfair assumptions about the immigrant families. She explained that a lot of the parents of immigrant children had been highly educated and working in professional roles in their home country but that, due to the language barrier and, in many cases, coming to the UK as refugees, they were working in the UK in unskilled roles or not working at all. She reported that this often led to people making assumptions about their social backgrounds and treating them with prejudice which was unjust.

Eva also explained that her own social circle is very wide and that she has friends from all social backgrounds. She shared that when she began working at her current school,

she "was horrified by other people's attitudes to other classes, you know this idea of illiterate therefore criminal". She reported that this is the first time she has worked in a school with a "largely middle-class catchment" and "I didn't know class existed until I worked in a middle-class area". She explained that she has witnessed more prejudice and stereotyping since working in her current setting than she ever did working in more disadvantaged areas, and she strongly believes that "people in the middle classes are most prone to being class conscious".

Laura also mentioned having witnessed prejudice towards certain social groups within settings she had previously worked at. She reported that when she was working at a setting in a large city, she worked with a group of traveller children and other, more experienced staff had told her that "there's a prejudice against them coming (to school), so they have to be overcompensated just to try and keep them engaged and keep them feeling like they are part of things". She also explained that she had seen other, non-traveller parents behaving in a prejudiced way towards those from the traveller community by "leaving children out of birthday parties, not letting their kids play with them, that kind of thing" and she perceives this to be for two main reasons, a fear of the unknown and not wanting to be associated with the stigma attached to traveller families.

Participant One – Laura

> *"I saw quite a lot of prejudice in terms of the parents of non-traveller children towards traveller children, like leaving children out of birthday parties, not letting their kids play with them, that kind of thing. I think that's probably for two reasons really. It's partly because they don't really understand the traveller culture so it's a bit of a fear of the unknown and not wanting to get involved in something they don't understand. The other thing is the stigma attached to travellers, you know like the societal image that they're dirty and uneducated and that they go round nicking lead of people's rooves and stuff. I think parents just,*

238

wrongly, have that stigmatised view in their heads and they don't want to be associated with it."

Susan also reported that she had witnessed the stigmatisation of certain social groups within society. She suggested that, in her experience, the group most affected by this was families where parents were non-working and particularly those who relied heavily upon benefits. She explained that she had witnessed a lot of "comments and unfair behaviour" from other parents towards these families. She also reported that some parents, and perhaps some practitioners, subconsciously have lower expectations of children from disadvantaged backgrounds because they are "statistically less likely to be successful". She emphasised that at her setting she works hard to ensure that her staff treat all children and families the same regardless of their background because she "believes that all children should have the same chance to reach their full potential no matter what their starting point".

Katie reported that she had experienced prejudice herself at school due to her own social background. She explained that she had grown up with a single parent and in a council house and that, whilst she attended grammar school and was academically successful, she experienced a considerable amount of name calling and other pupils making derogatory comments about her living situation, particularly at secondary school. She believes that, whilst ultimately this did not influence her success at school academically, it did affect her confidence and self-esteem so undoubtedly it had a negative effect on her wellbeing. She reported that she has not witnessed any similar issues in her current setting but that she thinks it is likely that such stigmatising behaviour is still prevalent with older children and teenagers, particularly where there is a mixed demographic in a setting.

7.8 Major Theme Seven - Covid-19 – The Elephant in Every Room?

The data collection for this project was carried out after the main Covid-19 lockdown had taken place all practitioners were keen to discuss the effect that Covid-19 had upon their settings and the families with whom they worked. The ideas for this theme will be discussed under four sub-themes (see fig 20).
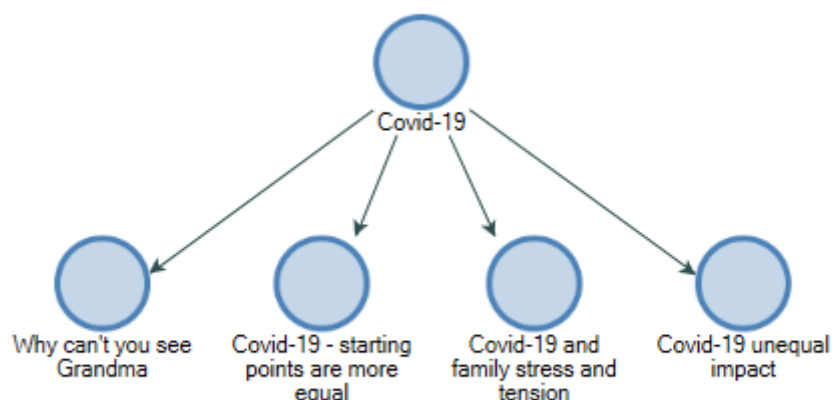
Figure 20 Extract from Coding Map showing Theme and Sub-themes for "Covid-19 – The Elephant in Every Room?"

7.81 Covid 19 – Unequal Impact

All of the practitioners talked about the effect of the pandemic upon the families in their setting being unequal, with some families being more affected than others.

Emily explained that her alternative provision was forced to cease face to face sessions entirely for a period of two months. She reported that they tried to support families with a range of different provision (see fig 21.) but that this was easier to access for some families than it was for others so some families felt better supported than others. She shared concerns that the pandemic lockdowns were particularly challenging for parents with children with additional needs because they "are the ones that need the support the most but are usually the ones that find online provision the hardest to engage with".

"In our situation we were closed because of lockdown for 2 months before they opened up the special schools and since then we have been open for parents who wanted to come to face to face sessions because they were brave enough or we provided sessions online for those who had to self-isolate so we supported everybody as equally as we could, jumping online, being face to face, whatever the situation was we just quickly re-planned our programme. All our families had facilities to access online sessions but they were not all able to join to an online group session because these children have complex needs because they are cognitively not able to concentrate on what is going on, they don't understand the situation, or they have visual impairment, blind, so that's very important to have close contact with them, they have behavioural issues, so obsession or objection to looking at the screen or working indirectly or they are new kids to us and parents weren't very good at understanding our approaches and they didn't know how to support their children at home without us being there and helping them hand on hand, showing them. We work hard physically with the children helping them to learn different physical movements and if the parents just recently started to attend obviously, they don't know the special techniques to help their children so that was especially hard. We worked out other techniques though to support, we talked to parents on the phone, we sent out special recordings that they could put them on their television when the child was ready ,then we do activities where we sing movement songs and when the kids hear the song it triggers the movement so we recorded those songs and sent them out to parents as well so they were able to use these things in their own time when the child was ready and relaxed because if you run a session and the child falls asleep what can you do? I think the Covid lockdowns were especially hard for our parents, well, any parents with children with additional needs, because those are the children who need the support the most, but they are usually the ones that find online provision the hardest to engage with."

Figure 21 Vignette Six, A Story from Emily

Jenny also expressed concerns that there was a split in the way in which families engaged with online learning. For her, however, the difference was seen between families from more advantaged backgrounds and those from less advantaged situations. She explained that during the pandemic parents of those children from disadvantaged families were not as supportive of home learning as those from more socially advantaged backgrounds and she perceives that this is partly due to parental attitudes towards education but also, in part, due to the availability of technological equipment. She reported that whilst her school provided devices for some of the most disadvantaged families, sometimes there "were three children all sharing one tablet" or "they had the device but no internet connection". She concludes that this has undoubtedly had a disproportionate effect upon the children

who could not engage with home learning as they have missed a large amount of schooling in comparison to their peers. In addition, Jenny also reported that of those children who were physically allowed to attend school "it tended to only be the middle-class parents who sent their children in". She expressed concerns that this meant that not only did the children who did not attend miss that portion of education, it was also a long time to miss "being with peers and particularly where there were safeguarding concerns it's a lot of time to be in that home environment without monitoring".

These concerns were shared by Susan, who also suggested that children from more advantaged families "almost certainly had a better home learning experience in terms of engaging with online lessons". She expressed concerns that parents from lower social classes "don't always have the capital to see the value of educational things" so aren't always as supportive. However, Susan also reported that she had experience of several families from disadvantaged backgrounds who had spent a lot of time outdoors during the pandemic and the children from those families had been encouraged to broaden their cultural capital in a creative and imaginative sense. She suggested that "over time we might see an upturn in creativity and imagination perhaps as a result of having to be more resourceful in the pandemic".

Lisa expressed concerns that the pandemic will have affected lower income families more than higher earners because she perceives that it is lower earners who have been most affected by redundancies, furlough and rising prices. She suggested that this could have a subsequent effect upon the parents' wellbeing which, in turn will affect the children because they will pick up on the stress and worry. These ideas were also expressed by Katie, who shared more detail about her thoughts on why lower earners might have experienced more job insecurity. She perceives that people working in professional roles are more likely

to either be working in key worker roles, or to be in roles where moving their working pattern to working from home is fairly easy. In her opinion, this has given "middle class families greater security from redundancy and businesses going under than those from the lower classes". She suggested that this has helped to safeguard the wellbeing of parents and children from the middle-class families she works with. She also explained that the children from middle class backgrounds at her setting were either able to continue attending nursery because their parents worked in essential roles, or they were able to stay at home because parents were working from home. She suggested that, in some cases, the children who stayed at home may have actually benefitted from this time because "we haven't been able to go out so parents haven't been able to cart their children from one activity to another and then go home have dinner and go to bed, they have had to spend time as a family and that will have been really good for some children".

These views were shared by Eva, who reported that the children in her nursery class had benefitted from spending more time at home with their parents. She felt that those children who had attended school as a key worker child had also benefitted academically because they had been in smaller classes, with more focused attention. However, Eva also expressed concerns for a small number of children who had experienced a negative pandemic period, sharing the worries expressed by Jenny for children with underlying safeguarding issues and also highlighting that some children will have experienced parents who were frontline medical staff, unwell or highly anxious about Covid and "that will have had a knock-on effect on the children's wellbeing".

Laura also expressed similar ideas, reporting that children in her setting had spent much more time with their parents than they usually would. She explained that children who attended nursery as key worker children "on the whole did shorter hours than usual"

so even they spent more time at home. However, she also shared concerns that for some children, particularly the under twos, the length of time they had spent without socialisation was beginning to have an impact upon their speech and social skill development. She explained that children who were starting at nursery at the time of her interview around the age of 9-12 months "had missed out on all that early socialisation, going to groups and seeing other babies" which meant that as a setting they were seeing a downturn in children's entry ability to communicate. She also shared her experience of some children who had spent all the Covid lockdowns at home showing high levels of anxiety on return to nursery. She explained that there were some children who did not want to return to nursery and as a setting they had to work "really hard to settle them back in, it was almost like starting from scratch with them". In addition, Laura suggested that the lockdowns and restrictions had a greater impact upon her relationship as a practitioner with the parents at her setting than they did on her relationship with the children. She explained that because of the restrictions parents were not allowed to physically come into the nursery and that had made it harder to build a relationship with parents where parents felt comfortable to share important things that are happening at home.

Participant One – Laura

> *"Covid as well has stopped the little bit of dialogue that is easy that we'd have,*
> *we'd invite parents in, face to face to have that chat and maybe about something*
> *a bit awkward for them. We just talk to them briefly on the doorstep now, and*
> *that's at a distance. And obviously, you know, another parent could come. And*
> *that's it, it just shuts down the conversation. And we could have been in that*
> *moment when they disclose something that is really vital to why that child might*
> *find things difficult. So that's a bit of a problem. We've got one child, and her*
> *mom is very uneasy now because she just says "I haven't been in the nursery*
> *where my child goes for over a year, and I just miss seeing her play. I want to see*
> *that she's playing with people, and that she is happy." I think that is really sad but*

244

we can't do anything about it, we try to send parents lots of photos and little

video clips but it's not the same as being able to go in and see for yourself."

7.82 Covid-19 and Family Stress and Tension

Four practitioners specifically commented upon the effect that Covid-19 has had on family stress levels.

Eva reported that she had experienced tension in families who had previously seemed very secure and relaxed due to the added stress of the pandemic. She explained that for some families, especially where both parents experienced job insecurity for the first time, there was a great deal of added stress which undoubtedly had an effect on the children. In addition, Eva expressed concerns that many middle-class parents felt under pressure to entertain and educate their children. She recalled a story about parents trying to compete with one another on social media (see fig 22.) and the effect that this had on her own sister's mental health. In addition to the effect that this behaviour has on the wellbeing of the adults, Eva also expressed concerns that giving children engineered activities all of the time leads to them being reliant on adults and not learning to play independently or socially with peers which in the long term is detrimental to their wellbeing too.

*"There was a time where again people were putting on Instagram on social media "look at me, I've created six tents and a festival in my garden for my children" and I can remember one of our parents saying that they turned them off because they couldn't cope with anymore. "We all know she gets p***ed on Prosecco of a night, she ain't all that really" and it's that pressure. I think again its social media and I know my sister has fallen foul of this with her 2 year old, she got very, to the point where she was almost clinically depressed because she was following all of the Instagram, how to have the perfect environment, so she was making these bloody Tuff, well she hasn't got a Tuff tray but she was making these trays full of coco pops with diggers and I remember saying to her "what are you doing that for?" and she was like "oh well I want him to understand the concept of up and down" and I just said "he's understanding that you play your cars in cereal that is not a good message" and she was hooked on what it said on Instagram all the time instead of thinking about the real message the activities were giving him. I mean I fell foul as soon as I started nursery looking at those social media groups where they've got these Tuff trays that are absolutely beautiful but are actually meaningless and within 30 seconds of children playing with them, they don't look like that anymore anyway and you can't make them look like that anymore because they've mixed it all together and made something totally different with it anyway. My sister was absolutely having kittens, I mean she had got set up, so he was writing 1-5 by the age of 2 and ½, she was like, he's behind because he can't write number 3. I think there's a lot of, back to that middle class perfection and actually your child is the best because they're doing all this by the age of 3. I mean I dread to think what she will be like by the time he goes into reception although she has calmed down a bit but it's quite scary.*

I think you've got two groups really, one group of parents who were expected to work from home and look after their children so they either set up all these fancy activities to try and keep their children entertained and had a mental breakdown over it and now their children are really reliant on adult intervention because they've got used to completing all these lovely elaborate activities set up for them or you've got those where the children were left to find their own entertainment and so have either learnt to be really resourceful or have spent a huge amount of time in front of a screen one way or another."

Figure 22 Vignette Seven, A Story from Eva

Susan reported that she has seen changes in family situations which she perceives have been brought about due to the pandemic. She shared details of one family where the parents have recently separated and, whilst she acknowledges that the separation would probably have happened in the future, she thinks it has happened earlier because of the stresses of the pandemic. She explained that, whilst this is a single case, she believes that it is likely there are thousands of families facing similar situations across the country because the pandemic has "magnified all the little problems that were already there". She reported

that the child concerned is not, at present showing signs of being negatively affected but "often they are ok at the time and then in the future it will suddenly all come out" so "who knows what effect it will have in the long term".

Katie reported that she is concerned about the influence that wider family stress might have on children's wellbeing. She explained that in her experience children at her setting tend to "pick up on tension within the family and this plays out in their behaviour" so she is concerned that for children who have experienced parents feeling stressed and anxious about job insecurity, health, finances or other pandemic related concerns there may be a "considerable knock-on effect". She suggested that it is too early to tell whether children have been affected in this way but that in the next two to three years she expects to see changes in children's wellbeing and behaviour in line with their experiences of family stress and tension during the height of the pandemic.

Emily shared concerns that family stress was likely to have been higher for families from her setting than for families without a child with additional needs. She explained that this is due to children with additional needs having more complex care requirements and the added uncertainty that the pandemic brought to the availability of services for these families. She also added that due to their needs, some of the children in her setting are more vulnerable to Covid-19 which would have added an additional layer of stress and anxiety for parents. Ensuring that parents felt well supported and less stressed was particularly key, according to Emily, to ensuring that the children in her setting were well cared for during the pandemic when much of the care fell to the parents.

7.83 Why Can't You See Grandma?

Three practitioners commented specifically on children's wellbeing during lockdown in relation to their understanding of the pandemic.

Eva suggested that children from her setting have been largely well supported to understand as much as they can. She did, however, express concern for a small number of children who have been adversely affected by their parents' anxieties. She explained that there are a small number of children who have developed a misconception that they are not allowed to go beyond their own garden due to their parent's severe anxiety around Covid and the personal restrictions they have placed upon themselves and their family. The children now believe that other people "are breaking the rules" if they go beyond the garden and despite trying to explain to the parents that it is confusing and distressing for the children they are, at present continuing to impose this restriction.

Jenny suggested that children were more widely affected by confusion around the restrictions placed upon them during lockdowns. She perceives that a lot of children were not able to fully understand the reasons behind the restrictions and therefore they couldn't understand "why they couldn't go to see grandma or why the park was closed". She explained that this has led to a large number of children who have experienced lots of restrictions but haven't fully grasped the reasons why and she reported that children in her class are still asking her lots of questions about Covid-19 even though the lockdowns have now ended. She shared a story about a child in her previous setting who had been particularly badly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and had developed worrying signs of anxiety due to the pandemic and underlying safeguarding issues which were heightened during lockdown (see fig 23).

These concerns were shared by Lisa who also added that some children found adults wearing face masks particularly scary so even a simple trip to the shop became an anxiety provoking event for them. She suggested that she perceives that we do not yet know the full

effect of Covid restrictions on young children and that "only as they get older and try to process what has happened will we truly see the impact it has had".

> "When a child feels a bit anxious or doesn't have a good home life it does affect the way they engage and the way they learn. They might not be able to communicate properly and that does affect their feelings. I had a child in my previous setting who had really awful wellbeing, she just felt awful about herself and that all stemmed from her home life. There were a lot of safeguarding concerns coming through and she had been in care before and just been returned to her parents when we went into lockdown. She was able to come to school because she was classed as vulnerable and that was really important because she developed awful anxiety during the lockdowns and really struggled to understand what was happening so school was a slice of normality for her. She had two younger siblings so although she was only five, she was the youngest of three so a lot of responsibility was on her shoulders even though she was so young. She was coming into school every day being very anxious and worried about everything. She did engage with me because we built a kind of trust so one to one sessions with me she would feel good and engage but in whole class sessions she would sit there and not want to engage because she didn't want to be wrong or to be made to look silly so I think wellbeing is important all the time but particularly at the moment I think children not being able to access certain opportunities has made wellbeing even more important."

Figure 23 Vignette Eight, A Story from Jenny

7.84 Covid 19 – Starting Points Are More Equal

Three practitioners commented specifically on the idea that the starting points for children entering nursery or school may be more equal in the years immediately following the pandemic due to the social restrictions that lockdown brought about.

Susan suggested that at her setting they usually see a difference in the starting points for children from less advantaged compared to their more affluent peers. She explained that she perceives this largely to be due to the activities that more affluent families engage with outside of nursery which means that children from these families have been more likely to attend baby and toddler classes and activities. These activities contribute to the wide and varied cultural capital children have already developed before entering school or an early years setting. However, due to Covid restrictions these activities

haven't been available to any children in recent years and Susan suggests that this has helped to "narrow the gap" between the least and most advantaged children although she acknowledges that it has been a "negative narrowing" because the more advantaged children have "come down to meet the less well off". This means that for all children the cultural capital they have been able to build prior to school or nursery has been limited by the Covid-19 restrictions.

Lisa shared similar ideas, suggesting that she too had seen a change in the starting points for children from more advantaged families. However, she explained that whilst they had missed out on the early socialisation opportunities "these families were quick to pick things back up as soon as they were allowed to" so she expects to see that children from families who engage in this type of activity will make accelerated progress in comparison to their less advantaged peers. This is due to the children having the opportunity to broaden their cultural capital now that the restrictions have eased.

Katie suggested that her setting had also seen a drop in the starting points for children from more advantaged families, due mainly to the lack of additional activities available to them. However, at her setting she reported that many families "were slow to pick these things back up". She suggested that she thought this was because "parents were nervous about mixing with people, so they didn't go to optional things like that too quickly". She expects that it will therefore take longer for the gap to widen again although she is "in no doubt that (we) will see it go back to how it was once people resume their usual behaviour".

8: Discussion

8.1 Introduction

This thesis has focused on the relationships between cultural capital, wellbeing and the ways in which young children aged 0-5 experience early years settings in England. A qualitative, interpretive method was used to explore the perceptions of three key groups; practitioners, trainee practitioners and parents of children under the age of five. Data was collected through a combination of online qualitative surveys and episodic interviews which were conducted through Microsoft Teams. Data collection was carried out during and immediately after the second national lockdown of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The findings were analysed thematically and presented in detail in the previous chapters under the following themes:

1. *The Chronosystem - Changes Over Time*

2. *Is An Opportunity Enough*

3. *A Fish Out of (Or In) Water*

4. *Habitus Starts At Home*

5. *Knowing Children Well Is Important*

6. *The Exosystem - Structural Systemic Pressures*

7. *Covid-19 – The Elephant in Every Room*

This chapter will draw together these findings, along with the newly developed theoretical perspective (see section 8.2), which is a synthesis of theories from Bourdieu (1986; 1994) and Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1993), policy and evidence from previously published empirical literature in order to address the research questions.

8.2 Moving Towards an Integrated Theoretical Model

Through the analysis and interpretation of the data from this project a new and unique synthesis of two existing theories has been created to illustrate the interrelationships between habitus, field and cultural capital and the micro-, meso- and macro-systems within

young children's lives. A visual representation of the conceptual framework has been

created and will be used throughout this chapter to illustrate the discussion of the findings

of this project.

8.21 *"An ecology of social and cultural capital for children's family, social and educational microsystems"*

The model (see figure 24) is designed to show the relationship between cultural

capital, habitus and the ways in which children interact with their ecological systems. The

model illustrates the difference in the experiences of children who become dominant players

in the field because they hold cultural capital which aligns with the existing dominant players

and children who have developed capital which is different to that of the dominant players

within the setting thus placing them as peripheral players.

The model is constructed using key elements from both social reproduction theory

(Bourdieu, 1977; 1986; 1994) and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1993). It

comprises of the following key elements:

The Field of Play

Within the context of this study the field of play represents the early years setting or more

widely the education system as a whole. The field of play is the setting in which the players

jostle for position but where only the dominant players enter because of the existing and

entrenched unwritten rules of play (Bourdieu, 1977).

The Macrosystem

The dominant macrosystem sits within the field of play. The dominant macrosystem

represents the unwritten rules of the game which are influenced by wider societal

expectations and the routines and processes which are inherent in the education system.

Such structural components of the system are heavily influenced by both current

government policy and the historic development of the system over multiple generations

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The dominant players are those who possess the capital which matches these structural expectations and routines.

For players who possess different capital becoming a dominant player is difficult because of the necessity to understand the unwritten rules of the game (Bourdieu, 1977). These players operate within a separate peripheral macrosystem within which their capital matches the expectations and processes. Consequently, peripheral players rely on meso-systemic links between their own micro- and macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and those of the dominant players.

The Dominant Section of the Microsystem

The dominant area of the microsystem sits nested within the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The dominant section consists of the dominant players within the game. In this context this area of the microsystem involves people, or players, who share similar cultural capital to that expected by the setting. The type of capital expected by the setting is influenced heavily by the workings of the macrosystem and players require capital aligned to the setting to be able to understand the unwritten rules of the game (Bourdieu, 1977).

The Dominant Players

In this context the dominant players are likely to include early years practitioners, some wider professionals working regularly within the setting and the children and parents for whom their capital is aligned to the setting. The dominant players possess capital which enables them to understand the rules of the game set within the macrosystem and function effectively within the field of play (Bourdieu, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The Peripheral Section of the Microsystem

In contrast the peripheral section of the microsystem present in the model is set on the edge of the field of play. This illustrates the microsystem of players who possess cultural capital

which differs from that possessed by the dominant players within the field (Bourdieu, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This creates a subsection of the microsystem and a different macrosystem, or habitus, within which the peripheral player can function well but which makes understanding the rules of the game (Bourdieu, 1977) difficult and means that the peripheral player faces challenges when trying to function effectively within the field of play.

The Peripheral Players

A peripheral player symbolises the children who have developed cultural capital which is different to that of the dominant players within the education field of play (Bourdieu, 1977). It is important to acknowledge that this capital is no less important or valuable than that of the dominant players but that it is tailored to allow the child to function within a different field of play. Since children in the UK are legally required to join the education system and the system has deep rooted 'unwritten rules', often the capital which has served them well within their family microsystem and their macrosystem is undervalued by the education setting and systems which makes functioning within the new field of play difficult for the child (Boudieu, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This leads to the child functioning as a peripheral player within the education field of play (Bourdieu, 1977).

Meso-systemic Links

The model includes meso-systemic links between the players, the microsystems, the macrosystems and the field of play (Bourdieu, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The meso-systemic links for the peripheral player are integral to their functioning within the field of play. These links are often fragile since those who create the links are also acting as peripheral players within the system. This illustrates the insecurity of the peripheral player when they are trying to function within a field of play which requires different capital to the capital they have developed (Bourdieu, 1977).

In contrast, the model also shows the strong meso-systemic links which are possible when the child possesses the capital required to become a dominant player within the field. Where the child's microsystem and macrosystem, or habitus, shares expectations, routines and processes with the microsystem of other dominant players the child is more likely to be able to easily understand 'the rules of the game'. Furthermore, the other key players within the child's microsystem can also better understand the field of play which strengthens the mesosystemic links between them and the rest of the field (Bourdieu, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Field of Play (Education System)

Unwritten rules of the game (Macrosystem/Habitus)

Dominant Microsystem

Expectations

Values

Children

Parents

School staff

Dominant Players

Routines

Processes

Peripheral Player reliant on fragile Meso-systemic links to field of play and dominant players.

Peripheral Macro- and Microsystem

Child

Parents

Peripheral Player - cultural capital differs from that of dominant players. Functions in a different habitus(macrosystem) to dominant players. Occupies a peripheral position within the microsystem.
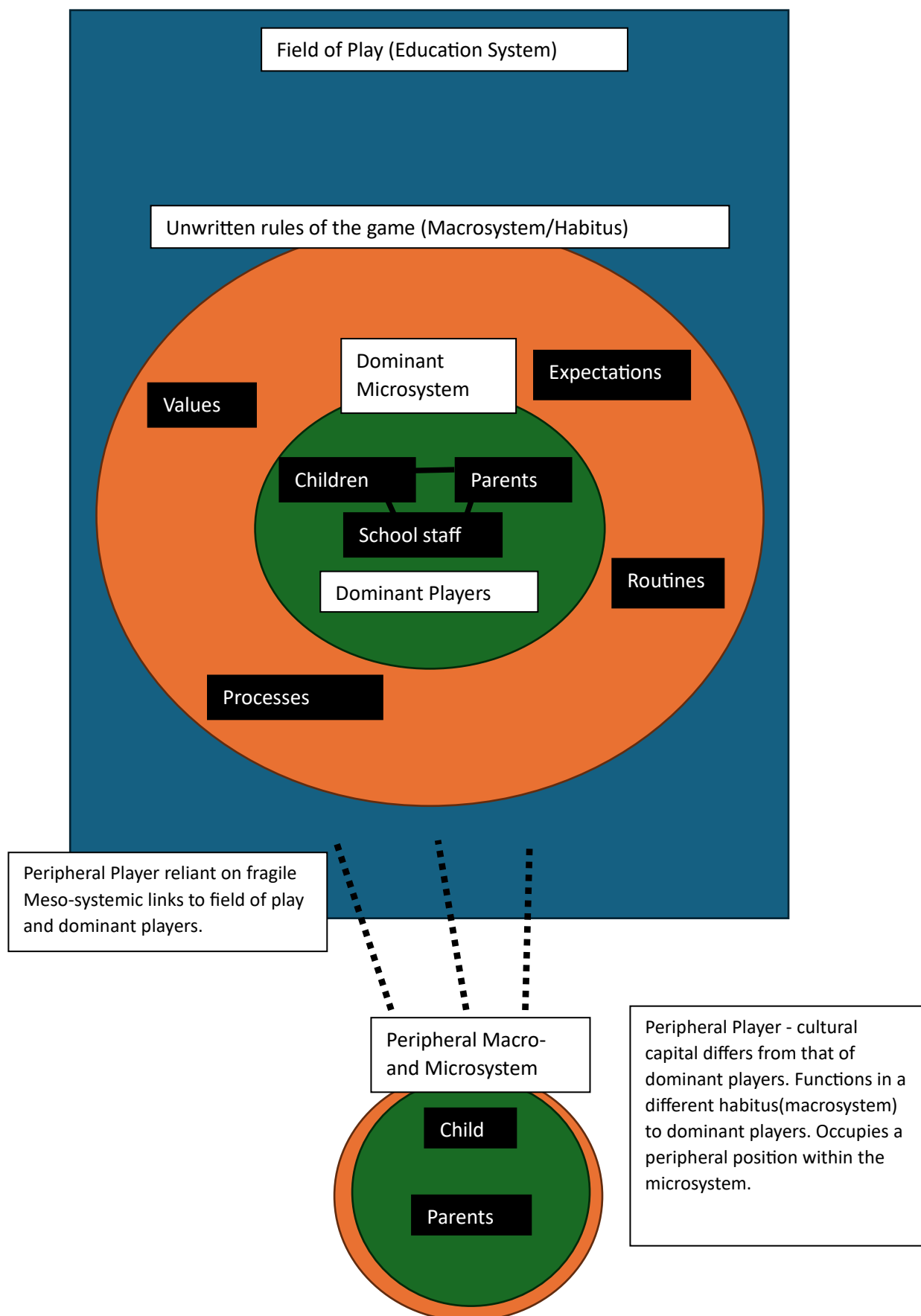
Figure 24 Playing the Game – an ecology of children's cultural capital and habitus for their understanding of how to 'play the game' of education (created from the data from this project with references to Bourdieu (1977; 1986; 1994) and Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1993)

8.3 Research Question One

How do practitioners and parents perceive the way in which cultural capital influences the wellbeing of children aged birth to five?

8.31 Disruption within the Family Microsystem

Practitioners and trainees both placed great value upon the home environment in their responses. They suggested that children's wellbeing is most influenced by their relationship with their parents or main carer and whether their basic needs are being met at home. These views imply that practitioners and trainees place most value upon the child's family microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1993) when considering their wellbeing and the influences upon it. Practitioners emphasised the importance of a child's basic needs being met but many commented that other additional activities and experiences, such as extra-curricular sports clubs and cultural experiences, were less important than the relationship between child and parent. This aligns with evidence from Kirby, Wright and Allgar (2019) who suggested that a child's attachment to their parents or main carer is a better indicator of their mental health than family financial situation. However, current government policy offers incentives such as 30 hours free childcare (Childcare Act, 2016) made available only to those who work 16 hours or more each week. This subtly encourages parents to return to work which helps the government to increase the working population but also means that parents spend less time building strong relationships with their children, instead leaving them in the care of early years settings for 30 hours every week (Blanden et al., 2016; Brewer et al., 2014). The relationships between the child and parent or carer will be explored more in section 8.32.

In the parent survey, the majority of parents indicated that they felt that meeting a child's basic needs, such as adequate nutrition, shelter and clothing (Maslow, 1954), was the

most important factor for their wellbeing. This compliments the findings from the

practitioners and trainees although the parent participants placed more value upon this and

less upon relationships between child and carer. Although in the survey participants selected

"basic needs" as important, when asked to expand on their answers in free text and in the

interview phase of the project participants focused predominately upon nutrition and food

insecurity in their answers. For example, Katie (interview participant five) talked about the

implementation of a free breakfast club at her setting because "many children were coming

to school without breakfast" and several parent participants in the survey commented upon

the effect on wellbeing for families who needed to use food banks to feed their children. The

need for adequate nutrition forms an important part of the child's family microsystem and is

promoted in previous research related to food insecurity (Lambie-Mumford and Green,

2017; Lovelace and Rabiee-Khan, 2013; Knight et al., 2018; Trussell Trust, 2023) where

evidence suggests that where children's basic nutritional needs are not met their wellbeing

is at risk. Furthermore, parent participants suggested that they felt that children who live in

households where there is financial insecurity are more likely to experience mental health

difficulties, a view echoed by Collishaw et al. (2019) and Mattheys et al. (2018). However,

practitioners and trainees perceived financial situation to be less important, sharing a similar

view to Kirby, Wright and Allgar (2019). The importance of the link between financial

security and good nutrition has been supported by successive governments, with the

introduction of universal infant free school meals in 2014 following an independent review

into school food (Dimbleby and Vincent, 2013), continuation of the provision of free nursery

milk for under fives (The Healthy Start Scheme and Welfare Food Regulations, 2020) and the

introduction of healthy start vouchers in 2006 (Department of Health, 2018) although

funding cuts in recent years have seen a reduction in support for families facing

disadvantage (Bambra and Garthwaite, 2015; Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2015; Jones, Lowe and West, 2019; Jupp, 2016; Local Government Association, 2018).

Several participant practitioners and parents commented upon the effect that disruption within the family microsystem, such as poor relationships with parents or carers or an unstable home environment with financial insecurity, has upon a child's capability to achieve emotional wellbeing and a sense of fulfilment. This suggests that disruption within the family microsystem is a key factor affecting the development of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1994; Reay, 2004). Emotional capital, suggested by Reay (2004) as a subsection of cultural capital, forms an important part of a child's identity and children can often find themselves viewed as disruptive or labelled with special educational needs because their emotional capital does not match the capital required to understand the 'rules of the game' within the education field of play (MacClure et al., 2012; Reay, 2004; Stirrup et al., 2017). This is further reinforced by the early years foundation stage (EYFS) curriculum which sets out standard expectations for a child's personal, social and emotional development (DfE, 2023b) and does not take into account the wide ranging cultural capital that children possess.

In contrast, social policy supports the importance of good mental health and acknowledges the influence that disadvantage can have on this. Independent reports commissioned by the government by Field (2010) and Marmot et al. (2010) have been used to inform the 'Best Start in Life' guidance which now supports both mental and physical health of young children (HM Government 2021) through the introduction of "family hubs" (HM Government, 2021). Parents commented in the online survey for this project that they felt it was important to "have somewhere to go" (Participant CH) and that at the moment

they relied heavily on their child's early years setting for support. The introduction of family hubs will, in theory, reduce the pressure on settings to provide this support and allow them to focus more on providing education and care rather than "trying to be everything for everyone" (Lisa – interview participant three). However, although work has begun in 14 areas across the country (HM Government, 2023), the only local authority in the West Midlands, which is the region where the majority of participants in this study were based, to benefit from this early work is Coventry, with the rest of the region having to wait until at least 2025 before hubs will be in place (HM Government, 2023).

8.32 The Importance of the Mesosystem

Practitioners and parents were keen to emphasise the importance of relationships and their influence on children's wellbeing. Practitioners focused on the relationship that children have with their parents or main carers and agreed with previous research (Armstrong-Carter et al, 2021; Carlo et al., 2018; Elias and Haynes, 2008; Flouri and Sarmadi, 2016; Kirby, Allgar and Wright, 2019) in that they suggested that children are able to overcome other barriers to learning as long as they have strong relationships with parents, carers and peers and feel secure in their home environment. When referring to wellbeing, practitioners placed less value on the cultural capital that children had built prior to nursery or school, than the relationships they had with family and close friends. Parent participants also valued the relationships between children and their carers and they suggested that children's happiness within their early years setting is also important to their wellbeing. When asked to explain this, parents cited ideas such as attachment to nursery and school staff, relationships with peers and development of social skills as important factors in whether a child has a good level of wellbeing or not. This can be illustrated by the conceptual framework and the security felt by children who become dominant players in the

education field of play in contrast to those who rely on the fragile meso-systemic links when they sit as peripheral players. Interestingly, participants appear to value the setting that they spend the least time within the most; parent participants appeared to place most value upon the early years setting whereas practitioners valued the home the most.

The parent participants commented upon the importance of children having strong social skills and learning how to build good relationships prior to starting their early years setting. When asked what the most important benefit of early years education was, the most popular response from parents was "social skills development". In contrast, in answer to the same question the most popular response from practitioners and trainees was "speech and language development" and "social skills development" was selected by less than half of respondents. This suggests that the parents value the development of cultural capital early in life more than the practitioners in relation to the influence that it has on children's wellbeing. This is a surprising finding since there is clear evidence to suggest that strong social skills can help to mitigate the effects of disadvantage (Carlo et al., 2018; Elias and Haynes, 2008; Flouri and Sarmadi, 2016). However, much of this evidence is based on studies carried out in the USA and therefore, perhaps, it is less of a focus within practitioner training in England. The EYFS curriculum (DfE, 2023b), which informs practice within settings in England, does however place equal value upon social development and speech and language through two key areas of development; personal, social and emotional development and communication and language development. Therefore, it could be suggested that practitioners might place equal emphasis upon the two areas to ensure that children develop adequate skills in both.

8.33 A Fish Out of Water

Practitioners, trainees and parents all talked about the importance of children and their families feeling as though they "fit in" within communities and groups. This is illustrated by the position of the peripheral and dominant players within the conceptual model (see fig. 24). Practitioners who were interviewed spoke extensively about how they try to include all children and their families in activities in their settings and the strategies they use to do this. Emily, who worked within a specialist provision for children with physical disabilities, shared her experiences of ensuring that families fit into their activity groups in their setting. This included making sure that parents had "people like them" (Emily – interview participant seven) in their groups so that they felt comfortable with those that they were working with. She identified that if families feel uncomfortable or as though they do not belong, this not only has an effect upon their engagement with the service but also upon the child and parents' wellbeing. This view was shared by other practitioner participants in both interviews and survey responses, particularly when talking about children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Practitioners reported observing that children from less advantaged households often experienced a feeling of "not fitting in" (Susan – interview participant four), "not belonging in the setting" (Participant BF – survey) and "struggling to fit in to the social norms expected in school" (Eva – interview participant six). This suggests that practitioners acknowledge that some children experience a sense of being a "fish out of water" (Bourdieu, 1986) which has a subsequent effect upon their wellbeing. This feeling could be as a result of children and parents sitting as peripheral players within the education field of play due to a mismatch in their cultural capital and habitus. Children with less advantaged backgrounds are likely to have developed different capital to that which is expected within the education field of play, meaning that their family microsystem

remains on the periphery of the education field of play and they rely on fragile

mesosystemic links to function within the field. In contrast, a child from a more advantaged

background is more likely to have the capital which matches the expectations of the field of

play. This makes it easier for the child to understand the 'rules of the game' and creates

strong meso-systemic links since the different players possess similar values and

expectations.

Parents also reported a reduction in their own wellbeing when they felt like they did

not fit into a group at their child's setting. The majority of parents suggested that their

child's setting worked hard to make sure that everyone felt included although four parents

suggested that settings could offer more individualised support to children and families in

order to further support wellbeing. Practitioners and trainees agreed with this, citing

reasons such as restrictions relating to the curriculum and poor staffing levels as reasons for

children not receiving individualised support. Practitioners who were interviewed explained

that their settings tried to offer as much individual support as possible in response to

children's developmental stages, home environment and trauma experiences but that they

were sometimes limited due to resources, time and staffing. Practitioners emphasised the

importance of knowing children well and being aware of what has happened within a child's

prior experience when working to improve wellbeing. This suggests that practitioners

understand the relevance of the capital that a child comes into the setting with and that

they seek to find out about each child's existing cultural capital before beginning to try and

build new capital within their early years setting. However, it was not explicitly

acknowledged by participants that children's prior capital influences the way in which they

interact with their current setting and the choices they make when engaging in activities,

something which was suggested in research by Wiltshire et al. (2019). This, in turn, can have

263

an effect upon their wellbeing as they experience the setting in a different way to their peers

who have alternative capital to draw on and so should be an important consideration for

practitioners. The latest EYFS curriculum (DfE, 2023b) for the first time includes a statement

which acknowledges the different social backgrounds that children come from and that

these backgrounds can have an influence upon their learning. However, the reference is

brief and may be easily missed by practitioners who are focused on the content within the

seven areas of learning.

The next section will address these differences in the experiences of children from

different social backgrounds in more detail.

8.4 Research Question Two

*What perceptions do practitioners and parents have about the way in which cultural capital
influences children's interactions with their different ecological systems in the early years?*

8.41 Influence of the Macrosystem

Prejudice

In both the survey and the interviews, participants from all three groups talked about

the influence of elements of the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1993) upon the

experiences of children in their early years.

One of the most frequently discussed ideas was that of stigma. Participants from all

three groups commented upon the negative effects of societal stigma linked to social

background. Practitioner and trainee survey participants reported that they had witnessed a

negative attitude towards some families due to their social status and they perceived that

this sometimes affected the way that those families interacted with the setting. In

practitioner interviews every participant commented, either directly or indirectly, on the

negative effect of stigma on children's experiences in their setting. Four practitioners

recalled specific occasions where they had witnessed prejudice based on social background

and how this had affected the way that children were able to access opportunities in their setting. These recollections included prejudice relating to assumptions about the social background of migrant families, traveller families, single parents and non-working parents. Whilst there is evidence to suggest that migrant families are more likely to experience economic deprivation (Condon and McClean, 2016; Jayaweera and Quigley, 2010) and parents with negative experiences of education, such as those from the traveller community are more likely to disengage from supporting their children (Hornby and Blackwell, 2018) the high level of societal prejudice reported by the participants in this study seems disproportionate to the evidence of actual problems caused by belonging to one of these groups. The practitioners suggested that the negative view that society has of these groups has a direct influence upon the way in which the parents, and consequently the children, interact with the education system. This view suggests that whilst being part of a disadvantaged community does not automatically cause a lack of ability to engage, the stigma and societal expectation from the macrosystem is a key influence upon a child's

cultural capital. This has a subsequent effect on their experience of nursery or school as they sit outside of the field of play as a peripheral player due to the mismatch between their cultural capital and habitus and the entrenched expectations and unwritten rules of the education system imposed by society (see fig. 24).

Two practitioners suggested that negative macrosystemic perceptions of the family create a "prejudice against the children coming into school" (Laura – interview participant one). Laura and Susan both explained that they had witnessed children being left out of activities by their peers due to their social background which "perpetuates the inequality in educational attainment between the classes" (Susan – interview participant four). This

fragile mesosystemic relationship between a child and their peers seems to be characteristic of the mesosystem relationships experienced by a child who is a peripheral player and who possesses different capital to that of their dominant peers. Practitioners, parents and trainees all reported that children living in disadvantage, on the whole, find it harder to make friends, often have tension in their relationships with school or nursery adults due to their "difficult behaviour" (Susan – interview participant four) and sometimes have less secure relationships with their parents due to the stress and tension present in the home environment (Laura – interview participant one). These ideas can be conceptualised by considering the child's experience of feeling like "a fish out of water" (Bourdieu, 1986) as discussed in the previous sub-chapter, and the fragile mesosystemic relationships they hold with the key people within the education field of play (Bourdieu, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1993).

Pressure

Practitioners who were interviewed talked at length about the influence of the media, and in particular social media, on parents and children. Whilst they acknowledged that the media influences nearly all families, Eva and Laura suggested that families from a middle-class background were most likely to feel pressure to meet social media expectations and create "Insta perfection" (Eva – interview participant six). Eva perceived that families in her setting, which is predominantly middle class, feel pressurised to compete with one another and to "keep up with relentless, mostly completely unattainable, social media expectations" (Eva). She suggested that this consequently places the children under pressure to perform both academically and socially and reported that she often sees children with high levels of anxiety or disengagement which she believes is caused, at least in part, by the pressure placed on them by their parents. Participants suggested that many parents who

attempt to meet social media expectations are likely to find it difficult to do so because they

are trying to recreate situations or expectations which are set by people who live in

"different environments and move in different circles to them" (Eva). The expectations are

often a "perfect scenario" which few people live in and therefore most people do not have

the capital to be able to recreate this situation. As a result, parents and children are being

placed under unnecessary pressure by society which has a subsequent negative effect upon

the cultural capital parents and children develop.

Another participant, Laura, also commented on the influence of the media. She

reported that children at her setting were heavily influenced by what they saw or heard in

the media and that this had an effect on the types of activities the children chose to engage

with, something also reported in research by Wiltshire et al (2019). Laura perceived that

there had been an increase in "physical, more aggressive play" (Laura – interview participant

one) over recent months and she attributed this to things the children had seen on the

internet and television whilst they are in their family microsystem.

Wiltshire et al. (2019) suggested that macrosystem elements had the largest

influence upon the type of activity that young people chose to participate in because of the

pressures to conform that are placed on young people by the media. In the early years it is

perceived by the participants in this project that parents' interaction with the media is as

influential as that of the child themselves but that the resulting pressure is similar to that

described by Wiltshire et al. (2019).

The link between the family microsystem and the educational field of play is evident

here in that these ideas suggest that the child's macrosystem experiences that they have at

home not only influence the way that they behave within the family microsystem but also

the way that their cultural capital aligns with that which is expected by the education field of play.

8.42 Reproduction of Cultural Capital

Participants in this project also perceive that children's experiences at their settings are heavily influenced by the attitudes and example set by the adults they have contact with within all of their systems. Practitioners, trainees and parents all commented that parents' experience of education is one of the most important factors affecting social class. It was also suggested by all three groups that parental involvement and support is one of the most influential factors on a child's engagement in educational opportunities, something also found in previous research (e.g. Hornby and Blackwell, 2018; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Sime and Sheridan, 2014).

Using Bourdieu's concept of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986) it could be suggested that parents' ability to effectively support their child is linked to their cultural capital which has been built through their prior experience of education. Consequently, parents who have had negative educational experiences, such as those parents who left school without formal qualifications (Laura – interview participant one), or those who did not enjoy their time at school (Susan – interview participant four), are less likely to have the capital which aligns with the education system expectations and may therefore find it more difficult to support their own child's education. Parents who have had negative experiences of education are likely to pass their attitudes on to their children since this forms an important part of one's habitus (Bourdieu, 1977). Parents in this situation are likely to sit as peripheral players within their child's microsystem but outside of the education field of play. This makes building strong mesosystemic relationships between the family and educational setting more difficult. Consequently, the child is also less likely to be able to build the

cultural capital they need to be able to understand the rules of the education field of play so they also remain on the outside of the field and their relationships remain fragile.

This perception is echoed in previous research by Hornby and Blackwell (2018), who suggested that parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to have had negative experiences of education which then affects the way they engage with their child's education. However, research by Sime and Sheridan (2014) found that for participants in their study, socio-economic factors had little influence upon whether parents were supportive or not and that the majority of parents were keen to support their child in their education. In this study practitioners perceived that parents did not necessarily choose not to support their child but that, in some cases, simply they did not have the skills required to do so. This aligns with the conceptual framework since the skills referred to by Sime and Sheridan (2014) are likely to form part of the unwritten rules of the game within the education field of play. This means that parents who are sitting as peripheral players on the edge of the field cannot support their child as well as a parent who understands the rules and sits as a dominant player in the centre of the field.

Katie, one of the interview participants recalled working with the traveller community where "a lot of the parents have little experience of education themselves so they don't understand how it works" (Katie – interview participant five) and Susan recounted a story of working with an illiterate parent who "wanted to learn to read so she could support her daughter to learn to read" (Susan – interview participant four). This suggests that in many cases parents are willing to support their child's education but that their cultural capital and position as a peripheral player is often what prevents them from doing so. However, when parents are keen to develop their own capital in this way it may be

possible for them to then strengthen the relationships they have with their child's education

microsystem, thus gradually bringing the family microsystem into the field of play.

8.43 Social Capital and Transitions Between Microsystems

Practitioners commented in interviews that children chose to engage in

different play activities and that often the choices that they made were dependent on their

social background and what experiences they had at home. Whilst this project focuses on

the under-fives as opposed to adolescents, participants shared very similar perceptions on

the relationship between activity choices and social background to those in the research by

Wiltshire et al. (2019). It could be said that this is as a result of social reproduction theory

and that children are recreating their previous experiences because those experiences are

what their cultural capital is built upon (Bourdieu, 1986; 1994; Reay, 2004). For some

children, whose capital aligns with the opportunities available at school or nursery, the

process of transitioning into an educational setting can be simple, but for others who have

capital which does not closely match with the expectations and routines of the setting this

process can be more difficult (Bernstein, 1970; Reay, 2004; Youdell and Armstrong, 2011).

Participants perceived that children from families with a lower socio-economic

background were less likely to have developed the capital required to transition easily into

school or nursery. They suggested that children from more advantaged families are more

likely to have developed the skills required to understand the nuances and routines of

educational settings which places these children at an immediate advantage because they

are better prepared with the skills needed to function in the setting. This suggests that

children from more advantaged backgrounds are better prepared to enter the field of play as

dominant players whereas children from less advantaged backgrounds are often positioned

as peripheral players (see fig.24). Participants commented that children who enter their settings with skills, or capital which does not match the expectations of the system, often have to spend time building those skills before they are able to capitalize on the opportunities available to them which affects the way that they experience their early education (Armstrong-Carter et al., 2021; Bernstein, 1970; Neilsen, 2020; Reay, 2004). This can be conceptualized through the use of the newly synthesised Bronfenbrenner-Bourdieu model which illustrates the way in which a child who has different cultural capital to that of the education system sits outside of the field of play and experiences fragile relationships with those within the field whereas a child with capital which matches the setting experiences a completely interconnected, nested collection of systems with themselves at the centre as a dominant player in the field(see figure 24).

Practitioners who were interviewed reported that often children from less advantaged social backgrounds are "seen as boisterous and even badly behaved" (Laura – interview participant one) or they "find it hard to settle and have high levels of anxiety" (Jenny – interview participant two). This is supported by evidence from previous research by Stirrup et al. (2017) and MacClure et al. (2012). Stirrup et al. (2017) reported that children from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to be described as "odd" or "difficult to manage" by practitioners because their behaviour does not match the expectations of the setting. MacClure et al. (2012) echoed this, explaining that a child's social background is integral to the reputation they develop within school or nursery. However, the outward behaviour of these children is likely to be a result of them feeling insecure in the nursery or school environment because they do not possess the capital to understand the underlying unwritten 'rules of the game' within the education system. Children who have developed capital which more closely aligns to that of the other children and adults in the setting are

more likely to settle quickly and seem as though they "fit in" as they often enter the field of play as a dominant player. For children who have different capital to that which is needed to function in the educational microsystem, there is a tension between the family microsystem and the education field of play for that child which can be difficult to navigate and confusing for a young person to manage due to the requirement for different capital in different systems. This is accentuated by the often fragile mesosystemic relationships between the family and the education field of play.

8.5 Research Question Three

How do practitioners and parents perceive the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and children's social background, wellbeing, and early years experiences?

8.51 Disruption to the Ecological Systems

Micro- and Mesosystems

Considerable disruption to the ecological systems of children during Covid-19 were reported by participants. All three participant groups suggested that children had been negatively affected by the limitations that Covid lockdowns placed on children's micro- and mesosystems due to the restrictions placed upon seeing family and friends. This was echoed in previous research by Curtin et al. (2022) which reported that closure of nurseries and schools had created greater social isolation and that some parents had witnessed a regression in their child's development. Although regression was not reported in this study, practitioners in interviews did suggest that children in their settings had been affected in a developmental sense, with children showing reduced ability to communicate effectively and lower levels of physical skill upon entry to nursery compared to previous cohorts, and from a wellbeing perspective. Jenny and Eva reported that children in their settings were showing higher levels of anxiety post lockdown, and they interpreted this as partly being due to confusion around the rules which meant that they couldn't visit relatives or go to their usual

social activities. The outward manifestations of such anxieties were reported as being different for different children; Jenny explained that she had seen children in her setting showing higher levels of disruptive behaviour whereas Eva reported that children had been less keen to separate from their parents and had been more tearful during sessions. Practitioners reported in interviews that in their experience social isolation and stress were more likely to occur for families from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Participants from this project attribute the difference to families from less advantaged backgrounds experiencing greater job insecurity and therefore the home environment being more stressful for the child, a different explanation to that given in previous research by Curtin et al. (2022) and Leitao et al. (2021).

Conversely, parent participants from all backgrounds suggested that, on the whole, their children had benefitted from being able to spend more time at home with parents and siblings. They perceive that being able to spend more quality time together was a positive consequence of the lockdowns and that it improved their child's wellbeing. This view was partially supported by practitioners who were interviewed. Practitioners perceived that children who most benefitted from increased time at home were those from middle income families who were ordinarily "carted from one activity to another and then home, have dinner and go to bed" (Katie – interview participant five). Practitioners suggested that these children had a positive experience of lockdown because "life had to slow down and they had to spend time as a family" (Eva – interview participant six). These interpretations suggest a strengthening of the family microsystem during lockdowns due to a forced reduction in the dependence on external factors from the exosystem such as extra-curricular clubs and activities. This is an unexpected finding from this study since previous studies have indicated

a broadly negative association between Covid-19 lockdowns and family relationships (e.g. Curtin et al., 2022; Leitao et al., 2021; Rosenthal et al., 2023).

Conversely, parents reported that they had found the lack of physical interaction with their child's nursery or school particularly challenging with one parent sharing that they "hadn't ever actually seen inside the nursery building" (Participant CJ). Practitioners also suggested that the relationship between the setting and children's home environments had become more difficult to develop and maintain because "we couldn't invite parents in, now it's just a really quick chat at the door if you're lucky" (Laura – interview participant one). These views are reflected in research by Bubb and Jones (2020) and Wrigley (2020) who both comment on the strained relationship between teachers or schools and parents during the pandemic. The difficulty in maintaining a relationship between home and school or nursery is likely to have led to fractures in the mesosystemic relationships for the majority of children. For children who were already sitting as peripheral players at the edge of the education field of play and who experienced fragile mesosystemic relations, this would have just widened the gap between their systems whereas for dominant players who normally experienced interwoven, nested systems with strong mesosystemic links, it would have created smaller degrees of movement and disruption to the relationships.

Exosystemic Limitations

Whilst a reduction in reliance on the activities provided by the exosystem could be seen as a positive for some families, for others the closure of important services and support was detrimental to both adult and child wellbeing (Curtin et al., 2022; Hefferon et al., 2021; Leitao et al., 2022). In the current study, participants highlighted that a reduction in access to leisure facilities had been detrimental to wellbeing but interestingly only the practitioners and trainees reported a link between lack of access to support groups and wellbeing, despite

274

the option being available as a response for parents to select as well. However, in interviews practitioners commented that they had witnessed parents experiencing difficulties due to the closure of support groups which suggests that, even if parents do not identify it themselves, the link between the two may be present. Practitioners reported that difficulties due to support group closures were more common in families from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with children with a Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND). This may be simply because these families rely more upon external support than others but nevertheless these findings highlight a social inequality in the effect that Covid-19 has had on the wellbeing of young children and their families.

8.52 Limitations to Capital

Due to the restrictions placed upon people by the Covid-19 lockdowns, many of the extra-curricular activities that children usually accessed were no longer available. Practitioners and parents reported in the survey and interviews that this had a negative influence upon children's development because they did not have the breadth of experiences that they would otherwise have. The restriction on activities placed an inevitable limit on the cultural capital children were able to develop during that period of time due to the narrow range of activities. Consequently, many practitioners reported that they had seen lower baseline levels when children begin nursery or school due, they perceive, to the limited experiences they have had prior to joining the setting. This idea is supported by evidence in studies by Hefferon et al. (2021) and Curtin et al. (2022) which both report that children's development has been negatively affected by the limitations on their activity during lockdown.

Interview participants in this study commented on the disproportionate effect that this limitation has had on children from middle- and upper-class families. Susan (interview

275

participant four) suggested that she had seen a narrowing in the "gap between the starting points" and that children from middle- and upper-class families who would ordinarily have had a wide breadth of experiences and arrive at her setting with cultural capital which aligned with the expectations of the setting were now starting nursery with the same limited experiences as those children from more disadvantaged backgrounds. She acknowledged that whilst this is not a positive outcome, it has made working with children from different backgrounds easier since they "all have similar experiences" (Susan). This suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a greater number of children from different backgrounds to be positioned as peripheral players on the edge of the field of play since they have not had the opportunity to develop the capital which helps them to align with the expectations and rules of the settings.

Furthermore, a child's experience of home learning and online engagement was highly dependent on family circumstances and home environment (Andrew et al. 2020; Blundell et al., 2020; Davison et al., 2021; Hannon et al., 2020). Practitioners in interviews reported that they had seen great variations in the engagement of families and that this was largely due to the availability and reliability of devices and internet access. In contrast to the effect of limitations to social activities, practitioners perceived that for home learning children from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to have engaged and that this was usually due to difficulties accessing the sessions rather than a lack of motivation (see also Cullinane and Montacute, 2020 and Khan, 2022). The participants in this study reported experiences of families sharing one device between multiple children and "although we handed out some devices, we just didn't have enough to give to every child who needed one" (Jenny – interview participant two). These limitations meant that some children from less advantaged backgrounds struggled to access the opportunities made available to them during online

learning. This meant that, according to several practitioners (Jenny, Susan, Eva, Laura) children from less advantaged backgrounds fell further behind their peers academically during lockdown, also suggested by Cullinane and Montacute (2020) and Bubb and Jones (2020).

Participants also acknowledged that, in their experience, job insecurity had disproportionately affected those on lower incomes and that those parents had sometimes been less likely to support children with their learning because they were working or searching for jobs. This experience is supported by evidence from previous research by Andrew et al. (2020), Cullinane and Montacute (2020) and Blundell et al. (2020) who reported that families on lower incomes were more likely to experience financial insecurity and one or both parents were more likely to have been physically going out to work than middle or higher earners who often worked from home.

It is suggested by Eva, an interview participant, that for some children though their experience remained largely unchanged during the lockdowns since they already spent a lot of time at home and perhaps they attended nursery as a child of a key worker. She suggested that for these children they were able to continue with their usual routines and they still experienced a reasonable amount of social interaction. For children who attended their usual setting as a child of a key worker, they were also "somewhat immune to the issues of home schooling" (Jenny – interview participant two). However, for other children, as highlighted by Emily in her interview, lockdown meant that they had a monumental change in their routine and they "didn't leave the house or see anyone for weeks" (Emily – interview participant seven). This experience would have had a much greater influence on a child's capital development than the experience of a child who continued going to nursery or

school. Consequently, individual experiences dictate to what extent a child's cultural capital development has been affected by lockdown.

Participants in the survey and interviews also reported that they had experienced an increase in requirement for support for communication and social needs. This suggests that children are entering early years settings with underdeveloped cultural capital because of the Covid-19 restrictions on socialisation. This idea is supported by research carried out in Ireland by Leitao et al. (2022) and Curtin et al. (2022) where both projects found that more children were experiencing delayed development than before. In the UK Rosenthal et al. (2023) reported a large increase in the number of referrals for support for developmental and wellbeing issues in under-fives which implies a link between the pandemic and children's early development and wellbeing.

8.6 Reflections on the Research Design

8.61 Research Approach

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences and perceptions of practitioners, trainee practitioners and parents within the early years' context. The use of an interpretive and qualitative approach has allowed for this by addressing that reality is constructed socially (O'Donoghue, 2018) and by giving opportunity for detailed description and recollection (Denzin, 2001). Through social constructionism it has been possible to use the ideas and experiences of individual participants to construct a social, shared meaning for different groups of participants (Schwandt, 2001; O'Donoghue, 2018).

8.62 Limitations of this Study

This study was a small-scale project with practical limitations due to both time and finances. Despite approaching every early years setting within the West Midlands region, it was only possible to secure three participant settings. Consequently, the wider online

surveys were employed to achieve a broader understanding of the views of practitioners, parents and trainees from a range of settings. Although only three participant settings were recruited, the settings offered a diverse sample, with one mainstream setting, one specialist setting and one holiday food programme setting. The three settings were also located across the target geographical area and offered one rural, one semi-rural and one urban setting.

Perhaps the most significant limitation of this study was the restrictions placed upon research due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Data collection for this project was carried out in 2020 and 2021, at a time where visitors were not allowed to enter early years settings or schools and where all face-to-face research was suspended. Consequently, a complete re-design of the methods for this project was necessary since it was not possible to visit settings to observe practice or speak to parents. Therefore, a fully online approach was taken which allowed for the collection of data from groups who were otherwise inaccessible. The online approach and lack of personal contact almost certainly limited the number of participants who volunteered to take part in the study. This was also affected by the increased workload that practitioners were experiencing during the pandemic and the stresses of lockdown and home education felt by parents (as reported by parent participants) at that time. However, by using online methods to recruit participants and promote the surveys it was possible to reach a large number of potential participants in a short period of time (Denscombe, 2011; Illingworth, 2001; Marks et al., 2017). The use of video conferencing software to conduct interviews minimised the effects of the lack of face to face interaction between the researcher and the interview participants which was beneficial since it allowed for the non-verbal cues and body language to be recorded as well as oral responses to questions and provided the most natural setting for a conversation as possible (Janghorban et al., 2014; Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Seitz, 2014).

Unfortunately, there were no parents who were prepared to volunteer to participate in the interview phase of this project and due to time constraints the researcher was not able to spend any further time recruiting more widely for this element. It would have been beneficial to speak to parents as well as practitioners in order to include their experiences and views in greater detail than the survey responses allow. Additionally, the practitioners who volunteered to participate in an interview were all female. This is not representative of the early years workforce which although is dominated by females does have some male members. A more representative sample would have been beneficial had the circumstances and time constraints allowed. Due to this, and the small-scale nature of this project, it is not possible to achieve generalisation within this work, other than the naturalistic generalisation generated from the experiences of the participants and the interpretations of the researcher (Stake, 1994; Stake and Trumbull, 1982).

8.63 Implications
Using Bourdieu-Bronfenbrenner as a theoretical model

Using social reproduction theory (Bourdieu 1986; 1994) and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1993) in a newly synthesised approach (see figure 24) allowed the researcher to consider the ways in which children's cultural capital interacts with the structure of their ecological systems. It is suggested, through the findings of this work, that the field of play (Bourdieu, 1977) that is the education system and the settings within it operate under a set of unwritten rules (Bourdieu, 1977) within their own macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The field of play has a community of dominant players who understand these rules due to them possessing the cultural capital required. These players occupy the dominant area of the microsystem. Additionally there is a further group who sit on the edge of the field of play (Bourdieu, 1977) as peripheral players. These players

have different cultural capital to that which is expected by the education system and therefore they face challenges in understanding the unwritten rules of the game (Bourdieu, 1977) Rather, they operate within their own macrosystem, developed through their own cultural capital, and they rely on fragile mesosystemic relationships between them and the dominant microsystem and players (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1993). This can result in the child or parents feeling like a 'fish out of water' (Bourdieu, 1977) as they attempt to navigate a system which is built upon entrenched nuances and processes for which very specific cultural capital is required.

This conceptual framework and the associated model (see fig. 24) can be used to inform future policy and practice, focusing on the importance of breaking down the barriers to the education system by helping children and parents build the capital expected by the system and by addressing and challenging some of the deep rooted traditions and processes. The framework and model can also be applied to students of different ages and in different contexts when conducting research about cultural capital, social inequity and sense of belonging.

Parents showed good awareness of what is important for their children's wellbeing. They expressed concerns that Covid-19 restrictions had negatively influenced their children's development and, in some cases, mental wellbeing. Families can use this awareness to help support their children in accessing opportunities to improve their mental wellbeing, now that Covid-19 restrictions have eased. Some parents shared concerns that parents desire to achieve perfection on social media and to compete with one another was detrimental to both adult and child wellbeing. Parents would benefit from considering this when they are creating social media content in order to ensure that parenting groups and spaces remain supportive as opposed to competitive.

Parents, practitioners, and trainees were clear that aside from meeting their basic needs as described by Maslow (1954), the most important factor for a child's wellbeing was their relationship with the adults around them. Therefore, it is vital that families prioritise spending time together to strengthen the bond between family members since this is a key factor in a child's cultural capital and habitus development (Bourdieu, 1977).

Implications for the Education Field of Play

The findings of this project suggest that a child's ability to function well within the education field of play is largely dependent on the cultural capital that they bring into the setting and whether that matches with the expectations of the setting. Educators would benefit from further training in the importance of children's lived experiences and the influence that these can have on their position within the field (see figure 24). This would allow educators to consider this when supporting children within their settings and would foster an environment which embraces the diversity of experiences. Settings should be working to develop a sense of belonging for all children, regardless of their background, with

the belief that all children are capable of, and deserve to be dominant players in the education field of play (Bourdieu, 1977).

Settings are, on the whole, working well to challenge the prejudices and stigma that is still evident in wider society. Practitioners and parents reported experiencing societal prejudice due to social background but that within the early years settings this was less apparent. Settings could further their work on this by providing further outreach opportunities within their local communities and by promoting inclusivity in more visible ways such as in the local media and at local events.

Micro to Macro – Implications for Policy

Early years education policy has only recently been updated to include any reference to acknowledge children's different social backgrounds and the influence that these have on their experiences of school or nursery (DfE, 2021). It is clear that further work is needed to provide greater acknowledgement and emphasis of this within the EYFS curriculum documents (DfE, 2021) and inspection frameworks for early years providers (Ofsted, 2023).

Furthermore, the current funding model for early years providers is insufficient (as reported by practitioners in this study and in Akhal, 2019; CEEDA, 2018; Corey and Alakeson, 2014), with providers seeing variable rates across the country due to a lack of ring-fencing around the funding for early years education for 3 and 4 year olds (Akhal, 2019). The government has proposed an extension to the existing funding to provide funding for all children of working parents from the age of 9 months until they start school which is being implemented in phases, starting with 30 hours funding for two year olds of working parents from April 2024 (DfE, 2024). However, if this is to be adopted successfully the government must ensure that the funding is ring-fenced in order that the full amount is passed directly to providers rather than the amount being dependent on local authorities allocations.

Furthermore, it is imperative that the funding is provided at a sufficient level to provide high quality provision because, as highlighted by participants in this project, the quality of some early years settings is hindered by the low adult to child ratios. This issue is likely to worsen over time given the relaxation of the ratio requirements for two year olds and for childminders who are caring for siblings or for their own child in addition to children who they already look after (DfE, 2023)

The extension to the 30 hours early years funding will only apply to children who have parents who are working. Therefore, as highlighted in earlier sections of this chapter, this serves as an incentive for parents to return to work. This is somewhat concerning since practitioners, parents and trainees all indicated that, aside from basic needs, a child's relationship with their parents was the most important factor in determining their wellbeing. It might, therefore be more beneficial for policy to support parents spending longer periods of time at home with their children through extended parental leave or encouraging part time or flexible working policies as opposed to encouraging parents to return to work full time when children are very young.

Social policy is better developed in this context. Independent work carried out by Field (2010), Marmot et al. (2010) and Marmot et al. (2020), all of which emphasised the importance of the first five years of a child's life, has informed some changes in social policy. It is important that the current work on "Early Years Healthy Development" (HM Government, 2021a) and "The Best Start for Life" (HM Government 2021b) continues to be implemented and that the development of family hubs is prioritised so that the current target of full implementation by 2025 (HM Government 2023) is met. This work is supported by independent large-scale projects carried out by The Royal Foundation who also

284

acknowledge the importance of high-quality early years experiences (Royal Foundation, 2021).

8.64 Further Research

Further research is needed to make the findings of this project generalisable beyond naturalistic generalisation (Stake, 1994; Stake and Trumbull, 1982). Practitioners and parents from a wider geographical area should be included, particularly within the interview phase of any future project of this nature, since all interview participants in this project were located in the West Midlands region. Furthermore, research involving a larger number of settings would allow for the researcher to consider whether the views shared in this study are representative more widely of the views of practitioners and parents.

In order to fully understand the relationships between cultural capital, wellbeing and the way in which children experience their early years settings it would be useful to conduct some research involving observing children within their settings. Unfortunately, due to the restrictions placed upon research due to Covid-19, this was not possible in this study but for future research this forms an important element which is yet to be explored. This aspect may also be complemented by the inclusion of the child's voice in the project which again, was not possible within this study but is an important aspect to consider for future research. The use of creative methods, focus groups or informal interviews would allow the researcher to gather the child's views on the ways in which their home experiences influence their time at school or nursery and would add an additional dimension to the data already available from practitioners and parents from this study.

Other specific areas which may warrant further investigation are the issues around parents of children with SEND and the difficulties they face in accessing appropriate

provision for their child, wellbeing within Reception classes and during the transition period between nursery and school, and an exploration of the longer-term relationship between Covid-19 and the subsequent cost of living crisis and children's cultural capital and wellbeing.

8.65 Conclusion

This study has brought together the views of early years practitioners and parents of young children and has considered them alongside current policy, existing empirical literature and two key psychological and sociological theories to answer three research questions. This research has found that there is a clear link between a child's cultural capital and their wellbeing, and between their cultural capital and habitus and the way in which they experience early years education and care. Practitioners and parents have offered rich insights into their lived experience of working and living with children from a diverse range of backgrounds and have shared their perceptions of the ways in which children are influenced by their background and their experiences at home. As the data collection for this project was conducted during and immediately following the national lockdowns for Covid-19, these insights have included specific recollections relating to the Covid-19 pandemic and the ways in which the restrictions placed upon individuals and educational establishments influenced the youngest children in our society.

These views have been further developed by the researcher in order to develop a new ecological model to illustrate the ways in which a child's cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; 1994) influences the position they hold within the education field of play (Bourdieu, 1977). Drawing together two key theories, the model provides an illustration of the way in which children's position within the field of play can be affected by the type of cultural capital they hold.

Recommendations have been made for how these findings and the new conceptual model can change the way that families, education settings and policy makers approach their work with, and for, young children. Suggestions for how this study could be developed and extended further have been made. These include further work involving children which, unfortunately, was not possible as part of this project due to the Covid-19 restrictions in place at the time of data collection and the involvement of a larger number of practitioners and parents in order to create a generalisable dataset.

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Appendices

1 – Ethical Approval

1.1 Initial Approval

BIRMINGHAM CITY University

Faculty of Health, Education & Life Sciences Research Office
Seacole Building, 8 Westbourne Road
Birmingham
B15 3TN

HELS_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk

10/Sep/2020

Ms Hannah Malpass

hannah.malpass@bcu.ac.uk

Dear Hannah ,

Re: Malpass /7576 /R(A) /2020 /Sep /HELS FAEC - Exploring the multi dimensional relationships between social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing in Birmingham Early Years settings

Thank you for your application and documentation regarding the above activity. I am pleased to take Chair's Action and approve this activity.

Provided that you are granted Permission of Access by relevant parties (meeting requirements as laid out by them), you may begin your activity.

I can also confirm that any person participating in the project is covered under the University's insurance arrangements.

Please note that ethics approval only covers your activity as it has been detailed in your ethics application. If you wish to make any changes to the activity, then you must submit an Amendment application for approval of the proposed changes.

Examples of changes include (but are not limited to) adding a new study site, a new method of participant recruitment, adding a new method of data collection and/or change of Project Lead.

Please also note that the Health, Education and Life Sciences Faculty Academic Ethics Committee should be notified of any serious adverse effects arising as a result of this activity.

If for any reason the Committee feels that the activity is no longer ethically sound, it reserves the right to withdraw its approval. In the unlikely event of issues arising which would lead to this, you will be consulted.

Keep a copy of this letter along with the corresponding application for your records as evidence of approval.

If you have any queries, please contact HELS_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk

I wish you every success with your activity.

Yours Sincerely,

Mr Neil Sheasby

On behalf of the Health, Education and Life Sciences Faculty Academic Ethics Committee

1.2 Approval of Final Amendments

BIRMINGHAM CITY University

Faculty of Health, Education & Life Sciences Research Office
Seacole Building, 8 Westbourne Road
Birmingham
B15 3TN

HELS_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk

02/Mar/2021

Ms Hannah Malpass

hannah.malpass@bcu.ac.uk

Dear Hannah ,

Re: Malpass /#7576 /sub1 /Am /2021 /Mar /HELS FAEC - Exploring the multi dimensional relationships between social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing in Birmingham Early Years settings

Thank you for your application for approval of amendments regarding the above study. I am happy to take Chair's Action and approve these amendments.

Provided that you are granted Permission of Access by relevant parties (meeting requirements as laid out by them), you may continue your activity.

I can also confirm that any person participating in the project is covered under the University's insurance arrangements.

Please note that ethics approval only covers your activity as it has been detailed in your ethics application. If you wish to make any changes to the activity, then you must submit an Amendment application for approval of the proposed changes.

Examples of changes include (but are not limited to) adding a new study site, a new method of participant recruitment, adding a new method of data collection and/or change of Project Lead.

Please also note that the Committee should be notified of any serious adverse effects arising as a result of this activity.

If for any reason the Committee feels that the activity is no longer ethically sound, it reserves the right to withdraw its approval. In the unlikely event of issues arising which would lead to this, you will be consulted.

Keep a copy of this letter along with the corresponding application for your records as evidence of approval.

If you have any queries, please contact HELS_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk

I wish you every success with your activity.

Yours Sincerely,

Miss Nimrah Khan
Research Ethics Officer

On behalf of the Health, Education and Life Sciences Faculty Academic Ethics Committee

BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

Exploring the multi-dimensional relationships between social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing in West Midlands Early Years settings

Invitation to Participate

Your setting is being invited to take part in this research project. The purpose of this information sheet is to inform you about the project so that you can decide whether you would like to participate or not. Please take time to read the information and to make your decision. If you wish you can discuss it with other people or you can contact me if you would like to ask any questions or if anything is not clear.

What are the aims of the project?

This project is being undertaken as part of my PhD in Education. The project seeks to explore the ideas and perceptions of practitioners and parents in Early Years settings across the West Midlands around the key themes of social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing. It aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do practitioners and parents perceive the way in which social and cultural capital influences the wellbeing of children aged birth to five?

2. What perceptions do practitioners and parents have about the way in which social and cultural capital influences children's interactions with their different microsystems in the early years?

3. *How do practitioners and parents perceive the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and children's social and cultural capital, wellbeing, and early years experiences?*

Why am I being invited?

You are the manager or head teacher of a setting with children in the Early Years (Birth-5 years) currently on roll. Your setting has been identified as being located within the West Midlands region.

Do I have to take part?

You have the choice whether you would like your setting to take part or not. Regardless of your decision you are welcome to keep a copy of this information sheet to refer back to at any time.

If you choose not to participate you will not be asked to provide a reason why and you will not be negatively impacted by your decision. If you choose to participate you will be asked to complete a permission of access form before your setting participates. Even after you sign this you can still choose to withdraw from the project without giving a reason.

What will I have to do if I participate?

If you choose for your setting to participate you will be asked to provide some basic background information about the setting. You will also be asked to circulate information provided by the researcher to the Early Years staff and parents of Early Years children inviting them to participate as individuals. Once staff and parents consent to participate communication will continue between the researcher and the participants and you will not be expected to pass on any further information. You will also be individually asked to participate in a one to one online interview with the researcher. Separate information sheets will be provided for staff (including yourself) and parents should you decide that you wish for your setting to participate. The researcher will not, at any time, physically enter your setting or meet with you, your staff or any parents face to face in order to comply with Covid-19 restrictions.

What are the benefits of taking part?

This is an exciting opportunity to be able to participate in a study which hopes to create recommendations for improvements to the way in which Early Years settings operate in order to improve the life chances of young children. A summary of the final report will be provided to you to use and circulate within your setting should you wish to.

What are the potential risks of taking part?

Participating in this research is not expected to cause you any significant harm or discomfort. Should you feel uncomfortable at any stage you have the right to withdraw your setting from the study without providing a reason. You will not be expected to answer any question or discuss any topic which you feel uncomfortable about. You will have the right to refuse to answer without penalty.

Will my information and responses be confidential?

All of the information you provide about your setting or yourself during your participation will be kept strictly confidential. You and your setting will not be individually identifiable in any report or publication produced as a result of this study. You and your setting will be assigned randomly generated pseudonyms and will be referred to by this throughout any publication or report.

How will my data be protected?

Any digital data collected about you or your setting will be securely stored using an encrypted device and physical copies will be kept in a locked drawer. Your data will be held until the project is complete and the final report has been assessed by the examination board and an award has been confirmed. This is anticipated to be complete by August 2023.

If you have any concerns about the way in which your data has been used or stored at any stage you can contact:

Birmingham City University Data Protection Officer
Information Management Team, Birmingham City University, University House, 15 Bartholomew Row, Birmingham, B5 5JU
informationmanagement@bcu.ac.uk

0121 331 5288

Information Commissioner
Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF
Further information available at www.ico.org.uk

What rights do I have?

You have the right to choose whether your setting participates in this study or not. You have the right to have access to enough information to be able to make this decision. You can also choose to withdraw from the project at any point without prejudice. You and your setting have the right to remain anonymous in the resulting reports and publications and for your data to be adequately protected.

Who is organising the project?

This project is organised by Hannah Malpass, a Graduate Research and Teaching Assistant and registered PhD student at Birmingham City University.

Who is supervising this project?

This project is being supervised by Dr Carolyn Blackburn and Dr Kate Thomson, both of Birmingham City University. They can be contacted using the information below:

Dr Carolyn Blackburn (Director of Studies)
Reader in Interdisciplinary Practice and Research with Families
Birmingham City University, Faculty of Health Education and Life Sciences, Room 213, Ravensbury House, Westbourne Road. Birmingham B15 3TN
Carolyn.Blackburn@bcu.ac.uk

Dr Kate Thomson (Second Supervisor)
Associate Professor in Therapies and Public Health
Birmingham City University, Faculty of Health Education and Life Sciences, Room 114, Ravensbury House, Westbourne Road. Birmingham B15 3TN
Kate.Thomson@bcu.ac.uk

Who can I contact if I wish to complain?

You can contact either of the supervisors named above or the Birmingham City Ethics Department on HELS_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk.

Contacts for Further Information

Hannah Malpass
Graduate Research and Teaching Assistant
Birmingham City University
Hannah.Malpass@bcu.ac.uk

Thank you for showing an interest in this research project.

BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

Exploring the multi-dimensional relationships between social class inequalities, wellbeing and play in children aged 0-5 years

Invitation to Participate

You are being invited to take part in this research project. The purpose of this information sheet is to inform you about the project so that you can decide whether you would like to participate or not. Please take time to read the information and to make your decision. If you wish you can discuss it with other people or you can contact me if you would like to ask any questions or if anything is not clear.

What are the aims of the project?

This project is being undertaken as part of my PhD in Education. The project seeks to explore the ideas and perceptions of practitioners and parents in Early Years settings around the key themes of social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing. It aims to answer the following research questions:

4. How do practitioners and parents perceive the way in which social and cultural capital

   influences the wellbeing of children aged birth to five?

5. What perceptions do practitioners and parents have about the way in which social and

   cultural capital influences children's interactions with their different microsystems in the

   early years?

6. *How do practitioners and parents perceive the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic*

   and children's social and cultural capital, wellbeing, and early years experiences?

Why am I being invited?

The manager or headteacher at the setting you work in has already expressed an interest in participating. You have been chosen as you are currently working with children within the birth to five age range.

Do I have to take part?

You have the choice whether you would like to take part or not. Regardless of your decision you are welcome to keep a copy of this information sheet to refer back to at any time. If you choose not to participate you will not be asked to provide a reason why and you will not be negatively impacted by your decision. If you choose to participate you will be asked to complete a consent form before you participate. Even after you sign this you can still choose to withdraw from the project without giving a reason.

What will I have to do if I participate?

If you choose to participate you will need to access an online survey using a computer or mobile device using the enclosed details. When you access the survey, you will be asked to complete a consent form and then answer some questions. The survey should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete. At the end of the survey, you will be asked whether you wish to volunteer for an individual online interview with the researcher. Separate information about the interview will be given to those who volunteer for this. No physical face to face contact will take place between yourself and the researcher in order to comply with the Covid-19 social distancing requirements.

What are the benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits to you, it is hoped that the project will be able to create recommendations for improvements to the way in which Early Years settings operate in order to improve the life chances of young children. A brief summary of the final report will be provided to you for your information.

What are the potential risks of taking part?

Participating in this research is not expected to cause you any significant harm or discomfort. Should you feel uncomfortable at any stage you have the right to withdraw from the study without providing a reason. You will not be expected to answer any question or discuss any topic which you feel uncomfortable about. You will have the right to refuse to answer without penalty.

Will my information and responses be confidential?

All of the information you provide during your participation will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be individually identifiable in any report or publication produced as a result of this study. Unless you volunteer for an individual interview you will remain completely anonymous. If you provide your contact information to volunteer for an interview these details will be separated from your survey responses immediately upon receipt. Your participation and survey responses will not be shared with your place of work.

How will my data be protected?

Any digital data collected about you will be securely stored using an encrypted device and physical copies will be kept in a locked drawer. Your data will be held until the project is complete and the final report has been assessed by the examination board and an award has been confirmed. This is anticipated to be complete by August 2023.

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Dr Carolyn Blackburn (Director of Studies)
Reader in Interdisciplinary Practice and Research with Families
Birmingham City University, Faculty of Health Education and Life Sciences, Room 213, Ravensbury House, Westbourne Road. Birmingham B15 3TN
Carolyn.Blackburn@bcu.ac.uk

Dr Kate Thomson (Second Supervisor)
Associate Professor in Therapies and Public Health
Birmingham City University, Faculty of Health Education and Life Sciences, Room 114, Ravensbury House, Westbourne Road. Birmingham B15 3TN
Kate.Thomson@bcu.ac.uk

Who can I contact if I wish to complain?

You can contact either of the supervisors named above or the Birmingham City Ethics Department on HELS_Ethics@bcu.ac.uk.

Contacts for Further Information

Hannah Malpass

Graduate Research and Teaching Assistant
Birmingham City University
Hannah.Malpass@bcu.ac.uk

Thank you for showing an interest in this research project.

BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

Title of Research Project

Exploring the multi-dimensional relationships between social class, wellbeing and play in children aged 0-5 years

Invitation to Participate

You are being invited to take part in this research project. The purpose of this information sheet is to inform you about the project so that you can decide whether you would like to participate or not. Please take time to read the information and to make your decision. If you wish you can discuss it with other people or you can contact me if you would like to ask any questions or if anything is not clear.

What are the aims of the project?

This project is being undertaken as part of my PhD in Education. The project seeks to explore the ideas and perceptions of practitioners and parents in Birmingham Early Years settings around the key themes of social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing. It aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do practitioners and parents perceive the way in which social and cultural capital influences the wellbeing of children aged birth to five?

2. What perceptions do practitioners and parents have about the way in which social and cultural capital influences children's interactions with their different microsystems in the early years?

3. *How do practitioners and parents perceive the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and children's social and cultural capital, wellbeing, and early years experiences?*

Why am I being invited?

You have expressed an interest in participating after seeing the project being promoted by your setting or in publications or online. You work with children aged birth to five in England.

Do I have to take part?

You have the choice whether you would like to take part or not. Regardless of your decision you are welcome to keep a copy of this information sheet to refer back to at any time. If you choose not to participate you will not be asked to provide a reason why and you will not be negatively impacted by your decision. If you choose to participate you will be asked to complete a consent form before you participate. Even after you sign this you can still choose to withdraw from the project without giving a reason.

What will I have to do if I participate?

If you choose to participate you will need to access an online survey using a computer or mobile device using the enclosed details. When you access the survey, you will be asked to complete a consent form and then answer a small number of questions. The survey should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete. You will not need to provide your name, the name of your place of work or your contact details in order to participate. No physical face to face contact will take place between yourself and the researcher in order to comply with the Covid-19 social distancing requirements.

What are the benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits to you, it is hoped that the project will be able to create recommendations for improvements to the way in which Early Years settings operate in order to improve the life chances of young children. A brief summary of the final report will be available on the project webpage for you to access should you wish.

What are the potential risks of taking part?

Participating in this research is not expected to cause you any significant harm or discomfort. Should you feel uncomfortable at any stage you have the right to withdraw from the study without providing a reason. You will not be expected to answer any question or discuss any topic which you feel uncomfortable about. You will have the right to refuse to answer without penalty.

Will my information and responses be confidential?

All of the information you provide during your participation will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be individually identifiable in any report or publication produced as a result of this study. Your responses will remain completely anonymous.

How will my data be protected?

Any digital data collected about you will be securely stored using an encrypted device and physical copies will be kept in a locked drawer. Your data will be held until the project is complete and the final report has been assessed by the examination board and an award has been confirmed. This is anticipated to be complete by August 2023.

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What rights do I have?

You have the right to choose whether to participate in this study or not. You have the right to have access to enough information to be able to make this decision. You can also choose to withdraw from the project at any point without prejudice. You have the right to remain anonymous in the resulting reports and publications and for your data to be adequately protected.

Who is organising the project?

This project is organised by Hannah Malpass, a Graduate Research and Teaching Assistant and registered PhD student at Birmingham City University.

Who is supervising this project?

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Thank you for showing an interest in this research project.

BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

Exploring the multi-dimensional relationships between social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing in children aged 0-5

Invitation to Participate

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What are the aims of the project?

This project is being undertaken as part of my PhD in Education. The project seeks to explore the ideas and perceptions of practitioners and parents in Early Years settings around the key themes of social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing. It aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do practitioners and parents perceive the way in which social and cultural capital

   influences the wellbeing of children aged birth to five?

2. What perceptions do practitioners and parents have about the way in which social and

   cultural capital influences children's interactions with their different microsystems in the

   early years?

3. *How do practitioners and parents perceive the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic*

   and children's social and cultural capital, wellbeing, and early years experiences?

Why am I being invited?

Your course director has already given permission for you to be contacted as a current trainee in the area of Early Years education. You have been chosen as you are in the second or third year of either the BA Primary Education with QTS or BA Early Childhood Studies course at BCU. Therefore, your course involves learning about young children and their development and may have involved placements in Early Years settings.

Do I have to take part?

You have the choice whether you would like to take part or not. Regardless of your decision you are welcome to keep a copy of this information sheet to refer back to at any time. If you choose

not to participate you will not be asked to provide a reason why and you will not be negatively impacted by your decision. If you choose to participate you will be asked to complete a consent form before you participate. Even after you sign this you can still choose to withdraw from the project without giving a reason.

What will I have to do if I participate?

If you choose to participate you will need to access an online survey using a computer or mobile device using the enclosed details. When you access the survey, you will be asked to complete a consent form and then answer a small number of questions. The survey should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete. At the end of the survey, you will be asked whether you wish to volunteer for an online focus group with the researcher and up to seven of your fellow students. Separate information about the focus group will be given to those who volunteer for this. No physical face to face contact will take place between yourself and the researcher in order to comply with the Covid-19 social distancing requirements.

What are the benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits to you, it is hoped that the project will be able to create recommendations for improvements to practice in order to improve the life chances of vulnerable young children. A summary of the final report will be provided to you in order to inform your future practice.

What are the potential risks of taking part?

Participating in this research is not expected to cause you any significant harm or discomfort. Should you feel uncomfortable at any stage you have the right to withdraw from the study without providing a reason. You will not be expected to answer any question or discuss any topic which you feel uncomfortable about. You will have the right to refuse to answer without penalty.

Will my information and responses be confidential?

All of the information you provide during your participation will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be individually identifiable in any report or publication produced as a result of this study. Unless you volunteer for a focus group you will remain completely anonymous. If you provide your contact information to volunteer for a focus group these details will be separated from your survey responses immediately upon receipt. Your participation and survey responses will not be shared with your lecturers or fellow students.

How will my data be protected?

Any digital data collected about you will be securely stored using an encrypted device and physical copies will be kept in a locked drawer. Your data will be held until the project is complete and the final report has been assessed by the examination board and an award has been confirmed. This is anticipated to be complete by August 2023.

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What rights do I have?

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Who is organising the project?

This project is organised by Hannah Malpass, a Graduate Research and Teaching Assistant and registered PhD student at Birmingham City University.

Who is supervising this project?

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Hannah Malpass

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Thank you for showing an interest in this research project.

BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

Exploring the multi-dimensional relationships between social class inequalities, wellbeing and play in children aged 0-5 years

Invitation to Participate

You are being invited to take part in this research project. The purpose of this information sheet is to inform you about the project so that you can decide whether you would like to participate or not. Please take time to read the information and to make your decision. If you wish you can discuss it with other people or you can contact me if you would like to ask any questions or if anything is not clear.

What are the aims of the project?

This project is being undertaken as part of my PhD in Education. The project seeks to explore the ideas and perceptions of practitioners and parents in Early Years settings around the key themes of social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing. It aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do practitioners and parents perceive the way in which social and cultural capital influences the wellbeing of children aged birth to five?

2. What perceptions do practitioners and parents have about the way in which social and cultural capital influences children's interactions with their different microsystems in the early years?

3. *How do practitioners and parents perceive the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and children's social and cultural capital, wellbeing, and early years experiences?*

Why am I being invited?

The manager or headteacher at the setting your child attends has already expressed an interest in participating. You have been chosen as you currently have, or recently have had, one or more children in the Early Years classes at the setting. This means your child is aged between 0 and 7 years.

Do I have to take part?

You have the choice whether you would like to take part or not. Regardless of your decision you are welcome to keep a copy of this information sheet to refer back to at any time. If you choose not to participate you will not be asked to provide a reason why and you will not be negatively impacted by your decision. If you choose to participate you will be asked to complete a consent form before you participate. Even after you sign this you can still choose to withdraw from the project without giving a reason.

What will I have to do if I participate?

If you choose to participate you will need to access an online survey using a computer or mobile device using the enclosed details. When you access the survey, you will be asked to complete a consent form and then answer some questions. The survey should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete. At the end of the survey, you will be asked whether you wish to volunteer for an individual online interview with the researcher. Separate information about the interview will be given to those who volunteer for this. No physical face to face contact will take place between yourself and the researcher in order to comply with the Covid-19 social distancing requirements.

What are the benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits to you, it is hoped that the project will be able to create recommendations for improvements to the way in which Early Years settings operate in order to improve the life chances of young children. A brief summary of the final report will be provided to you for your information.

What are the potential risks of taking part?

Participating in this research is not expected to cause you any significant harm or discomfort. Should you feel uncomfortable at any stage you have the right to withdraw from the study without providing a reason. You will not be expected to answer any question or discuss any topic which you feel uncomfortable about. You will have the right to refuse to answer without penalty.

Will my information and responses be confidential?

All of the information you provide during your participation will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be individually identifiable in any report or publication produced as a result of this study. Unless you volunteer for an individual interview you will remain completely anonymous. If you provide your contact information to volunteer for an interview these details will be separated from your survey responses immediately upon receipt. Your participation and survey responses will not be shared with your child's setting.

How will my data be protected?

Any digital data collected about you will be securely stored using an encrypted device and physical copies will be kept in a locked drawer. Your data will be held until the project is complete and the final report has been assessed by the examination board and an award has been confirmed. This is anticipated to be complete by August 2023.

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Who is organising the project?

This project is organised by Hannah Malpass, a Graduate Research and Teaching Assistant and registered PhD student at Birmingham City University.

Who is supervising this project?

This project is being supervised by Dr Carolyn Blackburn and Dr Kate Thomson, both of Birmingham City University. They can be contacted using the information below:

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Reader in Interdisciplinary Practice and Research with Families
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Contacts for Further Information

Hannah Malpass

Graduate Research and Teaching Assistant
Birmingham City University
Hannah.Malpass@bcu.ac.uk

Thank you for showing an interest in this research project.

BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

Exploring the multi-dimensional relationships between social class, health and wellbeing and play in children aged 0-5 years

Invitation to Participate

You are being invited to take part in this research project. The purpose of this information sheet is to inform you about the project so that you can decide whether you would like to participate or not. Please take time to read the information and to make your decision. If you wish you can discuss it with other people or you can contact me if you would like to ask any questions or if anything is not clear.

What are the aims of the project?

This project is being undertaken as part of my PhD in Education. The project seeks to explore the ideas and perceptions of practitioners and parents in Birmingham Early Years settings around the key themes of social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing. It aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do practitioners and parents perceive the way in which social and cultural capital influences the wellbeing of children aged birth to five?

2. What perceptions do practitioners and parents have about the way in which social and cultural capital influences children's interactions with their different microsystems in the early years?

3. *How do practitioners and parents perceive the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and children's social and cultural capital, wellbeing, and early years experiences?*

Why am I being invited?

You have expressed an interest in participating after seeing the project being promoted in publications or online. You have a child, or children aged between birth and five.

Do I have to take part?

You have the choice whether you would like to take part or not. Regardless of your decision you are welcome to keep a copy of this information sheet to refer back to at any time. If you choose not to participate you will not be asked to provide a reason why and you will not be negatively impacted by your decision. If you choose to participate you will be asked to complete a consent form before you participate. Even after you sign this you can still choose to withdraw from the project without giving a reason.

What will I have to do if I participate?

If you choose to participate you will need to access an online survey using a computer or mobile device using the enclosed details. When you access the survey, you will be asked to complete a consent form and then answer a small number of questions. The survey should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete. You will not need to provide your name or contact details in order to participate. No physical face to face contact will take place between yourself and the researcher in order to comply with the Covid-19 social distancing requirements.

What are the benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits to you, it is hoped that the project will be able to create recommendations for improvements to the way in which Early Years settings operate in order to improve the life chances of young children. A brief summary of the final report will be available on the project webpage for you to access should you wish.

What are the potential risks of taking part?

Participating in this research is not expected to cause you any significant harm or discomfort. Should you feel uncomfortable at any stage you have the right to withdraw from the study without providing a reason. You will not be expected to answer any question or discuss any topic which you feel uncomfortable about. You will have the right to refuse to answer without penalty.

Will my information and responses be confidential?

All of the information you provide during your participation will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be individually identifiable in any report or publication produced as a result of this study. Your responses will remain completely anonymous.

How will my data be protected?

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Who is supervising this project?

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Thank you for showing an interest in this research project.

BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

Exploring the multi-dimensional relationships between social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing in children 0-5.

Invitation to Participate

You are being invited to take part in this research project. The purpose of this information sheet is to inform you about the project so that you can decide whether you would like to participate or not. Please take time to read the information and to make your decision. If you wish you can discuss it with other people or you can contact me if you would like to ask any questions or if anything is not clear.

What are the aims of the project?

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2. What perceptions do practitioners and parents have about the way in which social and cultural capital influences children's interactions with their different microsystems in the early years?

3. *How do practitioners and parents perceive the relationship between the Covid-19 pandemic and children's social and cultural capital, wellbeing, and early years experiences?*

Why am I being invited?

You have been identified by the researcher as a potential participant in this study. Either you are a parent or main carer of a child aged between 0 and 5 years or you work with young children in a professional capacity as a teacher, a member of school or nursery support staff, social care worker or other allied health position.

Do I have to take part?

You have the choice whether you would like to take part or not. Regardless of your decision you are welcome to keep a copy of this information sheet to refer back to at any time. If you choose not to participate you will not be asked to provide a reason why and you will not be negatively impacted by your decision. If you choose to participate you will be asked to sign the attached consent form. Even after you sign this you can still choose to withdraw from the project without giving a reason.

What will I have to do if I participate?

If you choose to take part, you will be agreeing to attending a single one to one interview with the researcher on Microsoft Teams. This interview will take place at a time that will be mutually agreed between you and the researcher. This is flexible to suit your work and family commitments and can take place during the day or in the evening, on a weekday or at the weekend depending on your preference. The interview will be recorded using the Microsoft Teams software, but you will have the choice whether you turn on your video camera for the interview or not. Recordings will be deleted once the researcher has made written copies of your responses. No physical face to face contact will take place between yourself and the researcher in order to comply with the Covid-19 social distancing requirements.

What are the benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits to you, it is hoped that the project will be able to create recommendations for improvements to the way in which Early Years settings operate in order to improve the life chances of young children. A brief summary of the final report will be provided to you in order to inform your future practice.

What are the potential risks of taking part?

Participating in this research is not expected to cause you any significant harm or discomfort. Should you feel uncomfortable at any stage you have the right to withdraw from the study or to terminate an interview without providing a reason. You will not be expected to answer any question or discuss any topic which you feel uncomfortable about. You will have the right to refuse to answer without penalty.

Will my information and responses be confidential?

All of the information you provide during your participation will be kept strictly confidential. and your child's setting or the setting that you work in will not be individually identifiable in any report or publication produced as a result of this study. You and your/your child's setting will be referred to using randomly generated pseudonyms in all reports and publications. These pseudonyms will be assigned at the point where the interview is transferred into a written document. Original copies of interviews will be deleted as soon as the anonymous written copy has been created.

How will my data be protected?

Any digital data collected about you will be securely stored using an encrypted device and physical copies will be kept in a locked drawer. If your video camera remains on during interviews the video recording will not be used in the reporting of the project. All audio and video recordings will be stored on an encrypted device and will be deleted as soon as a written copy of your interview has been created by the researcher. Your data will be held until the project is complete and the final report has been assessed by the examination board and an award has been confirmed. This is anticipated to be complete by August 2023.

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Thank you for showing an interest in this research project.

BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

Permission of Access Form for Research

Exploring the multi-dimensional relationships between social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing in children from Birth to Five

Conducted by Hannah Malpass, Graduate Research and Teaching Assistant, Birmingham City University.

This project is being undertaken as part of my PhD in Education. The project seeks to explore the ideas and perceptions of practitioners and parents in Early Years settings around the key themes of social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing.

The information provided by parents and practitioners will be made anonymous and may be used in whole or part in

-   The final thesis submitted to Birmingham City University for the award of PhD Education
-   Local, national and international conference presentations
-   Academic papers, articles or books

The involvement of your setting in this project is entirely voluntary and you may choose to withdraw your setting from the project without penalty. Should you choose to withdraw every effort will be made to remove your data entirely from the project. However, once processing has taken place and analysis has begun it may not be possible to remove individual responses. In this case your data will remain anonymous throughout the report and no further data will be requested from you after you confirm your intention to withdraw.

Thank you for agreeing to your participation in this project. Ethical procedures for academic research undertaken from UK institutions require that a person of authority provides permission of access to the researcher before individual settings may be used in research. Therefore, this form is necessary to ensure that you understand the involvement of your setting and that you agree to the researcher gaining access to information about your setting and inviting practitioners and parents to participate in the project. Would you therefore please read the settings information sheet and then complete this form as confirmation that you give permission for the researcher to access information about your setting and to recruit individual participants from within it.

Please **initial** each box to indicate that you understand and confirm the following:

I have read and understood the information in the information sheet and in this form.	
I have had the opportunity to gain further information and ask questions about the project	
I understand that participation in the project is entirely voluntary	
I understand that I have the right to withdraw my setting from the project without penalty	
I understand that should I choose to withdraw every effort will be made to remove data from the project and that any data which remains will be anonymised.	
I understand that I have the right for my setting to remain anonymous in any publication or report arising from this project	

Please **initial** each box to confirm that you consent to:

The researcher recruiting practitioners and parents from your setting as participants	
Circulating information provided by the researcher to practitioners and parents in Early Years classes	
The anonymised data that is provided being securely stored until the project is completed in August 2023	
The anonymous data being included in any subsequent publications or reports arising from this project	

I confirm that I have read, understood and agreed with the information provided in the participant information sheet and on this form and that I wish to volunteer my setting to participate in this project.

Print Name _____

Signed _____

Job Title _____

Date _____

BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

Permission of Access Form for Research

Exploring the multi-dimensional relationships between social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing in Early Years settings

Conducted by Hannah Malpass, Graduate Research and Teaching Assistant, Birmingham City University.

This project is being undertaken as part of my PhD in Education. The project seeks to explore the ideas and perceptions of practitioners, parents and trainee practitioners in Early Years settings around the key themes of social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing.

Any information provided by any participant from your organisation will be made anonymous and may be used in whole or part in

- The final thesis submitted to Birmingham City University for the award of PhD Education
- Local, national and international conference presentations
- Academic papers, articles or books

Your permission to involve trainees from your organisation in this project is entirely voluntary and you may choose to withdraw your permission without penalty. Should you choose to withdraw every effort will be made to remove data gathered from your organisation entirely from the project. However, once processing has taken place and analysis has begun it may not be possible to remove individual responses. In this case your organisation will remain anonymous throughout the report and no further data will be requested from you after you confirm your intention to withdraw.

Thank you for agreeing to your organisation's participation in this project. Ethical procedures for academic research undertaken from UK institutions require that a person of authority provides permission of access to the researcher before individual organisations may be used in research. This form is necessary to ensure that you understand your organisation's involvement and that you agree to the researcher gaining access in order to approach students to invite them to participate in the project. Would you therefore read the accompanying letter and then complete this form as confirmation that you give permission for the researcher to recruit individual participants from within your organisation.

Please **initial** each box to indicate that you understand and confirm the following:

I have read and understood the information in the information letter and in this form.	
I have had the opportunity to gain further information and ask questions about the project	
I understand that my permission to involve my organisation in the project is entirely voluntary	
I understand that I have the right to withdraw my permission without penalty	
I understand that should I choose to withdraw every effort will be made to remove data from my organisation from the project and that any data which remains will be anonymised.	
I understand that I have the right for my organisation to remain anonymous in any publication or report arising from this project	

Please **initial** each box to confirm that you consent to:

The researcher contacting the course directors for BA Primary Education and BA Early Childhood Studies to seek their permission to involve the students on those courses.	
The researcher contacting students from the above courses to invite them to participate in the project.	
The anonymised data that is provided about my organisation being securely stored until the project is completed in August 2023	
The anonymous data about my organisation being included in any subsequent publications or reports arising from this project	

I confirm that I have read, understood and agreed with the information provided in the participant information sheet and on this form and that I wish to participate in this project.

Print Name _____

Signed _____

Job Title _____

Date _____

BIRMINGHAM CITY
University

Exploring the multi-dimensional relationships between social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing in children 0-5

Conducted by Hannah Malpass, Graduate Research and Teaching Assistant, Birmingham City University.

This project is being undertaken as part of my PhD in Education. The project seeks to explore the ideas and perceptions of practitioners and parents in Early Years settings around the key themes of social class inequalities, play and health and wellbeing.

The information you provide will be made anonymous and may be used in whole or part in

- The final thesis submitted to Birmingham City University for the award of PhD Education
- Local, national and international conference presentations
- Academic papers, articles or books

Your involvement in this project is entirely voluntary and you may choose to withdraw from the project without penalty. You also have the right to terminate your interview at any stage. Should you choose to withdraw every effort will be made to remove your data entirely from the project. However, once processing has taken place and analysis has begun it may not be possible to remove individual responses. In this case you will remain anonymous throughout the report and no further data will be requested from you after you confirm your intention to withdraw.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of this project. Ethical procedures for academic research undertaken from UK institutions require that interviewees explicitly agree to being interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used. This consent form is necessary for us to ensure that you understand your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Would you therefore read the accompanying participant information sheet and then complete this form as confirmation that you wish to participate.

Please **initial** each box to indicate that you understand and confirm the following:

I have read and understood the information in the participant information sheet and in this consent form.	
I have had the opportunity to gain further information and ask questions about the project	
I understand that my participation in the project is entirely voluntary	
I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the project without penalty	
I understand that should I choose to withdraw every effort will be made to remove my data from the project and that any data which remains will be anonymised.	
I understand that I have the right to remain anonymous in any publication or report arising from this project	

Please **initial** each box to confirm that you consent to:

Participating in an online one to one interview with the researcher named above	
My interview being recorded using Microsoft Teams software and a written transcript being created by the researcher	
The recording of my interview being kept securely until transcription has taken place	
The anonymised data that I provide being securely stored until the project is completed in August 2023	
My anonymous data being included in any subsequent publications or reports arising from this project	
Direct quotations from my interview being used in the final report on the condition that I cannot be personally identified from these quotations	

I confirm that I have read, understood and agreed with the information provided in the participant information sheet and on this form and that I wish to participate in this project.

Print Name _____

Signed _____

Date _____

4.2 Survey Participants (completed online at the start of the survey with slight adaptations for each participant type)

Conducted by Hannah Malpass, Graduate Research and Teaching Assistant, Birmingham City University.

This project is being undertaken as part of my PhD in Education. The project seeks to explore the ideas and perceptions of practitioners, trainees and parents in Early Years settings around the key themes of play and health and wellbeing.

The information you provide will be made anonymous and may be used in whole or part in

- The final thesis submitted to Birmingham City University for the award of PhD Education
- Local, national and international conference presentations
- Academic papers, articles or books

Your involvement in this project is entirely voluntary and you may choose to withdraw from the project without penalty. You also have the right to terminate the survey at any stage. Should you choose to withdraw every effort will be made to remove your data entirely from the project. However, once processing has taken place and analysis has begun it may not be possible to remove individual responses. In this case you will remain anonymous throughout the report and no further data will be requested from you after you confirm your intention to withdraw.

Thankyou for agreeing to take part in this project. This consent form is necessary for us to ensure that you understand your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Would you therefore ensure that you have read the participant information sheet provided to you and then complete this form as confirmation that you wish to participate.

I confirm that I am aged 18 or over.

    ○ Yes

I have read and understood the information in the participant information sheet and in this consent form. ✳ *Required*

    ○ Yes

I have had the opportunity to gain further information and ask questions about the project ✳ *Required*

    ○ Yes

I understand that my participation in the project is entirely voluntary and does not form part of my degree course ✳ *Required*

    ○ Yes

I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the project without penalty ✳ *Required*

    ○ Yes

I understand that should I choose to withdraw every effort will be made to remove my data from the project and that any data which remains will be anonymised. ✳ *Required*

    ○ Yes

I understand that I have the right to remain anonymous in any publication or report arising from this project ✳ *Required*

    ○ Yes

Page 2: Consent

Please **tick** each box to confirm that you consent to: Participating in this online survey
✳ *Required*

    ○ Yes

The anonymised data that I provide being securely stored until the project is completed in August 2023 ✳ *Required*

    ○ Yes

My anonymous data being included in any subsequent publications or reports arising from this project ✳ *Required*

    ○ Yes

Direct quotations from my responses being used in the final report on the condition that I cannot be personally identified from these quotations ✳ *Required*

    ○ Yes

Please confirm that you still wish to take part in this survey ✳ *Required*

[   ]

354

5 Online Surveys

5.1 Practitioner Survey

Page 3: Basic Information

What gender do you identify as?

- ○ Female
- ○ Male
- ○ Transgender
- ○ Prefer not to say
- ○ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

Which of the following age brackets do you fall within?

- ☐ 18-20yrs
- ☐ 21-30yrs
- ☐ 31-40yrs
- ☐ 41-50yrs
- ☐ 51-60yrs
- ☐ 61 or over
- ☐ Prefer not to say

What is your **current** place of work?

- ☐ Private Day Nursery
- ☐ Children's Centre
- ☐ Pre-School
- ☐ Maintained Nursery School
- ☐ Maintained Primary/First/Infant School

What age group of children do you currently work with? If you work with multiple ages please select all that apply.

- ☐ Babies (Birth to 12 months)
- ☐ Toddlers (12months to 3 years)
- ☐ Pre-School (3-4 years)
- ☐ Reception
- ☐ Year One
- ☐ Year Two
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

Please indicate whether you have previously worked with a different age group. Please select all that apply

- ☐ Babies (Birth to 12 months)
- ☐ Toddlers (12 months to 3 years)
- ☐ Pre-School (3-4 years)
- ☐ Reception
- ☐ Year One
- ☐ Year Two
- ☐ I have not worked with a different age group
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

- ☐ Primary/First/Infant Academy
- ☐ Independent School
- ☐ Childminder
- ☐ Specialist Provision (e.g. Special Needs school or Pupil Referral Unit)
- ☐ I visit multiple settings as an advisor or to offer specialist support
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

Please indicate if you have previously worked in any other type of setting. Please select all that apply.

- ☐ I have not worked elsewhere before
- ☐ Private Day Nursery
- ☐ Children's Centre
- ☐ Pre-School
- ☐ Maintained Nursery School
- ☐ Maintained Primary/First/Infant School
- ☐ Primary/First/Infant Academy
- ☐ Independent School
- ☐ Childminder
- ☐ Specialist provision
- ☐ I have previously worked visiting multiple settings as an advisor or to offer specialist support
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

How long have you been working with children aged birth to 5?

- ☐ Less than one year
- ☐ 1-2 years
- ☐ 3-5 years
- ☐ 5-10 years
- ☐ 10-15 years
- ☐ over 15 years

Which of these titles best describes your current job role?

- ☐ Headteacher/Principal
- ☐ Deputy Headteacher/Assistant Principal
- ☐ EYFS Leader
- ☐ Class Teacher
- ☐ Teaching Assistant/Higher Level Teaching Assistant
- ☐ Childminder
- ☐ Nursery Manager
- ☐ Deputy Nursery Manager
- ☐ Room Leader
- ☐ Nursery Practitioner
- ☐ Associated health professional (e.g. speech and language therapist, occupational therapist, health visitor)
- ☐ Early Years advisor or specialist teacher (e.g. SEND support teacher, settings improvement advisor etc)
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

Do you hold any qualifications in childcare or education? * *Required*

☐ Yes
☐ No

If yes, what is the title of your **highest** qualification in childcare, education or associated subject? (E.g. NVQ Level Two Childcare, CACHE Level 3 Diploma in Childcare, BA Primary Education etc)

[   ]

Page 4: Social Inequality

1. Which of the following do you think contribute to whether a child experiences social inequality? (Please select all that apply) * *Required*

☐ Household Income
☐ Globalisation
☐ Household Debt
☐ Political attitudes and policies
☐ Parents' Occupation and employment status
☐ Levels of parental education
☐ Technological advances
☐ Parents' Childhood experiences
☐ National Economic Situation
☐ Family situation or history
☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

2. Which of the following do you think are affected by social inequality? (Please select all that apply) * *Required*

☐ Life expectancy
☐ Infant mortality rates
☐ Adult Mental health wellness or illness
☐ Child Mental health wellness or illness
☐ Community crime levels

☐ Household Incomes
☐ School Leavers' Educational outcomes
☐ Adult Physical wellness or illness
☐ Child Physical wellness or illness
☐ Adult Self image
☐ Child Self image
☐ Levels of Happiness and satisfaction
☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

3. Thinking about your answers to the previous two questions, what does the term "social inequality" mean to you? You can draw upon the ideas already presented in the previous questions or on your personal or professional experience if you wish. * *Required*

[   ]

Page 5: Wellbeing

4. What do you think contributes most to a child's wellbeing in the first 5 years of their life? * *Required*

Please select no more than 5 answer(s).
☐ Participation in outdoor play or sport
☐ Relationship with parents
☐ Relationship with peers
☐ Happiness at school/other educational setting
☐ Premature birth or low birth weight
☐ Presence of a disability or long term condition
☐ Mental health concerns
☐ Participation in cultural activities
☐ Household income
☐ Access to funded early years education
☐ Home environment (overcrowding, basic facilities, suitability of accommodation etc)
☐ Basic needs (nutrition, clothing, shelter etc)
☐ Parents education levels
☐ Parental involvement in alcohol or substance abuse
☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

4. (b) What are your reasons for selecting these options?

[   ]

Page 6: Promoting Wellbeing

5. In your professional opinion, how far do you agree with this statement?

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
All Early Years settings do a good job of supporting and promoting children's wellbeing.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

5. (b) What are your reasons for saying this?

[   ]

Page 7: Assessing Wellbeing

6. As a practitioner what do you look for when assessing a child's level of wellbeing? Please select all that apply ✸ *Required*

- ☐ Persistence, engagement and involvement in acitivities
- ☐ Ability to take risks
- ☐ Showing trust and affection towards adults and peers
- ☐ Educational attainment/level of development
- ☐ Physical Appearance
- ☐ Facial Expressions
- ☐ Body movement
- ☐ Energy levels
- ☐ Curiosity and desire to explore new things
- ☐ Interactions with adults
- ☐ Interactions with peers
- ☐ Confidence
- ☐ Ability to regulate emotions
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

7. Which element do you think is most important when assessing wellbeing? ✸ *Required*

Why do you think this? ✸ *Required*

8. What do you do at your current setting to support and promote children's wellbeing? ✸ *Required*

- ☐ Develop a rich and stimulating classroom environment.
- ☐ Check your environment and update it regularly to reflect the children's interests.
- ☐ Introduce unusual and original activities and resources regularly.
- ☐ Observe children closely to gain feedback on their interests and strengths and weaknesses.
- ☐ Provide stimulating and rich interventions to assist children with specific additional needs.
- ☐ Support children in following their own ideas and interests.
- ☐ Planning to reflect children's interests and needs rather than following a yearly/termly curriculum or topic map
- ☐ Promote a positive emotional climate through positive reinforcement and a happy and caring environment.
- ☐ Help children to explore their feelings, emotions and behaviour through targeted activities and adult encouragement.
- ☐ Identify and support those children who need extra wellbeing support.
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

8. (b) Is there anything you think you could do better to promote children's wellbeing at

your setting? Please give as much detail as you can. ✸ *Required*

Page 8: Play

9. What are the most important factors you think affect a child's opportunity to play? Please select up to five options. ✸ *Required*

Please select no more than 5 answer(s).
- ☐ Access to toys and resources
- ☐ Availability of space
- ☐ Access to early years education
- ☐ Parental support
- ☐ Media influences
- ☐ Parent's disposable income
- ☐ Family socio-economic status
- ☐ Parent's level of education
- ☐ Child's cognitive ability
- ☐ Child's Gender
- ☐ Child's Ethnicity
- ☐ Child's language development
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

10. Do you think these elements have had a positive or negative influence on children's play over time? Please indicate on the scale for each element. ✸ *Required*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

Please select at least 5 answer(s).

	Very negative	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Very positive	Don't know

	Very negative	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Very positive	Don't know
Availability of toys and resources	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Technological advances	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability of outdoor space	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Safety	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to early years education	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

10. (b) Why do you think this? Please give as much detail as you can. ✸ *Required*

11. Please rank the following in terms of how much influence you think they have had on children's play changing **over time** with ONE being the **most influential** and FIVE being the **least influential.** ✸ *Required*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

Please select at least 5 answer(s).

	1	2	3	4	5
Availability of outdoor spaces	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Safety	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Technological advances	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to early years education	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

	1	2	3	4	5
Availability of toys and resources	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

357

12. What do you think are the most important benefits of having access to high quality play experiences in the first five years of life? Please select up to three options. ✳ *Required*

Please select no more than 3 answer(s).
- ☐ Speech and Language Development
- ☐ Social skills Development
- ☐ Physical Health
- ☐ Mental Health and Wellbeing
- ☐ Developing skills for life-long learning
- ☐ Cognitive Development
- ☐ Development of Creativity and Imagination
- ☐ Physical Development
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

12. (b) Why did you choose these benefits? Please give as much detail as you can.

Page 9: Covid-19

13. Thinking specifically about experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic which of the following do you think have affected the wellbeing of children aged five and under? You can think about the children that you work with or children five and under more generally. Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Parental stress and anxiety about finances
- ☐ Parental stress and anxiety about their own and others' health
- ☐ Parental job insecurity
- ☐ Reduction in household income
- ☐ Reduced access to educational settings
- ☐ Reduced access to leisure facilities (e.g. swimming pools, sports centres, museums)
- ☐ Reduced contact with friends and family
- ☐ Increased time spent at home
- ☐ Limited access to support groups for child (e.g. speech and language groups, baby and toddler groups etc)
- ☐ Limited access to support groups for parents (e.g. parenting classes, mother and baby groups, ante-natal classes etc)
- ☐ There has not been an effect on young children's wellbeing
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

14. Thinking specifically about children aged five or under, how much do you agree with the following statements?

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
Young children have been negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The children I work with have shown signs of increased anxiety during the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The children I work with ask questions about the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Young children have benefited from the increased time they have spent with parents and siblings.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Young children have been negatively affected by not being able to see friends or family.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Young children's development has been negatively affected by the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Young children's development has been positively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Children under five have not shown any signs of being affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

15. Have the setting you work in had to close at any point due to the Covid-19 restrictions? Consider any time you have closed due to lockdown, self-isolation, decontamination following a confirmed case etc. ✳ *Required*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't Know

If you answered yes, please provide details of the length of time that you had to close for and the reason for this

358

16. Have the setting you work in seen a reduction in the number of children attending even when the setting has been open during the Covid-19 pandemic? Please consider reductions caused by children on roll not attending due to parental choice, shielding etc as well as a reduction in the uptake of places by new families.

☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Don't Know

If yes, why do you think this is? Please give as much detail as possible.

17. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences of working with children aged five and under during the Covid-19 pandemic?

Page 10: Further Information

18. Do you have any other ideas or thoughts that you would like to share about young children, wellbeing, play and different backgrounds?

5.2 Parent Survey

Page 3: Basic Information

What gender do you identify as?

- ○ Female
- ○ Male
- ○ Transgender
- ○ Prefer not to say
- ○ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

Which of the following age brackets do you fall within?

- ☐ 18-20yrs
- ☐ 21-30yrs
- ☐ 31-40yrs
- ☐ 41-50yrs
- ☐ 51-60yrs
- ☐ 61 or over
- ☐ Prefer not to say

How many children under the age of 18 live in your household? * *Required*

Please select no more than 1 answer(s).
- ☐ One
- ☐ Two
- ☐ Three
- ☐ Four
- ☐ Five or More

How many of these children are aged five or under? * *Required*

Please select no more than 1 answer(s).
- ☐ None
- ☐ One
- ☐ Two
- ☐ Three
- ☐ Four
- ☐ Five or more

How old is your **youngest** child? * *Required*

Please select no more than 1 answer(s).
- ☐ Under 1 year old
- ☐ Between 1 year 1 month and 2 years
- ☐ Between 2 years 1 month and 3 years
- ☐ Between 3 years 1 month and 4 years
- ☐ Between 4 years 1 month and 5 years
- ☐ 5 years 1 month or older

Including yourself, how many adults over the age of 18 live in your household? * *Required*

- ☐ One (Just Me)
- ☐ Two
- ☐ Three
- ☐ Four or more

What is your occupation? (If you are currently on maternity/paternity/adoption leave or are

furloughed please state your usual occupation) * *Required*

[   ]

What is the occupation of the **main earner** in your household? (If they are currently on maternity/paternity/adoption leave or are furloughed please state their usual occupation)

[   ]

What is the **first part** of your home postcode? (e.g. B26, E12, WR11) Please do not provide your full postcode here. This information will only be used during analysis to group participants' responses into geographical area and will not be used to make contact with you at any stage.

[   ]

What is your ethinicity? * *Required*

Please select no more than 1 answer(s).
- ☐ 1. English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
- ☐ 2. Irish
- ☐ 3. Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- ☐ 4. Any other White background
- ☐ 5. White and Black Caribbean
- ☐ 6. White and Black African
- ☐ 7. White and Asian
- ☐ 8. Any other Mixed / Multiple ethnic background
- ☐ 9. Indian

- ☐ 10. Pakistani
- ☐ 11. Bangladeshi
- ☐ 12. Chinese
- ☐ 13. Any other Asian background
- ☐ 14. African
- ☐ 15. Caribbean
- ☐ 16. Any other Black / African / Caribbean background
- ☐ 17. Arab
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

What type of educational settings, if any, do any of the children living in your household currently attend? If children are not currently attending due to Covid-19 please select the types of settings that they were attending prior to the national lockdown. (Please select all that apply) * *Required*

- ☐ No educational settings
- ☐ Private Day Nursery
- ☐ Pre-School
- ☐ Childminder
- ☐ Maintained Nursery School
- ☐ Primary/First/Infant School
- ☐ Junior/Middle School
- ☐ Secondary School
- ☐ Further Education College
- ☐ Special School
- ☐ Specialist Alternative Provision (e.g. PRU, Assessment Unit, Hospital School)
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

Have you **ever** used any of the following Early Years settings for a child in your household? (Please select all that apply) ✱ *Required*

☐ None
☐ Private Day Nursery
☐ Pre-School
☐ Maintained Nursery School
☐ Childminder
☐ Nursery provision within a special school
☐ Nursery provision within an alternative setting (e.g. PRU, Assessment centre, Hospital school)
☐ Other Nursery or Pre School Provision (please specify)

If you selected Other, please specify:

Page 4: Social Inequality

1. Which of the following do you think contribute to whether a child experiences social inequality? (Please select all that apply) ✱ *Required*

☐ Household Income
☐ Globalisation
☐ Household Debt
☐ Political attitudes and policies
☐ Parents' Occupation and employment status
☐ Levels of parental education
☐ Technological advances
☐ Parents' Childhood experiences
☐ National Economic Situation
☐ Family situation or history
☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

2. Which of the following do you think are affected by social inequality? (Please select all that apply) ✱ *Required*

☐ Life expectancy
☐ Infant mortality rates
☐ Adult Mental health wellness or illness
☐ Child Mental health wellness or illness
☐ Community crime levels

☐ Household Incomes
☐ School Leavers' Educational outcomes
☐ Adult Physical wellness or illness
☐ Child Physical wellness or illness
☐ Adult Self image
☐ Child Self image
☐ Levels of Happiness and satisfaction
☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

3. Thinking about your answers to the previous two questions, what does the term "social inequality" mean to you? You can draw upon the ideas already presented in the previous questions or on your personal or professional experience if you wish. ✱ *Required*

Page 5: Wellbeing

4. (a) What do you think contributes most to a child's wellbeing in the first 5 years of their life? ✱ *Required*

Please select no more than 5 answer(s).
☐ Participation in outdoor play or sport
☐ Relationship with parents
☐ Relationship with peers
☐ Happiness at school/other educational setting
☐ Premature birth or low birth weight
☐ Presence of a disability or long term condition
☐ Mental health concerns
☐ Participation in cultural activities
☐ Household income
☐ Access to funded early years education
☐ Home environment (overcrowding, basic facilities, suitability of accommodation etc)
☐ Basic needs (nutrition, clothing, shelter etc)
☐ Parents education levels
☐ Parental involvement in alcohol or substance abuse
☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

4. (b) What are your reasons for selecting these options?

Page 6: Promoting Wellbeing

5 Thinking about your own children, how far do you agree with these statements?

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The Early Years settings my children have attended do a good job of supporting and promoting children's wellbeing.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My children's wellbeing has improved through attending an Early Years setting.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Attending an Early Years setting is important for a child's wellbeing.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

6. Thinking about your own children, how far do you agree with this statement? The Early Years settings my children have attended do a good job of supporting and promoting children's wellbeing. ✱ *Required*

○ Strongly Agree   ○ Agree   ○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Disagree   ○ Strongly Disagree   ○ Don't know

What are your reasons for saying this?

[text box]

[text box]

Page 7: Assessing Wellbeing

7. Which of the following do you think help to show a child's level of wellbeing? Please select all that apply ✳ *Required*

- ☐ Persistence, engagement and involvement in acitivities
- ☐ Ability to take risks
- ☐ Showing trust and affection towards adults and peers
- ☐ Educational attainment/level of development
- ☐ Physical Appearance
- ☐ Facial Expressions
- ☐ Body movement
- ☐ Energy levels
- ☐ Curiosity and desire to explore new things
- ☐ Interactions with adults
- ☐ Interactions with peers
- ☐ Confidence
- ☐ Ability to regulate emotions
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[text box]

8. (a) Which element do you think most shows a child's level of wellbeing? ✳ *Required*

[text box]

8. (b) Why do you think this? ✳ *Required*

[text box]

9. Thinking about the Early Years setting that your child currently attends, what does the setting do to promote children's wellbeing? If your child does not currently attend an Early Years setting please think about the setting that they most recently attended. ✳ *Required*

- ☐ Offer a rich and stimulating classroom environment.
- ☐ The classroom is updated regularly to reflect the children's interests.
- ☐ They introduce unusual and original activities and resources regularly.
- ☐ They observe children closely to gain feedback on their interests and strengths and weaknesses.
- ☐ They provide stimulating additional support for children who need it.
- ☐ They support children in following their own ideas and interests.
- ☐ They promote a positive emotional climate through positive reinforcement and a happy and caring environment.
- ☐ They help children to explore their feelings, emotions and behaviour .
- ☐ They identify and support those children who need extra wellbeing support.
- ☐ Don't know/Can't remember
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[text box]

10. Is there anything you think your child's setting could do better to promote children's wellbeing? Please give as much detail as you can. ✳ *Required*

Page 8: Play

11. What are the most important factors you think affect a child's opportunity to play? Please select up to five options. ✳ *Required*

Please select no more than 5 answer(s).
- ☐ Access to toys and resources
- ☐ Availability of space
- ☐ Access to early years education
- ☐ Parental support
- ☐ Media influences
- ☐ Parent's disposable income
- ☐ Family socio-economic status
- ☐ Parent's level of education
- ☐ Child's cognitive ability
- ☐ Child's Gender
- ☐ Child's Ethnicity
- ☐ Child's language development
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[text box]

12. Do you think these elements have had a positive or negative influence on children's play over time? Please indicate on the scale for each element. ✳ *Required*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

Please select at least 5 answer(s).

	Very negative	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Very positive	Don't know
Availability of toys and resources	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Technological advances	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability of outdoor space	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Safety	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to early years education	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Why do you think this? Please give as much detail as you can. ✳ *Required*

[text box]

13. Please rank the following in terms of how much influence you think they have had on children's play changing **over time** with ONE being the **most influential** and FIVE being the **least influential.** ✳ *Required*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

Please select at least 5 answer(s).

	1	2	3	4	5
Availability of outdoor spaces	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Safety	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Technological advances	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to early years education	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability of toys and resources	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

14. What do you think are the most important benefits of having access to high quality play experiences in the first five years of life? Please select up to three options. ✱ *Required*

Please select no more than 3 answer(s).
- ☐ Speech and Language Development
- ☐ Social skills Development
- ☐ Physical Health
- ☐ Mental Health and Wellbeing
- ☐ Developing skills for life-long learning
- ☐ Development of cognitive skills (e.g. reading and writing)
- ☐ Development of Creativity and Imagination
- ☐ Physical Development
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

14. (b) Why did you choose these benefits? Please give as much detail as you can.

[   ]

Page 9: Covid-19

15. Thinking specifically about experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic which of the following do you think have affected the wellbeing of children under five? You can think about your own child or all children under five. Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Parental stress and anxiety about finances
- ☐ Parental stress and anxiety about their own and others' health
- ☐ Parental job insecurity
- ☐ Reduction in household income
- ☐ Reduced access to educational settings
- ☐ Reduced access to leisure facilities (e.g. swimming pools, sports centres, museums)
- ☐ Reduced contact with friends and family
- ☐ Increased time spent at home
- ☐ Limited access to support groups for child (e.g. speech and language groups, baby and toddler groups etc)
- ☐ Limited access to support groups for parents (e.g. parenting classes, mother and baby groups, ante-natal classes etc)
- ☐ There has not been an effect on young children's wellbeing
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

16. Thinking specifically about your child/ren aged five or under, how much do you agree with the following statements?

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
My child/ren have been negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child/ren have shown signs of increased anxiety during the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child/ren asks questions about the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child/ren have not shown any signs of being affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child/ren have benefited from the increased time they have spent with parents and siblings.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child/ren have been negatively affected by not being able to see friends or family.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child/ren's development has been negatively affected by the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
My child/ren's development has been positively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

17. Thinking specifically about your child/ren aged five and under, has your child been unable to attend their usual Early Years setting for any length of time due to restrictions from the Covid-19 pandemic. ✱ *Required*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If you answered yes, please provide details of the length of time that they were unable to attend and the reason for this (e.g. setting was closed during lockdown, anxieties around health risks, child/parent was shielding or self-isolating)

[   ]

18. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as a parent of a child aged 5 or under during the Covid-19 pandemic?

[   ]

Page 10: Further Information

19. Do you have any other ideas or thoughts that you would like to share about young children, wellbeing, play and different backgrounds?

[   ]

5.3 Trainee Survey

Page 3: Basic Information

What gender do you identify as?

- ○ Female
- ○ Male
- ○ Transgender
- ○ Other
- ○ Prefer not to say
- ○ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

What is your ethnicity? ＊ *Required*

- □ 1. English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/ British
- □ 2. Irish
- □ 3. Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- □ 4. Any other White background
- □ 5. White and Black Caribbean
- □ 6. White and Black African
- □ 7. White and Asian
- □ 8. Any other Mixed / Multiple ethnic background
- □ 9. Indian
- □ 10. Pakistani
- □ 11. Bangladeshi
- □ 12. Chinese
- □ 13. Any other Asian background

5 / 28

- □ 14. African
- □ 15. Caribbean
- □ 16. Any other Black / African / Caribbean background
- □ 17. Arab
- □ Prefer not to say
- □ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

Which of the following age brackets do you fall within?

- ○ 18-20yrs
- ○ 21-23yrs
- ○ 24-29yrs
- ○ 30-39yrs
- ○ 40-49yrs
- ○ 50yrs or over
- ○ Prefer not to say

Which course are you currently studying? ＊ *Required*

- ○ BA Primary Education with QTS
- ○ BA Early Childhood Studies
- ○ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

6 / 28

[   ]

Which year of study are you currently in?

- ○ First
- ○ Second
- ○ Third
- ○ Fourth

Which of the following setting types (if any) have you previously worked in or had placements in? Please select all that apply.

- □ Private Day Nursery
- □ Maintained nursery school
- □ Primary School (Maintained or Academy)
- □ Secondary School (Maintained or Academy)
- □ Independent School
- □ Childminder
- □ Community Pre-School or Playgroup
- □ Children's Centre/Sure Start Centre
- □ Special School
- □ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

[   ]

7 / 28

Which year groups have you worked with or had placements with? Please select all that apply. ＊ *Required*

- □ None
- □ Babies (birth to 12 months)
- □ Toddlers (12 months - 3 years)
- □ Pre - School (3-4 years)
- □ Reception
- □ Year One
- □ Year Two
- □ Year Three
- □ Year Four
- □ Year Five
- □ Year Six

How many children aged 18 or under are you a parent or carer of? ＊ *Required*

- ○ None
- ○ One
- ○ Two
- ○ Three
- ○ Four
- ○ Five or More

364

How many of these children are aged five or under?

- ☐ None
- ☐ One
- ☐ Two
- ☐ Three

- ☐ Four or More

If you have children, how old is your **youngest** child?

- ☐ Under 1 year old
- ☐ Between 1 year 1 month and 2 years
- ☐ Between 2 years 1 month and 3 years
- ☐ Between 3 years 1 month and 4 years
- ☐ Between 4 years 1 month and 5 years
- ☐ 5 years 1 month or older

Page 4: Social Inequality

1. Which of the following do you think contribute to whether a child experiences social inequality? (Please select all that apply) ＊ *Required*

- ☐ Household Income
- ☐ Globalisation
- ☐ Household Debt
- ☐ Political attitudes and policies
- ☐ Parents' Occupation and employment status
- ☐ Levels of parental education
- ☐ Technological advances
- ☐ Parents' Childhood experiences
- ☐ National Economic Situation
- ☐ Family situation or history
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

2. Which of the following do you think are affected by social inequality? (Please select all that apply) ＊ *Required*

- ☐ Life expectancy
- ☐ Infant mortality rates
- ☐ Adult Mental health wellness or illness
- ☐ Child Mental health wellness or illness
- ☐ Community crime levels

- ☐ Household Incomes
- ☐ School Leavers' Educational outcomes
- ☐ Adult Physical wellness or illness
- ☐ Child Physical wellness or illness
- ☐ Adult Self image
- ☐ Child Self image
- ☐ Levels of Happiness and satisfaction
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

3. Thinking about your answers to the previous two questions, what does the term "social inequality" mean to you? You can draw upon the ideas already presented in the previous questions or on your personal experience or ideas from your studies if you wish. ＊ *Required*

Page 5: Wellbeing

4. (a) What do you think contributes most to a child's wellbeing in the first 5 years of their life? ＊ *Required*

Please select no more than 5 answer(s).

- ☐ Participation in outdoor play or sport
- ☐ Relationship with parents
- ☐ Relationship with peers
- ☐ Happiness at school/other educational setting
- ☐ Premature birth or low birth weight
- ☐ Presence of a disability or long term condition
- ☐ Mental health concerns
- ☐ Participation in cultural activities
- ☐ Household income
- ☐ Access to funded early years education
- ☐ Home environment (overcrowding, basic facilities, suitability of accommodation
- ☐ etc)
- ☐ Basic needs (nutrition, clothing, shelter etc)
- ☐ Parents education levels
- ☐ Parental involvement in alcohol or substance abuse
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

4. (b) What are your reasons for selecting these options?

Page 6: Promoting Wellbeing

5. In your opinion, how far do you agree with these statements? ＊ *Required*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

Please select at least 3 answer(s).

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
All Early Years settings do a good job of supporting and promoting children's wellbeing.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I have learnt about young children's wellbeing on my course.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel I will be well prepared to support children's wellbeing when I qualify.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

5. (b) What are your reasons for saying this? Please give as much detail as possible. ＊ *Required*

Page 7: Assessing Wellbeing

6. As a trainee practitioner what do you look for when assessing a child's level of wellbeing? Please select all that apply * *Required*

- ☐ Persistence, engagement and involvement in activities
- ☐ Ability to take risks
- ☐ Showing trust and affection towards adults and peers
- ☐ Educational attainment/level of development
- ☐ Physical Appearance
- ☐ Facial Expressions
- ☐ Body movement
- ☐ Energy levels
- ☐ Curiosity and desire to explore new things
- ☐ Interactions with adults
- ☐ Interactions with peers
- ☐ Confidence
- ☐ Ability to regulate emotions
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

7. (a) Which element do you think is the most important when assessing a child's wellbeing? * *Required*

7. (b) Why do you think this? Please give as much detail as you can.

8. What do you think Early Years settings do to support and promote children's wellbeing? * *Required*

- ☐ Offer a rich and stimulating classroom environment.
- ☐ The classroom is updated regularly to reflect the children's interests.
- ☐ They introduce unusual and original activities and resources regularly.
- ☐ They observe children closely to gain feedback on their interests and strengths
- ☐ and weaknesses.
- ☐ They provide stimulating additional support for children who need it.
- ☐ They support children in following their own ideas and interests.
- ☐ They promote a positive emotional climate through positive reinforcement and a
- ☐ happy and caring environment.
- ☐ They help children to explore their feelings, emotions and behaviour .
- ☐ They identify and support those children who need extra wellbeing support.
- ☐ Don't know/Can't remember
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

9. Is there anything you think Early Years settings could do better to promote children's wellbeing? Please give as much detail as you can * *Required*

Page 8: Play

10. What are the most important factors you think affect a child's opportunity to play? Please select up to five options. * *Required*

Please select no more than 5 answer(s).
- ☐ Access to toys and resources
- ☐ Availability of space
- ☐ Access to early years education
- ☐ Parental support
- ☐ Media influences
- ☐ Parent's disposable income
- ☐ Family socio-economic status
- ☐ Parent's level of education
- ☐ Child's cognitive ability
- ☐ Child's Gender
- ☐ Child's Ethnicity
- ☐ Child's language development
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

11. Do you think these elements have had a positive or negative influence on children's play over time? Please indicate on the scale for each element. * *Required*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

Please select at least 5 answer(s).

	Very Negative	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Very Positive	Don't Know
Availability of toys and resources	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Technological advances	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability of outdoor space	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Safety	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to early years education	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

11. b) Why do you think this? Please give as much detail as you can. ✱ *Required*

12. Please rank the following in terms of how much influence you think they have had on children's play changing over time with ONE being the most influential and FIVE being the least influential. ✱ *Required*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

Please select at least 5 answer(s).

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) in any single column.

	1	2	3	4	5
Availability of outdoor spaces	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Safety	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Technological advances	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Access to early years education	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Availability of toys and resources	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

13. What do you think are the most important benefits of having access to high quality play experiences in the first five years of life? Please select up to three options. ✱ *Required*

Please select no more than 3 answer(s).
- ☐ Speech and Language Development
- ☐ Social skills Development
- ☐ Physical Health
- ☐ Mental Health and Wellbeing
- ☐ Developing skills for life-long learning
- ☐ Cognitive Development
- ☐ Development of Creativity and Imagination
- ☐ Physical Development
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

13. b) Why did you choose these benefits. Please give as much detail as you can. ✱ *Required*

Page 9: Covid-19

14. Thinking specifically about experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic which of the following do you think have affected the wellbeing of children aged five and under? You can think about children that you work with, your own children or children five and under more generally. Please select all that apply. ✱ *Required*

- ☐ Parental stress and anxiety about finances
- ☐ Parental stress and anxiety about their own and others' health
- ☐ Parental job insecurity
- ☐ Reduction in household income
- ☐ Reduced access to educational settings
- ☐ Reduced access to leisure facilities (e.g. swimming pools, sports centres, museums)
- ☐ Reduced contact with friends and family
- ☐ Increased time spent at home
- ☐ Limited access to support groups for child (e.g. speech and language groups, baby and toddler groups etc)
- ☐ Limited access to support groups for parents (e.g. parenting classes, mother and baby groups, ante-natal classes etc)
- ☐ There has not been an effect on young children's wellbeing
- ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

15. Thinking specifically about children aged five or under, how much do you agree with the following statements? ✱ *Required*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

Please select at least 8 answer(s).

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Young children have been negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Young children have shown signs of increased anxiety during the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Young children ask questions about the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Young children have benefited from the increased time they have spent with parents and siblings.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Young children have been negatively affected by not being able to see friends or family.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Young children's development has been negatively affected by the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Young children's development has been positively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Children under five have not shown any signs of being affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

16. Do you feel that your **placement experience** has been affected by Covid-19. Please focus on your placements and not on university experience as a whole. ✱ *Required*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Don't Know

16. b) If you answered yes, in what ways do you think your placements have been affected? Please give as much detail as you can.

17. How much do you agree with these statements? ✱ *Required*

Please don't select more than 1 answer(s) per row.

Please select at least 4 answer(s).

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel excited about being able to support children in Early Years or Primary education during the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am looking forward to being able to promote children's wellbeing in educational settings despite the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The thought of working in educational settings during the pandemic makes me feel nervous.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I do not feel that I will be able to make a positive contribution to children's wellbeing due to the Covid-19 pandemic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Why have you selected these options? Please give as much detail as possible. ✱

Page 10: Further Information

18. Do you have any other ideas or thoughts that you would like to share about young children, wellbeing, play and different backgrounds?

5.4 Changes Following Pilot Study

Practitioner Survey

Question Number	Original Question	Change
2	Which of the following do you think are affected by social inequality?	Options changed to separate "adult mental health" and "child mental health" into two different choices rather than one combined choice of "mental health".
2	Which of the following do you think are affected by social inequality?	Options changed to separate "adult physical health" and "child physical health" into two different choices rather than one combined choice of "physical health".
6	As a practitioner what do you look for when assessing a child's wellbeing?	"ability to take risks" and "showing trust and affection to peers and adults" added as options to select
9	What do you think are the most important factors affecting a child's ability to play?	"child's gender", "child's ethnicity" and "parents' disposable income" added as options to select

Trainee Survey

Question Number	Original Question	Change
Basic Information	Which year of study are you in currently?	Addition of "Fourth" as an option to select
2	Which of the following do you think are affected by social inequality?	Options changed to separate "adult mental health" and "child mental health" into two different choices rather than one combined choice of "mental health".
2	Which of the following do you think are affected by social inequality?	Options changed to separate "adult physical health" and "child physical health" into two different choices rather than one combined choice of "physical health".
6	As a trainee practitioner what do you look for when assessing a child's wellbeing?	"ability to take risks" and "showing trust and affection to peers and adults" added as options to select
16b	n/a	Question added to allow trainees to explain how placements have been affected by Covid-19.