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**“Obviously it’s not...hurting anyone, the way you think of
parents...”: Early years practitioner perspectives on engagement
with parents of two-year-old children on funded early education
places.**

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the practices and perspectives of early years practitioners towards parents, in particular those of two-year-old ‘disadvantaged’ children who are in receipt of government-funded places in early years. The research examines how a group of practitioners strive to fulfil the statutory requirement to **‘seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child’s development at home’** (DfE, 2017: 1.10) while offering an intervention created to compensate for perceived deficiencies in home backgrounds. Data were collected for the thesis using a mixed-methods approach (Cohen et al, 2018) over three distinct phases, using a detailed questionnaire with 22 participants, semi-structured interviews with 15 of those participants and a case study approach focusing on one participant. Analysis of the data showed that early years education, which has been utilised as a vehicle to close the ‘attainment gap’ in recent years, has meant an increase in practitioners’ responsibilities (Osgood, 2010) and a shift in the way that practitioners see their role as a key person to children as young as two years of age (Elfer et al, 2012). Practitioners are shown to be heavily influenced by the ‘school-readiness’ agenda (Moss, 2016:231) and the pressures of policy compliance and inspections which, in turn, has influenced the focus of their work with children under three, in that they now see themselves first and foremost as educators. In addition, the accountability that results from the ‘responsibilisation’ of their profession (Done and Murphy, 2018: 142) leads practitioners to discount the important role that parents play in their children’s learning (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Sylva, 2014; Sylva et al, 2004), resulting in lost opportunities to support parents to be ‘co-educators’ (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014: 401) at a time when it may be best received.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother, who sadly passed away a few months before completion. She would have been very proud.

Contents

Chapter	Pages
1: Introduction	1
1.1: Education, parental involvement and ‘disadvantage’	1
1.2: The importance of the early years	5
1.3: Identifying a space for research	10
2: Literature Review	16
2.1: Introduction	16
2.2: The importance of the first three years of a child’s life	17
2.3: The drive towards ‘quality’ early years provision	20
2.4: The complex role of the early years practitioner	23
2.5: The significance of the home learning environment and the problem of the ‘achievement gap’	30
2.6: The rationale for intervention and the free early education and childcare places	35
2.7: The spotlight on parenting	42
2.8: Attitudes towards poverty and how children are affected	45
2.9: Poor children, education and social mobility	48
2.10: Partnerships with parents	51
2.11: Summary	54
3: Methodology	57
3.1: Introduction	57
3.2: Researcher positionality	58
3.3: Research paradigm	62
3.4: Research design	64
3.5: Methods	65
3.6: Participants	70
3.7: Ethical considerations	74
3.8: Data analysis and report writing	78

3.9: Generalizability, reliability, credibility and trustworthiness	83
3.10: Limitations of the study (see also 5.9)	86
3.11: Summary	86
4: Findings, Discussion and Analysis	87
4.1: Research questions and how data were collected	87
4.2: Phase 1 data results, analysis and discussion	88
4.3: Summary and discussion of themes emerging from Phase 1 data	102
4.4: Phase 2 data findings, analysis and discussion	108
4.5: Phase 3 data sample	149
4.6: Summary of data findings	167
5: Conclusion	171
5.1: A model for parent partnership that supports a child's learning	171
5.2: Blame	172
5.3: 'Preparing' for school	173
5.4: Relationships	175
5.5: Confusion	177
5.6: A personal response	180
5.7: The bigger picture	181
5.8: Contribution to knowledge	184
5.9: Limitations of the study and recommendations for further research	186
References	188
Appendices	209

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1: Education, parental involvement and 'disadvantage'

One of the many ways that access to education can improve one's life is the opportunity it provides for social mobility, a consideration that is especially important for children from backgrounds that do not offer many social or financial advantages. There is a popular belief that the education system of developed countries such as Britain is accessible to all and operates within the principles of meritocracy. This belief supposes that all children, including those from families of low socioeconomic status, can acquire the necessary qualifications and attributes to secure well-paid, stable employment in the future through hard work and application to their studies. However, researchers such as Gorard (2010) question this belief, pointing out that access to education is far from equal, in that some children are more- or less-supported by factors outside of the education system itself. These factors help some children to 'achieve' while other children, who may be of equal intellect and ability, struggle to reach their potential despite being offered the same educational curriculum and opportunities for learning.

Studies have shown that one of the most influential factors that affects a child's ability to thrive within the education system resides within his or her family unit (see Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003), as children are influenced and shaped by the attitudes and behaviours of their parents or carers and the 'resources' that can be consistently provided for them. These resources can either help or hinder a child's educational achievement and the effects of these resources, or lack of them, can be seen at the very start of a child's formal schooling:

'...children start school with different levels of resource and quickly display strong patterning by family origin in their revealed attainment.' (Gorard, 2010: 48)

This statement is reinforced by numerous research findings which find a persistent 'achievement gap' at all levels of assessment between children from poorer backgrounds and those who have more advantages (Warren, 2014). These studies mostly use financial background as a measure, by assessing the scores of children who are in receipt of Free

School Meals (FSM) against those who are not. However, the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) research project (Sylva et al, 2004b), which has been influential in establishing what factors make early years provision beneficial for children, found that it is not income but parental practices that make the difference in supporting a child's learning in the earliest years of life. As these researchers found:

‘For all children, the quality of the home learning environment is more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income.’

(Sylva et al, 2004b: ii)

Research into poverty and its effects on children's educational outcomes suggests that education by itself often cannot offer a remedy to a poor start in life. Examples of children from the EPPE research project who were able to surmount their difficulties and succeed ‘against the odds’ (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010: 463) were found to have at least one parent or carer who recognised the importance of certain practices, such as reading to a child or visiting the library. These parents or carers also possessed a ‘recognition of the power that they have in providing these educational experiences.’ (*ibid*: 472). In other words, they understood that educational success for their child was not just the responsibility of professional educators but was a shared responsibility between educators and parents. These parents ensured that they were actively involved with their children's learning at all stages of their schooling and provided a ‘home learning environment’ that supported this learning. As Siraj-Blatchford claimed:

‘the quality of the home learning environment (HLE) was indeed the most significant factor in predicting children's learning outcomes when other background factors were taken into account.’ (*ibid*: 464)

Support of this kind helps to build ‘capital’ for children that they are able to draw upon to assist progression through the education system. However, not all parents have the resources that enable them to be positive or proactive about educational matters, often because of other concerns that take up a lot of time and energy. These concerns may be external (such as financial worries) or internal (such as a lack of confidence, a lack of knowledge about the education system or negative memories of their own educational

experiences). Cooper and Stewart (2013), in their report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, found that depletion of these resources is most often found in situations where money is scarce. Mental health issues such as depression or stress can be exacerbated, if not caused, by living in conditions most often related to poverty, such as poor housing, limited diet and lack of safe, outdoor spaces where children can play. Donkin et al (2014) found that factors like these can cause stress within the family unit and affect the ways in which parents bring up their children, while Fairclough (*in* Lee et al, 2014) found that parents affected by the privations of poverty often showed signs of detachment from their children. Where this is the case, some children may be said to be 'disadvantaged' by their family circumstances, not simply by poverty but where opportunities for parental support for learning may be absent.

'Disadvantaged' can be a contentious label, especially if indiscriminately applied to all who live in 'poverty'. Hall and colleagues (2014) found that the participants in their study suggested that poverty should not be defined by income alone but also include the effects or by-products that living continually on a low income meant for families. These included:

'not having a support network; lack of opportunities and choice; lack of aspiration; not being able to participate or feel included in society; psychological impact of poverty; and duration of the experience.' (*ibid*: 5).

These researchers found that public perception of the causes of poverty had changed over the last decade and, among those they interviewed, there was a 'softening of attitudes' (*ibid*: 13) as people were now more aware of things like the use of food banks, cuts to benefits and in-work poverty caused by low wages and insecure contracts. However, the term 'disadvantaged' is still associated to concepts such as 'vulnerable', 'victims', 'blame' and 'fault' in some people's minds, leading to a deficit view of families and affecting attitudes and practices. Gorski (2010) warns of educators adopting a deficit perspective of children as it may lower expectations of them, while Simpson and colleagues found that the early years practitioners they interviewed viewed child poverty as a result of 'troubled parenting', the fault of the individual, which 'limited practitioners' poverty sensitivity and their promotion of social justice' (2015a: 325).

Although the most common marker of 'disadvantage' within educational circles is a low financial income (measured by eligibility for Free School Meals), it is crucial to acknowledge that financial problems within families do not automatically mean that parents do not care about their children's educational attainment or that 'the dominant trope of poor people being poor *at* parenting' (Dermott and Pomati, 2016: 125) is true. As Sylva (2014) found, aspirations for children were as high among poorer families as those who were better-off, dispelling the myth that has dominated public perception since the work of Bruner in the 1970s, who suggested that low achievement in children from poorer families was due to a lack of ambition and low aspirations. What some parents may lack, says Goodman et al, is the belief that they can make a difference and 'believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to higher educational outcomes' for their children (2011: 13). The actions of poorer parents are also, concluded Dermott and Pomati, subject to comparisons with the resources and activities that more advantaged parents can provide for their children which have become 'accepted as the benchmark against whom others are assessed' within educational circles (2016: 125).

However, Robinson and Harris, discussing their research conducted in the USA, where there are similar issues to England regarding inequality within the educational achievement of social classes, point out how accepted narratives about 'parental involvement' have affected education policies. These researchers question the foregrounding of parental responsibility and stress that the 'common sense' notion of parental involvement in education has been co-opted by educators and policy-makers to suit their own purposes:

'In a system consumed with promoting value-added practices, parents are viewed as a policy lever integral for helping administrators outrun the juggernaut of high-stakes accountability' (2014: 2).

Robinson and Harris point out that the issue of parental involvement is far more complicated than both policy-makers and educators seem to realise, concluding that recommendations for 'wholesale increase in parental involvement in children's education are misguided' (*ibid*: 221). What they recommend instead is that educators work closely with individual families to find what works best for them in supporting their children; in

short, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach is seldom effective, particularly for those who feel disenchanting with or excluded from educational practices (*ibid*: 230).

1.2: The importance of the early years

The foundations for the development of qualities in children that lead to a commitment to learning may be laid early on in a child's life and early childhood may also be a time, says Brooker (2010), when parents are more receptive to help and advice about their role as a supporter of their child's learning. Advice during this period may be instrumental in helping parents to see themselves as co-educators of their children, if they do not already do so. Indeed, it may be the case that, if opportunities to build relationships with parents are missed in the initial stages of a children's educational journey, these relationships may never happen, or they may be tokenistic, temporary and ultimately of little value to the child.

This period of childhood is felt to be of importance as it is the period where brain development, at its most prolific up to the age of three, may be particularly affected by the environment in which the child is living. In simple terms, there are some who say that 'brain architecture' (Shonkoff and Garner, 2012: e232) is being constructed and fixed in response to the environment in which the child is growing. This has led to warnings about the permanent damage that growing up in the stressful conditions, often found concurrent with poverty, can bring (e.g. Hair et al, 2015; Hanson et al, 2013). In turn, this has meant that a spotlight has been trained upon parents and their 'parenting' practices, leading to calls for interventions in the lives of young families affected by poverty. Although many dispute this discourse (e.g. Edwards et al, 2015; MacVarish et al, 2014), arguing that neuro-scientific findings have been very loosely interpreted and even misused in some instances (e.g. brain images showing effects of extreme childhood neglect used in Allen, 2011a, 2011b), some policy-makers have used neuro-scientific 'evidence' as a template for predicting future attitudes, behaviour and outcomes of children. *'The 1001 Critical Days. The Importance of the Conception to Age Two Period'**, a 'cross-party manifesto', stated that:

‘We are missing an opportunity if we don’t prevent problems before they arise. It is vital that a focus on the early years is placed at the heart of the policy making process’ (Durkan et al, 2015:4)

*These authors include conception and gestation in this critical period of a child’s brain development and recommend access to services such as Children’s Centres. These services are now available only to families that have been referred by professionals such as Speech and Language Therapists.

Changes in early years policy

Thus, in recent decades, the importance of the earliest years of a child’s life has taken up a prominent position in both informing and generating social and educational policy. This focus recognises the importance of ‘quality’ early years provision, with attention directed towards the practitioners supporting children’s learning and development in a variety of early years settings. In England, early years practitioners must demonstrate that their work with children adheres to legal requirements laid down in the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage*, first published in 2008 and revised in 2012, 2014 and again in 2017. Adherence to these requirements is assessed through regulatory measures such as internal supervisions and appraisals, as well as advisory visits and Ofsted inspections of the settings in which they work.

The emphasis on the work of early years practitioners has come about through studies such as the EPPE research project mentioned above. This government-funded project, now known as EPPSE (Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary Education), includes data from primary and secondary education which has collected data over many years, providing evidence about what ‘effective’ provision for young children’s learning can mean for that child’s future (Sylva et al, 2014; Taggart et al, 2015). In the initial EPPE reports (Sylva et al, 2004a, 2004b), data from 3,000 children aged 3 to 4 years and from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds were collected and analysed, showing that ‘quality’ early years provision can have a positive, long-term impact upon young children. This positive impact is felt to be especially the case for children growing up in families struggling with low income and its attendant disadvantages (see ‘*Child Poverty in Britain*’: Barnes and Silvester, 2013).

Accordingly, government funding and policies have been directed towards ensuring access to provision for children who are deemed to be disadvantaged.

The early education entitlement

A government initiative that is intended to benefit young children deemed 'disadvantaged' provides funding for a free nursery place for eligible two-year-old children. This 'early education entitlement', which began in 2013, is offered to two-year-olds from homes where the total family income falls below 60% of the current median income in England (currently around £16,000 per annum). These places equate to 570 hours over a year, which many settings offer as 15 hours a week over 38 weeks. Provision must be supplied by an early years setting that is Ofsted-registered and has been judged as at least 'good' in their last Ofsted inspection. Many of the eligible children attend private day care settings, some are in the care of registered childminders, while others have a place in a newly-established base within a school, often attached to an existing school nursery class.

Within these settings, early years practitioners are allocated a small group of children, some of whom might be funded, as their 'Key Person' (Elfer et al, 2012) within the setting, whose role it is to create a secure space for these children to thrive and learn. They plan activities that meet the needs and interests of the children, helping them to make steady progress within the Early Years Foundation Stage 'areas of learning and development' (DfE, 2017: 7). Another of their duties is to act as a liaison between home and the setting in order to support the child's well-being and learning. The Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage states that each key person, must '*seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home*' (DfE, 2017: 1.10).

Early findings

Policy-makers may have supposed that the programme of free education and childcare for 'disadvantaged' two-year-olds would meld seamlessly with this EYFS regulation and thereby help to solve many future social issues. However, little guidance beyond practice with the child within the setting appears to have been given, and the statutory directive to 'support

parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home', although straightforward in its intent may not be easily enacted in many cases. This may especially be the case when one realises that the introduction of the two-year-old 'early education entitlement' comes at a time of austerity measures in England. The Sure Start Children's Centre provision, a promising 'universal' support system for families with young children, has been scaled back so much that their services are now only available to 'referred families with high need' (Smith et al, 2018: 5). This means that the services these centres previously offered such as shared adult: child classes, 'parenting' sessions or toy libraries have all but disappeared; in fact, the only professional that a parent may now regularly come into contact with could be an early years practitioner.

That an early years setting may be now at the frontline of services for families may be problematic if the practitioners working there are either unaware of the importance of family support or unable to provide it to a good standard. Family support may not be high on a setting's list of priorities when practitioners are under pressure to demonstrate children's continual progress, which takes up a great deal of their time and energy. Educational and social researchers can draw upon findings from empirical research such as the longitudinal studies from the Head Start programme in the United States (*see* Schweinhart et al , 2005), set up to work with children and families living in impoverished circumstances in 1965, which showed that, although educational provision of good quality in a child's earliest years can make a difference in countering the negative effects of poverty at the time of delivery, quality early years provision on its own may not provide long-term benefits to a child's educational success unless it is coupled with working with the children's families. As the distinguished psychologist and theorist Urie Bronfenbrenner, who was one of the creators of the Head Start programme, commented nearly fifty years ago:

'...the involvement of the child's family as an active participant is critical to the success of any intervention program. Without such family involvement, any effects of intervention, at least in the cognitive sphere, appear to erode fairly rapidly once the program ends.' (1974: 17)

There is already some sign that Bronfenbrenner's warning may prove to be true. An early impact report on the outcomes of the two-year-old entitlement, which is an intervention

programme designed to close the achievement gap that persists at all levels of educational assessment, appears to show little discernible improvement in the outcomes of those who attended a setting under this programme when it was introduced in 2013 (Teager and McBride, 2018). Using data from the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) from the years 2015/16 and 2016/17, the authors concluded:

‘At a national level, there is little evidence to suggest the introduction of the 2-year-old entitlement has been associated with a substantial increase in the early years educational outcomes of FSM children.’ (Teager and McBride, 2018: 5)

The authors of this report suggest that this finding may be due to slow uptake of places in the first two years of the programme, a situation which has shown a steady increase subsequently. They do not appear to consider that the answer may lie elsewhere, such as a lack of liaison between children’s homes and the early years setting of those that do take advantage of these early education places.

As the influential EPPE/EPPSE project has shown, there are certain things that parents do to create a ‘home learning environment’ that supports the development of those attitudinal and behavioural characteristics that enable children to learn. These activities, which were outlined by the EPPE researchers and include activities such as ‘reading with the child’ and ‘playing with letters and numbers’ (Sylva et al, 2004b:4) do not depend upon socioeconomic status, parental qualifications or the amount of money coming into the home. As Sylva and colleagues found, ‘What parents do is more important than who parents are’ (*ibid*: ii). However, there appears to be some evidence that children from families where there is little money may not be provided with these sorts of activities as consistently or as effectively as their better-off peers (Cooper and Stewart, 2013; Donkin et al, 2014). Whatever the reasons for this, and it is beyond the scope of this study to debate these reasons in detail, this situation may explain why children who are already ‘disadvantaged’ by family circumstances remain so within the education system. This could explain why the achievement gap (Dearden et al, 2010) that is already evident at school-entry often continues to get wider, a situation that may remain unchanged unless steps are taken to include parents in educational matters at the earliest opportunity.

1.3: Identifying a space for research

Pascal and Bertram (2013) found that good early years provision was particularly beneficial to children from disadvantaged homes and even more effective when combined with support for their parents. Early years practitioners possess knowledge about children's learning and are usually more accessible to parents when compared to school staff (Cottle and Alexander, 2014). As such, they are in a prime position to offer support to parents of young children, especially those who may lack confidence or have little understanding of their own role in supporting early learning. Support for parents, however, may take many forms and it is left to each setting to decide whether it is worth the investment of time and energy to go beyond broad-brush strokes to a more individual, targeted provision. There is, according to researchers Goodall and Montgomery, a 'continuum between parental involvement with schools, and parental engagement with children's learning' (2014: 399) and it is the latter which is of most benefit to children ultimately.

Wherever on this continuum a setting might be, it may be the relationships that underpin these activities that will make a difference to the impact that they might have, as Callanan et al suggested (2016). However, as Hornby and Lafaele (2011) found, building relationships is not always easy as there are often tensions within the sphere of what might be called 'parental engagement', which may be exacerbated when parents are not considered by practitioners as easy to deal with or are perceived as a problem. Simpson et al's findings revealed practitioner insensitivity to low-income parents which restricted the way these practitioners interacted with them (2015a).

Practitioners delivering the two-year-old entitlement are not working in a vacuum and may be influenced by narratives which affect the way early childhood is understood and early years provision is utilised. Contributing to these narratives are ideals, such as the model of 'good parenting' and the imperative of 'early intervention' for those whose parents do not meet this ideal. These narratives (which will be outlined in the literature review in the following chapter) co-exist alongside a growing culture of performativity that has pervaded educational practice at all levels, including that provided for the youngest members of society. At the centre of this vortex of narratives stand early years practitioners, the key

persons on whom so much now depends. Not least is the imperative directed at them to 'seek to engage and support' parents in their children's learning. To do this, practitioners are expected to make connections, to patiently build relationships so that they might have a positive impact where it is most needed.

With these matters in mind, I began to hypothesise why an 'intervention' such as the two-year-old education entitlement did not appear to be having the impact that had been intended by the policy initiative and funding. Evidence for this supposition was based initially on an impact report of the pilot programme (Maisey et al, 2013), which showed little difference in outcomes between children who had and had not attended an early years setting on a funded place at the age of two. This finding was confirmed by a report on the impact of the two-year-old entitlement programme, after it had been on offer for a number of years (Teager and McBride, 2018). Notwithstanding the debatable issue of the inherent value of measuring young children's 'progress' with quantifiable test scores (in this case, the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, carried out at the end of a child's Reception year), the results of the EYFSP scores showed that the 'gap' between children who were and were not on Free School Meals (an established measure of relative disadvantage) remained. Given that many children from low-income families had accessed the early education entitlement places and attended early years settings that were at least 'good', this led me to question why the provision on offer did not appear to provide any long-term positive benefits.

There are a number of possible reasons why this lack of positive impact might have arisen. The authors of the report state that there are eligible families who have elected not to access the places available to their young children (Teager and McBride, 2018) and, they suggest, this is the main reason why the EYFSP results of the first cohort were so disappointing. Another reason may be that early years practitioners have not been adequately trained or prepared for an influx of two-year-olds that possibly bring with them additional issues, such as language delay, often associated with poverty (Phair and Davies, 2015). Yet another reason may be the relatively short amount of time in an educational setting (15 hours over 38 weeks) that the two-year-old children on funded places are permitted to attend.

However, my belief, based on past experience of working with parents and children on shared learning programmes, and extensive research (e.g. Desforges and Abouchar, 2003;

Sylva et al, 2004; www.ncb.org.uk, 2018), is that children who are supported to learn in their homes alongside setting provision are those most likely to succeed within the education system. This led me to consider whether early years practitioners are mindful of the role that parents play in supporting their children's learning, and whether they take steps to enable parents to be 'co-educators' (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014: 401) at a time when this might have the greatest impact.

Therefore, deciding on a focus for my research was straightforward: I wanted to find out, firstly, what 'parental engagement' was on offer in a sample of early years settings and how much of it supported children's learning in the home. I particularly wanted to know how practitioners went about building relationships with parents and to what extent they felt that this was important to the work they did with each child. The relationship formed between a parent and a practitioner may support or hinder a child's progress or be so weakly constructed that it would prove to have no impact at all. Where a child is already supported by shared activities with an interested, enthusiastic adult at home, the effects of a poorly-constructed relationship between home and setting would probably not have any long-term implications, regardless of the socioeconomic status of that child's family. However, where a parent is not disposed or equipped to support learning activities while their child is very young, a strong relationship with a person who possesses the knowledge and understanding of how children's learning can best be supported could bring about beneficial changes in practices and attitudes within the home. Given that children in England are expected to start their formal education in the academic year in which they will become five, these supportive relationships that focus on a child's learning could prove too important to be left to chance or treated as an optional extra.

Research questions

The research questions that formed the basis of the study were as follows:

- ✚ How is parental engagement in general perceived and enacted by a group of early years practitioners working with two-year-olds?

- ✚ What awareness do these early years practitioners have about issues which affect their capacity to **'seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home'** (DfE, 2017: 1.10), particularly with parents accessing free early education and childcare for two-year-olds?

These questions, which will be discussed in detail within Chapter 3, encompassed the subject of parental engagement generally and then moved into specifics relating to both the issue (support for children's learning) and the group of parents that were of particular interest for the reasons already discussed. The questions were aimed at early years practitioners who work with two-year-olds, at least some of whom are on government-funded places.

Scope

Issues associated with this topic are wide-ranging and varied; they include discourses such as practitioner status, parenting practices, school readiness and the effects of poverty on children's educational achievement, among others. While it is not within the scope of this thesis to examine each in any great detail, this study was able to show how certain discourses combined to affect the attitudes and behaviour of the practitioners who participated, in a way that could disadvantage many children and families. Discourses can have a pervasive influence, both upon those who accept and reproduce them and those on whom the discourse focuses. In general terms, declarations that form discourses often come from those in comparatively authoritative positions and become accepted as 'right' by many who hear them. These are then repeated and often expanded upon, exerting a direct influence on actions that subsequently take place. In this way, 'discourse' not only describes the world, it also confers value (or not), forms attitude and creates action accordingly. As Rogers describes it, 'language reflects and constructs the social world' (2011: 72). Foucault (1988) theorised that discourses usually emerge from the process of establishing and maintaining power; in other words, a discourse 'helps to define a particular type of person as suitable to have power and authority over others' (Oliver, 2010: 597). Discourses can and often do lead to increased scrutiny and surveillance by the dominant group towards those who are deemed to be outside the parameters of what is felt to be acceptable (Moss et al, 2000). In other cases, they can lead to deficit opinions which undermine expectations and

limit interactions. They are important in this context as constructive relationships between the key adults in a child's life can have a positive influence on his or her learning.

This research study covers only a small sample of the early years workforce in one city in the North West of England and is an exploratory case study of their practice as well as their thoughts and experiences about working with a particular group of parents. While this study and this report attempt to give insights that may prove to be 'relatable' (Bell, 2010: 19) to other practitioners who work with families on low income in England or further afield, it does not claim to provide definitive answers to what is clearly a very complex subject.

Sequence of research study and thesis chapters

The research study was conducted over a period of seven months (January to July) with contributions from a total of 22 participants, who provided data at different points. These participants were all early years practitioners working with two-year-olds and all provided initial data through a questionnaire. Then, 15 of these participants took part in a semi-structured face-to-face interview, with four participants exploring issues more deeply over a 6-session period of 'informal conversational interviews' (Cohen et al, 2018: 510). These different phases of the study were referred to as Phases, One, Two and Three. The thesis includes data from all questionnaires (Phase One) and interviews (Phase Two) but focused solely on one contributor's 'story' at Phase Three. The reasons for this choice and other decisions made regarding methods and methodology are discussed within Chapter 3 of this thesis.

The chapters that follow this Introductory Chapter are:

- Chapter 2- A comprehensive **Literature Review** that aims to show the field within which this study is located and give the reader some understanding of the issues surrounding the role of the early years practitioner. These issues may offer some insights into why practitioners hold certain views which may affect their practices.
- Chapter 3- The **Methodology** chapter which explains what and how certain decisions were made about collection, analysis and reporting of data. Ethical considerations are also discussed within this chapter.

- Chapter 4- The **Findings** chapter, which includes a data summary, analysis and discussion for each separate phase of the research study. These are intended to fit together as a whole to create an over-all 'picture' of the research participants' thoughts and practices in answer to the research questions.
- Chapter 5- The **Conclusions** chapter, where major points are emphasised, recommendations for practice are proposed and suggestions for further research are made.

Originality

This study provides some insights into a 'problem' that many early years practitioners appear to struggle with, that of working in partnership with parents, particularly those who might benefit most from practitioner knowledge about children's learning. While this may not be a universal problem and may be dependent upon circumstances such as training, background, demographics and work-based pressures, my own experience as an advisory teacher and early years inspector led me to conclude that this was an area that needed closer investigation. Compared to research studies conducted on educators working with children aged three and above, research on those working with two-year-olds is relatively sparse. Similarly, there is a huge body of research about 'parental involvement' strategies but not so much on practitioners who are tasked with supporting this involvement, and how constraints upon these practitioners may be affecting their attitudes, beliefs and practices. For this reason, I hope that this study will be of interest to early years practitioners, managers, headteachers, local authority early years advisors as well as early years lecturers in further and higher education establishments.

The next chapter contains a summary of the work of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Systems Theory which highlights the influences that affect individual children's lives. This theory makes reference to the importance of positive relationships between the significant adults that are closest to each child, in order to maximise support for learning and development.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1: Introduction

This chapter reviews literature about relationships between practitioners and parents. It covers a range of discourses that help to explain where and how early years practitioners position themselves and the factors that may shape their attitudes towards their work with parents, particularly those living in poverty. Practitioners seem unaware of how influential their work with these families could be, according to Pascal and Bertram (2013), especially in helping to close the 'achievement gap' between poorer children and their better-off peers (Dearden, Sibieta and Sylva, 2010). Brooker (2002) claims that practitioners can even be guilty of perpetuating this gap, albeit unwittingly, by differentiating access to educational opportunities between children from well-supported homes and those who are not. This happens, Brooker found, when practitioners work more closely with confident, proactive parents who are enthusiastic and 'engaged', which results in the marginalisation of 'uninvolved' families still further (*ibid*: 172).

The following sections of this chapter discuss influences of prevailing discourses that press upon the early years domain in general and early years practitioners in particular. These influences come from different sources; policies, regulatory guidance, the mainstream media, social media, setting practices and even 'common-sense' attitudes (Gorski, 2012: 304). They combine to provide a narrative that is compelling but unfair because it is claimed that parents who are financially poor are 'poor at parenting' (Dermott and Pomati, 2016: 125), leading to a belief that intervention is needed in their children's lives. According to Bronfenbrenner's *Bioecological Model of Development*, (Appendix 1) which was refined over many years (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 209-294; Hayes et al, 2017), these influences, that mostly exist within a child's exosystem or macrosystem (distal effects), exert strong pressure upon the relationships that are formed between the important adults within the child's mesosystem (proximal effects), and can have a direct effect upon the child's opportunities for learning.

The discourses which will be examined in more detail during this chapter include: the importance of a child's first three years of life, which has transformed early years pedagogy in recent years; the imperative to provide 'quality' early years provision, especially for 'disadvantaged' children; the multi-faceted and increasingly complex role of the early years practitioner; the significance of a child's home learning environment and the assumption that poorer parents do little to help their children learn; the rationale for early intervention programmes such as the funded places provided for eligible two-year-olds; the surveillance of parenting and how middle-class behaviours are mirrored within the education system; attitudes towards poverty that label poor parents as deficient; poor children, education and how social mobility may be increasingly difficult to achieve; and, ultimately, a short discussion about parental and practitioner partnerships in general, and those with parents on low incomes in particular.

This chapter concludes with a summary of how some of these discourses appear to work together to create a negative bias against poorer parents (Simpson et al, 2015a), which, I suggest, may be one reason why many practitioners have difficulty in creating relationships with them, ultimately to the detriment of children. Bias, which is often unconscious and, therefore, unacknowledged, will lead to behaviours of avoidance (Elfer, 2012) This leads onto a short overview of the purpose of my research study and why it may be imperative to get practitioners to recognise their own biases and the impact these may have on their practice.

2.2: The importance of the first three years of a child's life

'Developmental neuroscience ... has established that the quality of children's earliest environments is critical to the strength of their developing brains' architecture. This in turn determines children's future capacity to learn, their physical and mental health and their ability to regulate emotions.'

(Diamond and Whittington, 2015: 11)

Many of those working within the early years sector have taken note of evidence from 'neuroscience' about the significance of the first three years of a child's life; these findings

have reinforced a discourse around not only their own practice but also the critical importance of parenting practices. Neurological research over the past thirty years has demonstrated the significance of early years experiences (see Finnegan: Save the Children, 2016), with warnings about the devastating and long-lasting impact that a negative environment can have on children's developing brains. Some researchers suggest that growing up in poverty can impact upon the long-term 'architecture' of the brain (Fox et al, 2010: 28), causing damage that affects the development of many skills and traits such as social competence (Wilkinson, 2016) and 'study, language and executive function' (Farah et al, 2006: 167). While other researchers, such as Wastell and White, recommend caution, saying that information has been oversimplified and misinterpreted, educationalists and policy-makers have drawn upon 'evidence' which suggests that neglect, harsh interactions and other stress-inducing practices can cause an infant's brain to be 'hard-wired' (Durkan et al, 2015:2) in a certain way. Advances in Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) technology have apparently been able to show how specific areas of the developing brain, such as those relating to language development or executive functioning, are severely underdeveloped in cases of extreme neglect or abuse (Hanson et al, 2013). However, researchers such as Macvarish et al (2014) feel that attribution of conditions that constitute 'neglect', for example, appear to have been interpreted rather loosely in some circles and unfairly associated with low-SES parental practices. This has led, say Edwards et al, to policy changes and early intervention programmes that show a 'preoccupation with the nurturing practices of poor families' (2015: 9).

Some studies have found that living in poverty causes parental stress (e.g. Hanson et al, 2013; Newman et al, 2015); stress often results in practice that 'interferes with normal, healthy, brain development' according to Wilkinson, and negatively affects all areas of a child's physical and mental health (2016: 190). Jensen explains that this is due to the child's brain developing 'adverse adaptive responses' to unpredictable adult behaviour which, he argues, is often a feature of poorer households (2009: 8). These responses, he goes on to say, cause cognitive, social and behavioural problems in the child in later life. It is such problems, influenced most strongly by early adverse experiences, that researchers such as Stewart and Waldfogel (2017) say can be prevented by investing public funding into early years services for childcare provision and parenting support from professionals.

Conti and Heckman suggest that children growing up in 'disadvantaged environments' are on a course that will almost certainly mean a lifetime of difficulty for them, unless 'interventions to alter...trajectories' of these children's lives are put in place (2012:3). Images of comparative brain sizes have been utilised to promote and inform policies of family intervention (Allen, 2011a, 2011b), placing parenting firmly as the main driver in the 'architecture' of their offspring's brain (Shonkoff and Bales, 2013:23), particularly in the earliest years of a child's life. Some studies suggest that parents on lower incomes are less likely than better-off families to provide an environment that is supportive of children's learning and development. Hair et al found that 'parental nurturance' was lower in poorer households and there was 'less cognitive stimulation' for the children in these homes; it was subsequently found that the brains of children who had grown up in impoverished homes had 'systemic structural differences' (2015:3) to children from better-off backgrounds. An earlier paper by Anda et al, which the authors described as a 'convergence of evidence from neurobiology and epidemiology' (2006: 174) stated:

'Early environmental deprivation inhibits hippocampal neurogenesis; conversely, neurogenesis is enhanced by enriched environment' (*ibid*: 175)

It was this report that prompted Allen, in one of two government-commissioned reports, to advocate provision of 'high quality early learning and care' (2011a: 89) for children from low-income families outside of their home. These reports acknowledged the importance of professionals working directly with parents, possibly at that time envisaged as parental access to activities, information and resources such as those provided by Sure Start Local Programmes (House of Commons, 2010) that were then fully available. However, funding cuts for these services has led in more recent years to young children from poorer homes attending early years settings in the care of professional practitioners as an intervention measure.

According to Lowe et al, policies based exclusively on scientific evidence may help to perpetuate a deficit notion of children as 'potential victim(s) of poor parenting' (2015: 207), fuelling a belief that parental behaviour is solely responsible for the way a child develops while ignoring wider societal factors outside of parental control. Although the focus upon

early experiences has benefitted the early years sector in the form of greater funding and recognition of its importance 'after decades of neglect' (Moss, 2014: 346), it may have caused more entrenched bias against those least able to contest it, families living in poverty, warn Edwards et al (2015). In addition, this heightened interest has increased responsibility for practitioners supporting these children, bringing tighter regulation of the early years sector and a continuous drive for 'quality' provision, in a bid to close gaps in the achievement of children from different backgrounds.

2.3: The drive towards 'quality' early years provision

Early years practitioners have absorbed many changes since the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* was first introduced over ten years ago, not least the unceasing drive to improve the 'quality' of their practice and provision. This drive has been linked directly to a returns-based model, using the language of economics to drive home its message (www.heckmanequation.org). For example, the authors of the '*Doing Better for Families*' report reported that 'the rate of return on public investment in human capital is higher when it takes place in early childhood' (OECD, 2011: 2). Although Moss (2014) questions this perspective, describing the focus on 'quality' as a means of governmental control, the influential Effective Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education study (EPPSE, Sylva et al, 2014) evaluated the impact of early years education on children's later achievements and aspirations also used an 'investment: returns' rationale to argue the case for high quality provision. In one of a range of reports, the authors used supplementary information from the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) to predict returns of an investment into early years education in monetary value. The IFS provided an estimate of 'future financial returns' in the form of projected earnings for those children who had attended funded early education (Sylva et al, 2014: 17). The researchers, although advising caution in making absolute predictions, concluded that attendance at a good pre-school showed benefits up to and beyond GCSE age. This led to confident speculation that the initial funding would be recouped and increased, through access to higher education and eventual employment.

This cost-benefit approach has been subject to critique. Georgeson et al noted that ‘understandings of what constitutes quality for two-year-olds are complex and still emerging’ (2014: 6), while some question the very idea that ‘quality’ can even be measured in a ‘fixed and objective’ way (Tanner et al, 2006: 4). Nevertheless, Ofsted was granted the authority to be the ‘sole arbiter of quality’ (DfE, 2014) in September 2014, and inspections of early years provision were brought in line with other educational establishments through a ‘common inspection framework’ a year later (Ofsted, 2015: 4). (This has recently been updated: see *Early Years Inspection Handbook for Ofsted Registered Provision*, 2019). As a precaution, funded two-year-old places can only be offered by settings that have obtained at least a ‘good’ rating at their last Ofsted inspection. This has served to change the face of early years provision, with less emphasis on ‘care’ and more on the ‘education’ of children (DfE, 2014) with an accompanying increase in ‘data-based governance and accountability regimes’ (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016a:1). Despite the fact that young children often need more ‘care’ than ‘education’ (Hännikäinen, 2015; Page and Elfer, 2013), Ofsted’s remit has evolved to escalate the ‘school readiness’ agenda (Whitebread and Bingham, 2012 *for tactyc.org.uk*; PACEY, 2013), which Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury fear ‘has the potential to undermine the foundations for children’s personal development and learning’ (2016b: 119). Nevertheless, early years settings have had to adapt quickly, or else run the risk of failed inspections (Mathers and Smees, 2014) and loss of funding.

It is worth noting that, in any setting, a few years may have elapsed since an inspection took place due to the inspection cycles (Ofsted, 2015). Also, it is felt that inspections largely provide ‘an overall snapshot of the effectiveness of a setting’ (Mathers and Smees, 2014: 16) and inspectors do not have the capacity for an in-depth evaluation of staff practices, activities or resources on offer. Factors such as low pay (Gambaro, 2012) and high staff turnover (Totenhagen et al, 2015), can influence the quality of a setting over time. Callanan et al (2017) argue that a change of manager or senior staff can destabilize a setting within months as different leadership styles can confuse and alienate staff, rendering previous positive inspection judgements unreliable. Another issue is that better settings are often based in areas of higher socio-economic advantage where funded children are not likely to reside. Inability to travel long distances and high demand leading to long waiting lists make the more ‘outstanding’ settings unavailable to those most in need of them, according to

Mathers and Smees (2014). While these authors found that school-based provision for three- and four-year-olds was comparable across areas of low- or high- deprivation, private and voluntary settings were often quite different unless led by staff with higher qualifications. However, Simon et al (2015) conducted an evaluation study using 'large-scale UK data-sets' (page 2) of patterns of childcare usage along with the size and characteristics of the childcare workforce and found that 'positive steps have been made in increasing the quality of childcare' (page 7).

Gauging the quality of a setting is complex: many could cite environmental features such as an impressive outdoor area (Early Childhood Forum, 2016), while others may focus on the range of resources on offer, layout of rooms or provision for children with special educational needs (SEND Code of Practice, 2014). Audit tools such as the *Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scales* and the *Infant Toddler Rating Scales* (Harms et al, 2014) are often used by settings as guides for evaluating the effectiveness of the environment and resources, as well as staff interactions with children. Children's well-being and levels of involvement can be similarly assessed; the *Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being Scale* (Siraj et al, 2015) and the well-established *Leuven Scales for Well-being and Involvement* (Laevers, 2005) may be used by settings that are seeking to improve the 'quality' of their provision. It must be noted that, despite their popularity, audit tools such as these are in themselves problematic, in that they assume that quality is a fixed entity that can be assessed by experts, regardless of 'context and diversity' (Moss, 2016:10). They are also tools that constrain early years practice to be policy compliant.

Alongside improvements in environment and resources, knowledgeable staff are needed to demonstrate a drive towards continuous improvement of a setting. The research underpinning the original *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education* (EPPE) report found that:

'Settings that have staff with higher qualifications have higher quality scores and their children make more progress.' (Sylva et al, 2004: ii)

The characteristics of staff and their 'pedagogical practices' (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2017: 11) make a difference; higher qualifications have been repeatedly recognised as a major factor in increased quality of provision (Mathers et al, 2014; Nutbrown, 2012; Ofsted, 2015).

Melhuish and Gardiner's *Study of Early Education and Development* (SEED) added that quality for two-year-olds was superior when adult: child ratios were better than the statutory requirements (2017), suggesting that adults who are less stressed can give children more positive attention and time. Tickell's review of the Early Years Foundation Stage for the government (2011) and Nutbrown's comprehensive, independent review (2012) of early years practice noted that practitioners need to be well-trained, competent and skilful in supporting children's learning and development. They also need to be a confident 'role model' to both the child and the parent, according to Cottle and Alexander (2014: 640), especially where certain issues may affect a child's learning and development. Indeed, Roberts (2017) asserts that a commitment to building strong and supportive relationships with parents is an undisputed factor in settings that hope to make a positive difference in the lives of vulnerable children. This drive for quality as a feature of effective provision has, therefore, turned the spotlight on to the role and responsibilities of early years practitioners that may suggest a wider view of the caregiver role is needed.

2.4: The complex role of the early years practitioner

Pascal and Bertram, in their detailed analysis of factors which make a difference in 'countering socio-economic disadvantage' found that provision was particularly effective when combined with 'parenting support' (2013: 24). While they may have envisaged that 'parenting support' would be supplied by services such as Sure Start Children's Centres, it is increasingly the case that more responsibility has fallen on the shoulders of practitioners. This may be especially important in the development of building relationships with parents of children who are disadvantaged by poverty. According to Hayes et al, Bronfenbrenner's theory stresses the central role of relationships:

'...strong, positive relationships may have the power to overcome the impacts of the most damaging environments...Regarding early education, this means that we need to support the development of positive relationships between adults...' (2017:30)

Mathers et al recommend that 'family preferences, priorities and cultural differences' are sought and adhered to within planning for individual children's learning, that opportunities should be created for 'regular two-way communication' with parents and that practitioners

need to be alert and responsive to signs of parental stress (2014: 22). Callanan et al's research into the quality of early education found that practitioners needed to be 'effective' in their communication with the range of parents that they might come across (2017: 72) and should be able to offer 'personalised advice and guidance' to support children's home learning activities (*ibid*). However, Cottle and Alexander (2014) point out that building the necessary relationships to enable this to happen effectively takes a great deal of time and expertise and may first require practitioners to challenge long-held beliefs and practices.

Mathers et al (2014) stress that all practitioners should be able to build supportive relationships with parents and offer advice about children's learning. However, they acknowledge that higher qualifications are strongly linked to better practice, as recommended by Nutbrown in her review of qualifications and practice (2012). Early years practitioners, however, range from those with a full teaching qualification, known as Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), those with Early Years' Teacher Status (EYTS) or Early Years' Professional Status (EYPS) and those with NVQs, diplomas or degrees ranging from Level 1 through to Level 6, 7 or 8 (www.gov.uk/guidance/early-years-qualifications-finder), an important consideration with regard to achieving quality according to Moss (2014). An additional tension arises when higher qualifications do not automatically result in improved status or pay for the graduate practitioner; for those who have worked hard for a degree or Early Years Teacher Status, Moss (2014) points out that it does not offer parity with those with QTS. Graduates with QTS receive a higher rate of pay consistent with teachers' hours and conditions, and, though proficient in delivering the early years curriculum, may have had little, if any, training in child development up to age three (e.g. www.edgehill.ac.uk/courses/early-years-education-with-qts/). Teachers with QTS are more likely to work directly with children in nursery or reception classes; although many now oversee provision for two-year-old children in schools, they are unlikely to work with this age group on a daily basis.

Practitioners with other childhood-related qualifications will have studied child development (e.g. NCTL, 2013a, 2013b), and most working directly with two-year-old children will hold childcare qualifications at Level 3, according to Georgeson et al (2015); their research found that most setting managers agreed that 'graduate-led provision was not considered a priority for this age group' (page 7). Georgeson et al (2015) go on to claim

that this is often because of the adult: child ratios prescribed by the EYFS Statutory Framework (DfE, 2017). Practitioners with a QTS or EYTS qualification are allowed sole supervision of 13 children aged 3 and above, but ratios for two-year-olds remain at 1:4, regardless of the practitioners' qualification levels (*ibid*). The practice of placing better-qualified staff with older children, therefore, may make economic sense to setting owners or managers, especially within non-maintained settings where money is often an issue. It may also reflect a belief that learning is more important for children over three years. McDowall Clark and Baylis (2012) found in their study that, within the early years sector, there was a belief that working with the over-threes was 'perceived as more important' (230) and a highly-qualified practitioner would be 'wasted' on younger children (235).

The role of the practitioner has become increasingly professionalised within the last two decades, particularly since the introduction of the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) statutory guidance in 2008 (Faulkner and Coates, 2013). Although other curricula documents had been available before (e.g. *Birth to Three Matters: Sure Start*, 2003), it was the EYFS Statutory Framework that set national standards of care and education for children under the age of 5, all of which must be stringently adhered to by all Ofsted-registered providers (DfE, 2008; revised 2012; 2014b; 2017). While government reports suggest that practice has improved across the early years sector (e.g. Ofsted, 2017; Tickell, 2011), planning for and monitoring assessment outcomes have increased the documentary workload. Settings are judged against these standards with an emphasis on how children's learning is supported, assessed and tracked (Callanan et al, 2017). This has led to a focus on extensive record-keeping that shows how children's individual learning and development is planned for and when 'targets' are achieved (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016a: 127). However, in their study of early years practitioners and their experience of the EYFS, Brooker and colleagues (2010) found that many struggled with the 'burden of paperwork' that monitoring and assessment created (79).

Each member of staff in an early years setting is allocated a group of children to whom they are the 'key person' (Elfer, Goldschmeid and Selleck, 2012). The role of the key person is multi-faceted, responsible for meeting the 'individual needs' of each child within their small group (EYFS, 2017:22). Part of the key person's role is to encourage parents to support the learning and development of their children, and those working with two-year-olds are

tasked with doing one of the two statutory assessments that must take place during the EYFS phase of education. This assessment, most often known as the *Progress Check at Age Two*, requires that practitioners assess a child's progress against development guidance in the three 'prime areas' of learning and development: communication and language (known as CL), physical development (PD) and personal, social and emotional development (PSED) (Early Education, 2012: 4). Despite an intention of bringing this check in line with the health visitor review, also carried out at age two, the 'Integrated Review', which envisaged a joint review carried out by early years practitioners and health professionals (Blades et al, 2014), has not materialised in this format in many local authorities (e.g. <http://fsd.liverpool.gov.uk>), unless a child is found to be 'below' developmental norms (and so requires support outside of the nursery setting). As an example, Oxfordshire local authority stipulates that health visitors should do a Health and Development Review between the ages of 24 to 30 months, and practitioners should carry out the EYFS Progress Check between the ages of 30-36 months (e.g. <https://www2.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/content/2-year-old-reviews>), maintaining 'good communication' between services, another responsibility that must be absorbed into the growing list of practitioner duties.

When carrying out the Progress Check, the guidance document advises that practitioners, in their role as key person, state their plans to support the children in their group as well as making suggestions to parents for activities that would support the child's learning at home (NCB, 2012). In some cases, this might be the only time that these suggestions are made, although Goodall and Montgomery claim that encouraging ongoing parental 'engagement' in children's learning is the most beneficial for all concerned (2014: 399). However, in their study of early years practitioners working with funded two-year-olds, Georgeson and colleagues (2015) found that limited time and resources, as well as lack of training in the particular needs of families, prevented this happening in many cases.

According to *Development Matters*, the non-statutory practice guidance document most used by practitioners, key persons must document the learning trajectory of each child and take steps to intervene if there appears to be a 'risk of delay' (Early Education, 2012: 3). This may take the form of in-house additional support, for example, by providing extra language-

based activities to a child not meeting developmental norms in Communication and Language (DfE, 2017). As suggested by the authors of *Ready to Read* (Save the Children, 2015), ongoing surveillance of progress and monitoring of the situation is crucial, as is liaison with parents and other professionals such as speech and language therapists. However, individual speech and language therapy, should it be necessary, may not be readily available. In Liverpool, for example, the Speech and Language Therapy team now offers single training sessions for practitioners and parents (www.fsd.liverpool.gov.uk) suggesting that a child's key person is now the person most responsible for the implementation of language support activities. This means that, as well as the technical skills needed to support children with language delays or difficulties, each key person requires a high level of sensitivity and diplomacy when dealing with parents, especially if attempting to persuade a parent to adopt or discard certain practices. Clarke and Younas' research into parenting programmes (2017) found that the success of interventions that aimed to influence or change parental behaviour is 'heavily dependent on the approach that is adopted' (2017: 31), recommending that practitioners delivering any sort of parenting programme be 'well-trained, highly skilled (and) accredited' (*ibid*: 37).

Training for early years qualifications includes standards of proficiency for working with parents (DfE, 2011; NCTL *EYE*, 2013a NCTL *EYTS*, 2013b;). However, competency-based standards require a student to show only a small selection of concrete 'evidence' for each sub-section, so sending a single letter home or making a display might well meet the requirement for accreditation to 'encourage parents and/or carers to take an active role in the child's play, learning and development' (NCTL, 2013a: 6.3). However, Hughes and Read state clearly that 'communication involves entering a relationship' (2012:14) which, as Mac Naughton and Hughes point out, needs 'time and space' to develop (2011: viii).

Working with all parents can be a difficult task; it demands a high degree of professionalism but also, according to Farstad Peck et al (2015), a deep level of warmth and empathy. Roberts (2017) found that, although many of the practitioners that she interviewed felt that these characteristics were desirable, empathy was 'not well understood' and, therefore, should be 'an essential part' of further and higher education childhood-studies programmes (page 5). Discussions during training sessions may give that much-needed 'time and space' (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2011: viii) to encourage practitioners to look at wider issues

surrounding their work and increase their understanding of how these issues impact upon families.

MacNaughton and Hughes consider that additional responsibilities and expectations make practitioners 'time-poor...and inadequately prepared for relationships with parents' (2011: xi). These authors insist that practitioners need practical support to enable them to reflect on and discuss wider issues rather than those simply related to their day-to-day practice with children. However, although Melhuish and Gardiner (2017) found that higher staff: child ratios are better for both staff and children generally, according to Callanan and colleagues (2017), most setting managers can usually afford to employ only enough staff to cover the statutory requirements, which makes staff training very difficult. Few settings can afford to pay to cover for staff taking part in 'professional development' activities, even though ongoing training would be a desirable and ultimately beneficial investment (Maude et al, 2011). These researchers suggest that 'early childhood educators are not well prepared to serve the growing diversity of families and children' but, while managers and owners may recognise this, settings are now struggling with the added burden of accommodating the 'free' 30-hours offered to working parents of children aged 3 and above, with many private settings struggling to stay afloat (see Marcus article in *Nursery World*, 2016). In addition, Phair and Davies (2015) found that, even when staff are able to attend training sessions, they are often not given an opportunity to feed back to colleagues in any meaningful way that may impact upon setting practice.

In many settings, therefore, despite a concerted effort to upskill the childcare workforce which has contributed to raising standards, the issue of liaising with a diverse range of parents appears to have been largely left to chance; it is often a 'superficial part of initial training or ongoing professional development' (Hughes and Read, 2012: xv). As a result, social issues like childhood poverty, according to McNamara and McNicholl (2016), and its impact upon the development and learning of the children in their care, remains ignored and unresolved. Hughes and Read found that 'it is getting more and more difficult to make and sustain good working relationships' with parents (2012: 9) as practitioners appear to be unaware of the importance of providing a supportive role to families in need. While this may be due to a need for prioritising increased setting demands rather than reluctance, Hayes et

al point out, 'the onus is on the settings to be proactive on these issues' (2017: 150). In addition, as Gorski notes, a common tendency towards 'poverty stereotyping' in general may affect the willingness and persistence of practitioners to engage with poorer parents (2012: 312).

Even if a setting or an individual practitioner has some understanding of the wider issues, dealing with them may demand more than is reasonable; they may be willing to help but lack training or experience. Armstrong (2017) points out that low income families are more likely to be dealing with issues such as poor housing, ill health or antisocial neighbourhoods but, where in the past practitioners were able to signpost parents to other services, cuts to services such as Children's Centres, as outlined by Smith et al (2018), have meant that practitioners are now on the front line of professional support for families. Georgeson and colleagues noted that 'the two-year-old offer asks a lot from early years practitioners' (2015: 4) due to the expertise required to adequately support the difficult circumstances that many families find themselves dealing with. It is not unusual for practitioners to attend, for example, multi-disciplinary 'Team Around the Family' consultations (ipc@brookes.ac.uk, 2012), SEND meetings (e.g. lcis@liverpool.gov.uk) and CAF/EHAT conferences (www.liverpool.gov.uk) to support children and families with additional learning or social support needs.

These additional responsibilities are part of the 'professionalisation' of practitioners' roles that Osgood (2010: 120) has observed over the past decade. However, this professionalism may be the very thing that works against relationship-building as, according to Brooker (2002), it distances practitioners still further from families that may feel threatened or undermined by the educational discourses and practices that are now commonly used in early years settings. In addition, negative attitudes towards parents living on low incomes still exist, not least the theory that children with issues are 'disadvantaged' due to parental deficits as Simpson et al (2015a) found when interviewing early years practitioners about poverty. These views, whether they result in pity or scorn, may be influenced by a range of sources, and soon become, according to Gorski, 'common-sense' opinion (2012: 304). Gorski notes that, once these opinions take hold, observations and experiences of even a small number of examples will confirm the stereotype. This gives credence to another popular

notion; that some parents are simply ‘hard to reach’ (Boag-Munroe and Evangelou, 2012: 209), a common complaint (or excuse) for why ‘partnerships’ fail.

This section has described how attempts at partnership-building, driven by a principle that accepts the ‘evidence’ from the discourse of effective early provision, stresses the importance of parental ‘engagement with children’s learning’ (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014: 399). Hunt and colleagues discuss how practitioners can have a huge impact upon parental practices, as long as they take the time to build relationships and understand that ‘there may need to be a shift of focus in acknowledgement of the importance of parents in children’s learning’ (2011: 27). This would also require practitioners to realise the importance of a child’s home learning environment and take steps to influence learning in the home as well as in the setting. In addition, there are systemic problems in policy and practice that mitigate against practitioners in addressing the ‘achievement gap’.

2.5: The significance of the home learning environment and the problem of the ‘achievement gap’

Early years practitioners, although aware of their own role in supporting each child’s learning, are urged to be supportive of a child’s home learning activities; the *Home Matters* publication, for example, gathers together information from charitable organisations that have ‘championed the home learning environment (HLE) for many years’ (see FYT et al at www.ncb.org.uk, 2018: 2). The authors recognise that, although support for the home learning of children is a statutory requirement, there are variations in both the quality and quantity of support across settings.

A substantial body of research indicates that successful educational attainment starts in the home and this support may be multi-faceted (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). According to Brooker (2002), however, practitioners are inclined to believe that these home practices should replicate activities that take place in the setting or be dismissed as unimportant. Another strong belief that has gathered momentum, driven by reports such as Ofsted’s *Bold Beginnings* (2017) and *Teaching and Play* (2015), is that the earlier the process of ‘teaching’ young children is started, the better. Websites and books urge young parents to increase

their offspring's capacity to learn and fulfil their potential (e.g. www.scholastic.com; Wall, 2010) and help their child to 'grow brighter, healthier and happier' (Walsh, 2012: cover). Often citing 'evidence' from the research on brain development and accepting as immutable fact that the most crucial period of this development is 'first 1001 days' of a child's life (Durkan et al, 2015: 5), parents are urged to 'stimulate' their child's growing intellect (Arndt et al, 2013: 33). Suggested activities often mean an investment of significant amounts of time and commitment and, in some cases, money (Stirrup et al, 2016).

These activities are also, some claim, firmly rooted in middle-class parenting practices (Duncan et al, 2014; Harris and Goodall, 2008) and build a child's 'cultural capital' (Webb et al, 2002) that will help with their subsequent educational journeys. Some say that this obligation has become a defining characteristic of what is considered to be 'good parenting' (Axford et al, 2015: 50), with little acknowledgement of the differences that financial, cultural and social resources make. Thus, the acquisition of cultural capital within the home is reproduced to ensure that financially better-off families maintain their advantages throughout the education system and into the next generation (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Tranter, 2012).

However, being interested in your child's learning is not solely an attribute of middle-class parents, as Sime and Sheridan (2014) found in their study of parents and children in areas of high social and economic deprivation in Scotland. These researchers found that poorer parents were 'keen to engage in activities with their children' (2014: 327) but were aware that factors such as their own 'limited resources' (mostly referring to their lack of qualifications or skills) sometimes hampered their efforts (*ibid*) and sapped their confidence. Nevertheless, the authors of *The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project* (Sylva et al, 2004a, 2004b) stated that 'what parents do is more important than who parents are' (*ibid*: ii), and the activities which the authors found to be most helpful to a young child's learning are:

'...reading with the child, teaching songs and nursery rhymes, painting and drawing, playing with letters and numbers, visiting the library, teaching the alphabet and numbers, taking children on visits and creating regular opportunities for them to play with their friends at home...' (Sylva et al, 2004a: v)

These activities, although apparently neither expensive nor difficult for most adults to provide, do require a certain level of sustained adult engagement to be effective as learning opportunities for children. They require an active, interested adult, presupposing a warm and mutually-agreeable relationship between the parent/caregiver and child, according to the authors of the recently-published *Home Matters: making the most of the home learning environment* (www.ncb.org.uk). In addition to a lack of resources for 'enrichment experiences' (Sylva, 2014: 682), Russell, Harris and Gockel found, in their extensive interviews with parents bringing up children 'in poverty', that many were 'close to the margins of defeat' (2008: 83), some admitting that they found parenting a daily struggle. This would naturally affect the necessary 'attunement' that parents and children acquire by spending 'ten to twenty hours a week of harmonious, reciprocal interactions' (Jensen, 2009: 15). Attachment studies have shown that children born into poor households may have parents who are depressed, anxious or detached in some way (Fairclough in Lee (ed), 2014) and this often leads to calls for interventions that increase the parent-child attachment bond (Moullin et al, 2014). However, while this intention may be seen as admirable, there are those who argue no amount of attachment training or tuition in parenting skills or 'styles' will completely cancel out the 'disadvantages of poverty' (www.esrc.ukri.org/) and, until this issue is directly addressed, we will continue to see children starting their educational journey at very different levels (e.g. Marsh et al, 2017; www.jrf.org.uk/solve-uk-poverty).

The well-documented 'achievement gap' can be seen in the earliest stages of a child's life (Dearden, Sibieta and Sylva, 2010; Feinstein, 2003; Strand, 2014; Warren, 2013), with children from lower-income homes already behind their more advantaged peers at the end of their reception year, according to DfE National Statistics of the *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile* results (Wilshaw, 2014). If one subscribes to the idea that the home background makes the biggest difference to a child's educational success, it follows in some people's minds that the 'achievement gap' is caused by parents who are failing to provide 'cognitively stimulating' activities, such as 'parental reading and teaching' for their children, (Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2010: 18). In fact, The Sutton Trust's *Premium Policies* report found that 'two-thirds of teachers see poor parental engagement as a key factor' in children's lack of attainment (2012:4). However, Cooper and Stewart's evaluation of

research into the effects of poverty on children's outcomes found that 'money itself makes a difference to children's outcomes' concluding that extra money for families living below the poverty line would go some way to reducing the gap that persists between the achievement of higher- and lower-income children (2013:70). Sylva (2014) concurs, citing evidence from studies in the United States that showed poverty had a more negative impact on the home learning environment than factors such as ethnicity or culture.

However, the 'bad parenting' discourse remains and is tied up with classist prejudices, according to Jones, (2016), who found that poverty and ineffectual parenting are often paired together in people's minds. One influential study on children's language development conducted in the USA has become a springboard for many intervention programmes (e.g. The Hanen Centre, *You Make the Difference* (Manolson, 1995); ICAN, *Working with Parents Toolkit*; National Literacy Trust, *Early Words Together*) where lower-income parents, thought to be less articulate and nurturing in their use of language (Hart and Risley, 1995), are urged to adopt middle-class habits of explaining and reasoning when addressing their children, interactions which are generally described as more 'positive' (Hedd Jones et al, 2015: 54). This negative, deficit image of working-class parental failure permeates much of the literature about the gap in learning and achievement that continues to persist, leading to many government policies and interventions to support the disadvantaged child growing up in poverty (Gorski, 2012; McKinney, 2014). Indeed, early years settings and schools have a specific remit to support children from poorer homes but, as McNamara and McNicholl point out:

'Simplistic therapies that offer schools the possibility of reducing the outward manifestations of 'the gap' incline teachers to a deficit pathology, rather than generating understanding of the structural factors within society that cause poverty and the insidious mechanisms through which it operates.' (2016: 375)

As Gorski (2012) points out, interventions are based upon the assumption that the achievement gap exists 'within, rather than as pressing upon, poor and low-income families' (302), an assumption which, Donkin et al (2014) suggest, is ignorant of the inequalities that differences in income perpetuate. Carey, in contrast, questions the widely-accepted

narrative around the 'achievement gap' for a different reason, stating that, along with parents, it 'misplaces blame on teachers, students and schools for broader social and cultural issues' (2013: 443). Sylva (2014) suggests that some education reforms are themselves part of the problem, claiming that they may even inadvertently perpetuate the achievement gap, because they benefit better-off and poorer children alike, ensuring that the gap between these children remains. Certainly, the funding for free nursery education for all 3- and 4-year-olds is questioned by some (<https://www.pre-school.org.uk/>); if all children benefit from early education, then it follows that this universality of nursery places will do nothing to reduce the achievement gap. In fact, the increased hours on offer to children of working parents (interestingly, children whose parents earn above the 60% median income in the UK so, one might say, already 'advantaged' by comparison) may only serve to increase the differences in children's starting points within the education system (www.early-education.org.uk/).

To summarise, practitioners are under pressure to affect a child's learning environment positively, particularly when that child is growing up in disadvantaged circumstances. However, practitioners may not understand how they are uniquely placed to have a positive impact upon a child's home learning environment as well as within the setting. Some literature cited in this section shows how home practices may help to perpetuate the gap between the achievement of children from families which have different incomes. If practitioners lack understanding of wider issues such as this, as well as the advantage that middle-class children have due to similarities of home and school practices, they may be tempted to disregard home activities that do not fit the 'educational' template. Practitioners working with two-year-olds on the free education and childcare places also need to be aware that this programme is an intervention, which requires work with parents as well as with children to achieve maximum benefit. However, Phair and Davis found that the professionals that they interviewed had 'limited' understanding of why the funded places existed (2015: 1464) and what their role with families might entail.

2.6: The rationale for early intervention and the free education and childcare places

‘The evidence indicates further that the involvement of the child's family as an active participant is critical to the success of any intervention program. Without such family involvement, any effects of intervention, at least in the cognitive sphere, appear to erode fairly rapidly once the program ends.’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1974: 17)

Faulkner and Coates, in their summary of changes in the childcare sector over the previous two decades, say that government policies and initiatives have ‘improved the accessibility and quality’ of early education and care services, particularly for families living in disadvantaged circumstances (2013: 244). Among these services have been intervention programmes which focus on parents of young children to assist the development of ‘good quality parenting skills... to enable children to fulfil their potential’ (DfE and DoH, 2011: 78). There are detractors, such as Gillies, who says that parental interventions are ‘founded on the notion that individual parenting practices can be held accountable for children’s future life chances’ (*in* Wagg and Pilcher, 2014: 205) while other factors, such as living in persistent poverty, are ignored. In addition, Robinson and Harris (2014) question the whole premise of interventions and suggest that parental ‘involvement’ (as many schools or settings enact it) makes little significant impact upon children’s ultimate academic achievement. These authors note, however, that the notion of ‘parental involvement as a solution for low achievement’ has been seized upon by policy-makers and educators alike (*ibid*: 17). Indeed, as Gorski (2008) points out, lack of ‘involvement’ from parents is often cited by teachers as the reason why children come to school unprepared or unwilling to learn; this belief comes, according to MacNamara and McNicholl, ‘from a lack of critical perspective on context’ and is often ‘deeply ingrained and resistant to change’ (2016: 375).

However, if viewed solely from an economic perspective, the rationale behind early intervention programmes may be considered sound. Sir Michael Wilshaw, for example, using estimates from Sutton Trust research, argues that:

‘there would be cumulative losses of up to £1.3 trillion in GDP over the next 40 years if the country fails to bring the educational outcomes of children from poorer homes up to the UK average’ (2014: 3).

Therefore, the imperative for skilful mediation to be invested into a situation where problems are likely to result if preventative measures are not taken (eurochild, 2012) becomes harder to dispute. Without intervention, we are warned, a 'tsunami of dysfunction', is almost inevitable, according to ex-politician Allen (2011b:3), an avid supporter of intercession into social issues. Allen's influential reports, *Early Intervention: The Next Steps* (2011a) and *Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings* (2011b) warn that the cost to society will continue to be prohibitive if action is not taken to halt the reproduction of 'dysfunctional behaviours and lifestyles' that some parents, he suggests, often 'transmit... to their children' (2011a: 5). He also recommends that it would be less costly to intervene 'early' (when families had children under the age of 3); in other words, 'prevention is more cost-effective than remediation' as Conti and Heckmann's research into the financial implications around children's well-being has found (2012: 3).

In addition, Whittaker claims that family interventions are necessary to 'strengthen communities' (2014:250), stating that research from many disciplines confirms that interventions with 'mothers and infants' are especially important (251). Lee and colleagues note that ideology like this, however, reinforces the belief that parents, especially mothers, are 'wholly responsible for their children's outcomes' (2014: 31). When lax or disinterested parenting is considered as the root cause of social ills such as crime, alcohol dependency, drug misuse, ill-health and unemployment, it is a logical step to suggest that guidance which aims to change 'unhelpful' practices is the answer, according to Whittaker (2014: 254), in a paper written for health visitors working with parents of young children. In this paper, Whittaker discusses parenting styles and evaluates the advantages of some group-based training courses to support the behaviours associated with the most 'effective' style of parenting a child (*ibid*: 251). Special merit is reserved for 'gold standard', empirically-tested intervention programmes such as those evaluated by DfE-commissioned researchers (Lindsay et al, 2011), namely *Triple P* (www.triplep.net); *Strengthening Families Programme* (www.strengtheningfamiliesprogram.org); *Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities* (www.peabody.org) and *The Incredible Years* (www.incredibleyears.com). These programmes were shown in this evaluative study to be effective in changing parental methods of interacting with their children, thus resulting in 'significant improvements' in

conduct issues (*ibid*: 124/5). Lindsay and colleagues went on to optimistically claim that ‘positive outcomes in children’s behaviour and well-being would be expected to impact positively on educational attainment’ (2011: 9), though they were unable to provide evidence within their report that this was indeed the case.

Based on positive evaluations of larger-scale intervention programmes from the US such as Head Start, High/Scope and the Abecedarian Programme (Campbell et al, 2012; US Dept of Health and Human Services , 2010; Schweinhart and Weikhart, 1997), parenting advice and guidance proliferated in the UK through Sure Start Local Programmes (later renamed Children’s Centres) from the late 1990s, with a particular remit of reducing child poverty (House of Commons, 2010). These centres offered a range of family-based training but it was, according to Gaheer and Paull’s evaluation study in 2016, only specialist-trained parent/family support activities that showed any evidence of improving ‘Early Home Learning Environments’ for children (2016: 12). Sammons et al’s impact studies (2015) had also shown that parents who took part in centre-based activities with their children showed improved early home learning environments, but no significant improvements were found in cognitive attainments for those children whose parents had attended adult-based centre activities without their children in attendance. Unfortunately, as Gaheer and Paull’s costings (2016) show, children’s centre services were also expensive to run, which eventually resulted in their being ‘among the highest profile victims of austerity measures’ (www.independent.co.uk: 12.1.16). The situation now is that many children’s centres have been closed or merged, making their services too ‘thinly spread’ according to Smith et al (2018:5) with those that are left commissioned to work only with the most extremely-disadvantaged families with multiple issues.

Early intervention, on the face of it, may appear to have evolved from a desire to encourage and support those with fewer resources; for example, the Institute of Public Care urges local authorities to take responsibility for allocating funds and services to families ‘who would benefit from additional support’ (2012: 2). This, they argue, could be provided at different levels ranging from ‘universal’ for those families with no additional needs, through to ‘statutory or specialist services’ for families found to have complex needs (*ibid*). However, the OECD’s *Doing Better for Families* report (2011) suggests that, while universal systems

ensure that all children benefit 'without stigma' (p.3), targeted provision is more efficient and less costly, although Payler and Wood's recommendations for early years policy state that targeted services 'stigmatise families and reduce attendance' (2014: 13). The OECD report also points out that:

'Countries that do well on family outcomes devote about half of public spending on family benefits to in-kind services, including quality early childhood care and education services, so it makes sense to sustain this investment' (2011: 2).

However, there are those who say that the very idea of intervening in the practices of a certain group of people (usually, as it turns out, parents living in poverty) helps to perpetuate the 'othering' of these groups (McKinney 2014: 210). As Goodall (2013) points out, intervention programmes usually advocate practices most often used and validated by more advantaged parents, holding these practices up as the norm. Brooker (2002) noted in her year-long research of an early years setting, that practitioners had firm ideas as to how parents should support children, and, whether unconsciously or not, favoured parental practices which most closely resembled those of the setting. Because of attitudes like this, Cronin et al assert that the practice of intervention:

'is essentially a moralistic discourse locating the experience of poverty and disadvantage as an individual failure. This conception, therefore, ... coerces those socially excluded into becoming more responsible and independent citizens, focusing on individual behaviour change.' (2017:52)

Free 'early education and childcare'

Simpson and colleagues assert that early education and childcare (ECEC) in general has been co-opted as 'a key policy lever ... to intervene and regulate the lives of parents and children in poverty' (2015b: 96). The free early education and childcare offer for 'disadvantaged' two-year-olds is clearly an intervention programme, albeit of a different nature to parenting interventions such as '*Triple P*' or '*The Incredible Years*'. Based on 'growing evidence' of the 'strong influence' that families can have upon a child's early development and how 'high

quality early education can counter the potential negative effects' of certain family environments, (Gibb et al, 2011: 11), a pilot programme of free childcare for targeted families was introduced in 2006. This was followed by funding offered to '20% of the country's most disadvantaged two-year-olds' in 2013, which was then increased to include 40% of these children in September 2014. Happening in parallel to the reduction of children's centre services, the funded places for two-year-olds has emerged as another solution to the problems that poverty can bring, both to the individuals concerned and to society as a whole. In its earliest days Pascal and Bertram, in their research report for Ofsted in 2013, warned that the success of early education programmes for children aged 0-2, depended upon them being 'offered in conjunction with parenting support' (p.24). However, six years later, it is unclear where this support is coming from.

Nevertheless, provision of these funded places is presented as an 'opportunity' (Gibb et al, 2011: 20) for children; local authority web pages typically describe how children will benefit from playing and socialising, enjoying a wide range of activities (e.g. www.ehd.liverpool.gov.uk). On these pages, nursery access is portrayed as a facility that is clearly desirable for all children, possibly influenced by the findings from the EPPE report that stated:

'Pre-school experience, compared to none, enhances all-round development in children. Duration of attendance (in months) is important; an earlier start (under age 3 years) is related to better intellectual development.' (2004: ii)

Eligibility for these places is not confined to those children who come from lower-income families (below 60% of the median family income in England); children who are 'Looked-After' (in local authority care), those with Special Educational Needs, as well as children who may be on the 'at risk' register, are all considered to meet the criteria for 'disadvantage'. However, because children from low-income families take up most of the places, there may be a danger of 'pathologizing' (Osei-Kofi, 2005: 367) children living in poverty alongside those with physical and mental disabilities, and victims of social dysfunction and parental abuse. Pathologizing in this way can lead to the perpetuation of a deficit perspective of poor families which, as Gorski warns, can 'frame the least powerful communities as deficient'

(2010:7). If this deficit perspective is coupled with an attitude that poverty is caused by parental failings, as found by Simpson et al (2015a), it is no surprise if those working with their children believe that the practices of poorer parents should fit in with what they consider to be 'good' parenting as defined, argued Gewirtz (2001), by the ideal of middle-class family values.

That government invests capital in this project suggests that, in their view, it is preferable to spend money on letting professionals take over the business of supplementing parenting that is considered inadequate, at least in educational matters. The money that has been invested in to this project could, of course, have been paid directly to parents to do with as they wished; according to Cooper and Stewart's evaluation of intervention work in the US (2013), school attainment improved when parents were given additional income, as they overwhelmingly chose to spend the extra money on their children. These authors also found that increased income mattered most in early childhood (*ibid*). Other studies concurred, finding that extra money paid to families on low incomes was generally spent on better food, clothes or activities for their children (Clarke and Younas, 2017; Evans and Popova, 2016; Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2010).

Instead of giving extra money to poorer parents, however, the two-year-old offer has become established, and settings are given funding to cover the cost of accommodating eligible children. McKinney questions the long-term benefit of these places based as they are on a 'deficit' view of those affected by poverty, while existing alongside severely-depleted welfare payments to families (2014: 212). If the goal is to close the attainment gap, the two-year-old funded places pilot did not show any improvement in the EYFS Profile scores of those who had attended them, according to Maisey et al's review in 2013, though lessons were learned about the quality of the provision on offer and improvements subsequently made. The programme got off to an unexpectedly slow start in 2013 and, although the number of eligible children accessing the places increased from 58% in 2015 to 72% in 2018, the number decreased to 68% in 2019 (DfE, 2019), meaning that over 30% of 'disadvantaged' two-year-olds are not accessing the programme. It is not known how many of these children come from the lowest end of the income bracket nor is there much information as to why certain parents do not make use of these free places (National Audit Office, 2016). Simon and colleagues, in their evaluation of childcare arrangements in Britain,

used information from the Family Resources Survey (2010-11) which found that some families preferred to use 'informal' childcare arrangements, such as grandparents or other family members (2015:4), although this was not necessarily those on low incomes. In addition, Teager and McBride reported that take-up of the funded places varied around the country, being particularly low for eligible children from 'non-White British backgrounds' and where English is not the first language. This, they suggested, could mean that 'cultural and linguistic differences could be a barrier to accessing childcare' for some families (2018:10).

There is an assumption within the early intervention narrative that low-income parents are more likely to offer a 'lower quality home environment' (Watamura et al, 2011: 48) and should send their child to nursery provision to compensate for this failure. Indeed, the prevailing discourse that a good early years education is essential for preparing 'disadvantaged' children for the demands of school, endorsed by Ofsted reports such as *Teaching and Play* (www.ofsted.gov.uk) and *Bold Beginnings* (www.gov.uk/ofsted, 2017), is one of the underpinning arguments for funded places. Children from lower-income families are at a 'greater risk of starting school at a disadvantage' stated Stewart and Waldfogel (2017: 15) in their report commissioned by the Sutton Trust, an organisation that supports social mobility. Previously the authors of *Teaching and Play* had reported that:

'...in our most deprived communities ... Less than half of all disadvantaged children had the skills needed to secure a positive start to school; around one quarter still struggled to speak, listen or interact socially to support better learning overall.'
(www.ofsted.gov.uk, 2015: 4)

Statements such as this, while not explicitly attributing the lack of 'skills' deemed necessary for a child's 'positive start' within the education system to parental deficiencies, reinforces a belief that certain children need a substitute environment away from their home, where these skills will be taught. The implicit message is that practitioners are experts and that parents (especially those who are felt to be lacking in some way) can learn from their 'professionalism' (Osgood, 2010: 119) about the best ways to raise their children. In this way, once a child starts at an establishment that sees its main purpose as preparing a child for formal schooling, practitioners and some parents may be placed in a hierarchy which precludes an equitable relationship. For example, Brooker (2010) noted that there is an

expectation from practitioners that parents should 'engage' with them, available and willing to take up all invitations and suggestions with gratitude. If parents do not become involved in suggested activities, say Cottle and Alexander (2014), they run the risk of being labelled 'hard to reach'. These researchers found that practitioners interpreted a lack of involvement as apathy or 'reluctance to support their child's learning' in some cases (p.653). Although Goodhall and Vorhaus (2010) found that busy, professional parents are also often unable to 'engage' in nursery activities, apathy was mainly attributed to the poorer parents in Cottle and Alexander's study, although some practitioners conceded that 'working class parents may lack the confidence to engage in pedagogical discussions' with them (2014: 653).

It is clear, then, that the intervention of the funded places for two-year-olds is a political minefield. Within this minefield, practitioners are called upon to 'intervene' and, to some degree, expected to take the place of a parent who is judged to be lacking. These parents are most likely to be those on lower incomes; assumptions are made, based on little evidence, that the parent lacks the 'parenting skills' to properly support their child's learning. Intense scrutiny of parental ability to bring up their child in ways that fit with the accepted notion of what is 'good' and 'right' leads to deficit judgements that damage much-needed relationships between the important adults in the child's life.

2.7: The spotlight on parenting

'In today's world parents find themselves at the mercy of a society which imposes pressures and priorities ...which downgrade the role of parents and the functions of parenthood...' (Bronfenbrenner, 1973: xiii-xiv)

Never has there been such an intense scrutiny of parenting practices, according to Lee et al, (2014). These authors argue that 'parenting' is a social construct that specifies a right way to bring up your child and carries with it an 'explicit focus on the parent and their behaviour' (page 7). This focus, they warn, leads to the problematisation of certain behaviours that do not conform to accepted norms of 'good' parenting (page 92) and may also contain deterministic assumptions about the future of the children brought up by parents who are not considered 'good'. The parenting industry has burgeoned since the 1970s, spawning a plethora of advice, guidance and strategies from self-styled experts about desirable 'skills'

that parents must acquire and utilise (page 7). If parents are unaware of, or choose to ignore expert advice, they may even be considered as a 'risk' to their children, (Lee et al., 2014: 44). This surveillance is widespread and continuous; social and mainstream media providing immediate access to information via the internet means that every action can be scrutinised and judged with instant, widespread approbation or criticism (e.g. see article at www.liverpoolecho.co.uk).

Being found wanting in public opinion about their parenting 'style' (examples found in Dearden et al, 2011: 20) is often the case for parents who already find themselves as 'othered', on the margins of societal approval and inclusive privilege, which Lowe et al found were largely women from 'lower social economic classes' (2015: 25). The over-application of 'attribution theory' (Malle, 2011) means that parents living in poverty are often assumed to be feckless, lazy and deficient in the ability to raise their children in the way that the 'good parents' of Allen and Duncan Smith's cross-party report (2008), for example, are willing and able to do. The persistent trope of the deficit parent, a dominant feature of right-wing ideology, ascribes low aspirations and a lack of interest in the education of their children to poorer parents. This reinforces the narrative that it is solely parental failings that result in children doing badly in the education system and into adulthood, according to some social commentators and policy advisors (e.g. Field, 2010) which strengthens the 'parental involvement' ideal. The dominant narrative decrees that it is no longer acceptable that parents are just 'good enough' (as described by Bettelheim thirty years ago), fulfilling their role as providers and nurturers. Lee et al (2014) argue that parents are expected to adhere to a strict template of parenting 'skills' as outlined by advisors and self-styled 'experts'.

Research into 'parenting styles', based on the work of Baumrind (1971), suggests that a certain approach leads to better outcomes for children. It is generally accepted that an 'authoritative' style of parenting is most 'effective' (DfE and DoH report, 2011: 5), as it puts children's needs before parental needs or desires. Lee et al call this 'intensive parenting' and describe how the mother, in particular, is expected to absorb and apply these 'child-centered' behaviours (2014: 26) into her daily interactions with her children. It is, perhaps, no surprise that the approved model of parenting mirrors the childrearing practices most often attributed to 'middle-class' parents says Goodall (2013: 146), thus placing differences

between parents of higher or lower socio-economic status into categories of right or wrong, good or bad (Dermott and Pomati, 2016). Donkin and colleagues, however, found that the enactment of 'positive parenting' practices were directly linked to income (2014) and suggested that two paradigms, the Family Stress Model and the Investment Model, could explain why lower income parents sometimes struggle with providing a 'stimulating home environment' (page 83) for their children. As Lee and colleagues found, 'material necessity has a direct impact on one's cultural orientation towards parenting' (2014: 33).

The way a parent raises a child may not be influenced by income alone but also includes the impact of the parental level of education and parents' own academic successes; Sylva et al found that 'students whose parents had degrees earned 141 total GCSE points more than students whose parents had no qualifications at all' (2014: 22). The educational level of the mother especially seems to be a determining factor in the quality and quantity of support for learning offered to children in their earliest years (see Baker et al, 2014; Erola et al, 2015; Hartas, 2015). Some studies have found that a higher maternal level of education usually leads to practices that are recognised as more 'positive' (Hedd Jones et al, 2014; Kiernan and Mensah, 2011). This can act as a protective factor against the risk of academic failure associated with financial disadvantage as, in addition to more 'cognitively stimulating' (Waldfogel and Washbrook, 2010: 18) activities offered to their children outside of school, those who have had more educational success may be more articulate and less intimidated by the professionals with whom they have contact within their child's educational journey (Duncan et al, 2014) and can utilise this to their children's advantage.

In summary, as Sylva et al (2014) found, poorer children do not do as well as their better-off classmates at all levels of educational provision, while Bottero testifies that it is 'harder for a privileged child to fail than for a disadvantaged child to succeed' (*in* Sveinsson, 2010: 9). Given that already-advantaged children are further advantaged by the familiar practices of the school system, the stark facts of how poorer families often remain impoverished through factors outside of their control makes public (and practitioner) disapproval all the more difficult to comprehend (Armstrong, 2017; Marsh et al, 2017).

2.8: Attitudes towards poverty and how children are affected

According to Simpson et al's research, when they interviewed a group of early years practitioners about child poverty, a large majority

'defined and constructed child poverty as a problem, but one which is inevitable and a "normal" condition within competitive societies when individual parents and children lack motivation and the "right" values' (2015a: 329).

Hall et al found, in their investigation into public attitudes towards poverty, that the previous censure applied to those on benefits was softening slightly, concluding that, in times of national economic austerity which impacts upon all but the most wealthy, people are more understanding of those living in straitened circumstances (Hall et, 2014), which was a similar finding to researchers Barnes and Silvester (2013). However, other researchers have found that the opposite is true; Armstrong found that statistics from The National Centre for Social Research study in 2010 showed that harsher views about benefits and unemployment were increasing, possibly influenced, Armstrong suggested, 'by the way politicians and the British media have demonised benefit claimants for many years' (2017: 11).

While it is clear that 'absolute' poverty has largely been eradicated in the UK, Townsend (1979) suggested that the issue which divides society so drastically is the chasm between the wealthy and those on the lowest incomes; he theorised that it was this 'relative poverty' that had the most damaging effects on families. Townsend proposed that poverty in this instance was a social exclusion issue, as poorer families had access to resources 'so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns and activities' (1979: 31). The Joseph Rowntree Foundation define poverty in their research as being 'when someone's resources (especially material resources) are not sufficient for their needs (especially material needs)' (Hall et al, 2014: 17). This definition led to debate amongst some of their interviewees who queried whether owning a TV or a computer was essential, and Armstrong commented that many

people when interviewed suggested that such items might be more a 'want' than a 'need' (2017: 11).

Poverty researchers Barnes and Silvester (2013) found that families can move in and out of poverty over time but at least 12% of children (at that time) lived in persistent, and long-term poverty. Persistently poor families have to deal with the stressors that accompany financial hardship, which often leave them feeling overwhelmed (Russell, Harris and Gockel, 2008). Unfortunately, the belief that poorer parents have inferior parenting skills (Dermott and Pomati, 2016) has taken hold in public imagination mostly due to biased media accounts of events of an unfortunate few (Jones, 2016), whose outrageous and often despicable actions are taken to represent the characteristics of most families living in impoverished circumstances. These stories are pored over, discussed with indignation among friends and colleagues, none more so than those which affect children (e.g. www.dailymail.co.uk). Stories of child neglect, squalid homes, alcohol excess, benefit fraud, drug abuse and criminal activity may add fuel to the animosity that many feel towards those living in poverty; even those who work directly with these families may be influenced by these accounts as Simpson et al (2015a) found when interviewing early years practitioners working directly with children from low-income families. Thus, a culture of blame is created and is aimed towards those who are powerless to argue back, feeding into the narrative of the 'disadvantaged' child (DfE, 2014a). Some social commentators, like Gorski (2010), and Marsh (2017) feel that this is a deliberate ploy by those in power, whose control of the media perpetuates its prominence. This, Armstrong (2017) argues, is to ensure that changes to welfare benefits and cuts to other services upon which poorer people rely will be met with indifference or even approval in some circles (www.jrf.org.uk). Special public disapproval is often reserved for families on benefits, with particular 'scorn' as Gorski (2010) describes it, being directed towards single mothers, as this group is most affected by straitened circumstances, 'the poorest of the poor' say Russell et al (2008: 85). Recent cuts in child tax benefits as described by Armstrong (2017), may reflect an opinion that one should not expect the 'taxpayer' (Allen, 2011a: 17) to pay towards the upkeep of more than two children. Many people who have little sympathy for those less fortunate are also convinced that many people on benefits are 'fiddling' the system or are 'scroungers' who have no intention of ever working (Armstrong, 2017: 11). These beliefs are validated by

television programmes such as 'Benefits Street' (www.channel4.com) and newspaper or online articles that focus on a small minority of chaotic or criminal families (e.g. *The Great British Chav Off* see www.newshopper.co.uk where people can vote between a 'criminal family' or 'an 11-kids benefits couple' as the people they would least like to have living next door).

Poverty alone is not considered to be the only factor that affects parental behaviours negatively and disadvantages children (Barnes and Silvester, 2013); Katz and colleagues found 'no clear-cut causal link between poverty and parenting' (2007; 37). They suggested that 'factors such as family structure, neighbourhood and social support interact with parents' temperaments, beliefs and their own experiences of parenting' (*ibid*), providing a possible explanation why some children from low income families succeed 'against the odds' (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010: 463). Maternal warmth, parental responsiveness and high aspirations have been found to be buffers against many of the destructive effects that living in impoverished circumstances can bring, say Clarke and Younas (2017). However, Cooper and Stewart (2013) found that persistent long-term poverty is often associated with physical and mental health issues as lifestyle 'choices' such as poor diet, smoking, stress and debt may contribute to feelings of helplessness, apathy or even aggression, disrupting the attachment process that Bowlby (1988) theorised was such an important feature in a young child's development. The stress that comes with continually living on a low income can, according to some scientific studies, alter brain structure (see Buss et al, 2012; Katsnelson, 2015) and it is important to consider that the brains of some parents could have been affected by their own impoverished childhood. Cryan and Dinan described how 'early neurodevelopment is a time when stressors can produce long-lasting changes that significantly increase the risk of mental health problems in adulthood' (2013: 788). Newman et al suggest that 'hostile' or 'helpless' modes of parenting may actually reflect the mothers' own attachment experience (2015: 5). Caution is advised here, as this could be a few steps away from believing that some people should be dissuaded from becoming parents without some parenting guidance and, as such, needs careful interpretation. Dearden et al went as far as suggesting that there may be some wisdom in 'encouraging poorer mothers to delay the birth of their first child' as this 'might narrow some of the socio-economic gap in early cognitive development' (2010: 34).

The 'family stress model' (Stewart and Waldfogel, 2017: 32) describes how poverty-related environmental factors, such as poor housing, overcrowding and noise, can all add to a person's feeling of loss of control. Indeed, neighbourhoods where many low-income families are forced to live imbue a disadvantage that can affect growing children's learning, according to Sylva and colleagues' EPPSE study (2014). Many of those working among poorer families can testify to some that are chaotic, with parents that show volatile characteristics and aggressive behaviours that are often replicated in their children (see Bobbit and Gershoff, 2016; Hart et al, 2007). The expectation that all families on low incomes share these characteristics, however, continues to lead to a negative, 'deficit' perspective in some circles, not least among educators (Robinson and Harris, 2014). This is not a popular theory amongst many researchers, as it carries undertones of the now-discredited work of Oscar Lewis whose 'culture of poverty' theory (1969) talked of an 'underclass' that was almost feral, resistant to any attempts to support or control. While there is no dispute that dysfunctional families exist (in all social classes), social researchers point out that pathologizing poverty and 'blaming parents for their lack of sufficient income to provide adequately for their children' (Russell et al, 2008: 93) conveniently turns the spotlight away from the hidden systemic injustices that protect the wealthy while demonizing the poor (Edwards et al, 2015).

2.9: Poor children, education and social mobility

Another injustice is the debatable notion that educating parents or education in general will provide a route out of poverty. Hartas states that 'to approach parenting as a key social mobility strategy is problematic' (2015: 22) and this is especially the case for poorer families. Before starting statutory education, children from poorer homes are often found to lag behind their wealthier peers in the 'skills' or 'areas of development' that will be assessed from as early as two years of age (DfE, 2017). This disparity continues throughout their schooling and is evidenced through statutory assessment outcomes at all levels of compulsory education (*ibid*). However, although there are many who disagree with the practice of standardised tests being used as the only measure of 'success' (e.g.

www.education.com), particularly when administered so early in a child's life, they have become the accepted marker of achievement within educational circles.

Although many are quick to lay the blame for failure within the education system on parenting practices, there are others who point out that the education system itself is at fault, despite being 'set up purportedly to prevent' inequality (Gorard, 2010: 48). Brooker (2002) says that inequality remains within the education system as it is based on middle-class procedures that serve to alienate certain children while favouring others, a belief that formed the basis of much of Bourdieu's work (e.g. 1977). Whitebread et al note that early years practitioners have largely accepted the 'schoolification' of pedagogy (2013: 9), regardless of where they may have started themselves. The language that teachers use, the routines, rules and expectations are often different to those found in less well-off homes, and children who are unfamiliar with these standards may be viewed as deficient, 'falling short of a more complicated and richly endowed "real" child' (Steedman, 1986:127). This deficit viewpoint leads not only to personal beliefs but may also affect practices. Bradbury found in her study of early years teacher assessments, that teachers were persuaded to 'deflate' results for children from lower socio-economic status backgrounds due to pressures to show 'value-added' further up the school (2011: 655) and to fit in with educational expectations.

That children start formal education at such an early age in England is another hotly-contested area for debate between policy-makers and early education experts (see www.toomuchtoosoon.org). Payler and Wood's recommendations (2014) for early years policy include extending play-based EYFS to age six which would particularly help children who have less stimulating home environments. In the early years classrooms, say opponents such as Whitebread and Bingham (2012), children are subjected to formal 'learning' that prevents playful exploration, and the early starting age, with its accompanying emphasis on 'baseline' testing, particularly affects children already disadvantaged by a lack of opportunities for similar learning activities at home (Jarvis, 2017). This may well be one of the main contributory factors of the notorious gap that trails the poor throughout their school lives. This push for earlier school starting dates is part of a pursuit to compete within the global economy of the future (see Allen, 2011b); Gorard describes how school provision

has been extended in an attempt for ever-greater 'attainment', debating whether schools have 'lost sight of a major equitable purpose' of education as a result (2010: 59).

Education has long been heralded in the UK as a vehicle for social mobility and, in recent years, there has been a particular focus on early education policy 'which identifies preschool services as key to remediating the negative effects of child poverty on children and families' (Simpson, 2013:85). Social mobility policy is based on the belief that those who have the ability and who work hard will eventually be rewarded with qualifications that will get them a good career and its accompanying advantages. This ideal is premised on the acceptance that Britain is a meritocracy and that those possessing the right amount of intelligence and industry will rise to the top regardless of their start in life. However, when held up against the prism of poverty and its damaging effects, this principle of egalitarianism does not carry much weight, according to Marsh et al (2017). The facts remain that wealthier children, regardless of their 'intelligence' or how hard they work, still occupy better schools, universities and get superior jobs, as outlined in the SMCPC's *Elitist Britain* report (2014).

There are deliberate efforts to uphold the principle of education as a route out of poverty and the funded two-year-places is, perhaps, the start of attempts to level the educational playing field (see Gibb et al, 2011). These free places are subsequently followed by a 'pupil premium' attached to every eligible child throughout their schooling, meant to be used by schools to provide additional resources or activities for children from low-income homes. However, for all of these additional bonuses, Gorard muses that, 'schools simply reflect the local population in their intakes, while being relatively ineffective in addressing the stratification of attainment that results' (2010: 59). In other words, the positive effects of a 'good education' are often outweighed by the negative outcomes associated with poverty, which might lead one to believe that it is pointless for practitioners to even try to influence a child's learning at home. However, if done properly, the opposite is true; Brooker declares that a good relationship between parents and practitioners is 'crucial to the child's current and continuing wellbeing, and to their future development and learning' (2010: 182). The fact that early education has not yet made a significant impact upon reducing the stubborn achievement gap may be due to the paucity of these beneficial partnerships in many settings, possibly because of defeatist attitudes about parental deficiencies. The way to

improve partnership working might be to start with this simple principle: ‘Staff need to believe in parent’s deep commitment to supporting their children’s learning’ (Whalley, 2015) as this has the potential to go a long way towards creating a respectful, open dialogue.

2.10: Partnerships with parents

According to Mathers et al, ‘engaged and involved families’ (2014: 5) are a marker of good provision and it is apparent that most settings do aspire to make this happen. Whalley, the director of the Pen Green Centre for Children and Families in Northampton, stated in a conference speech:

‘We know that young children achieve more and are happier when early years educators work together with parents and share ideas about how to support and extend children’s learning’ (2015).

This principle of working together may be especially important when attempting to ameliorate the effects of disadvantage on children’s outcomes, as recommended in government documents such as *Families in the Foundation Years* (e.g. DfE and DoH, 2011). However, as Phair and Davis pointed out, ‘focussing on the family is a priority, but this requires knowledge, expertise, and compassion’ (2015: 1464). These researchers found, in their interviews with practitioners working directly with funded two-year-olds, that few of the practitioners had been trained or prepared adequately for the influx of disadvantaged two-year-olds. Nor had the reason for the funded places been ‘adequately communicated’ to the practitioners, meaning that they did not see supporting families as an important part of their work (*ibid*: 1476). This is despite a DfE-commissioned report stating that:

‘The programme aims to provide good quality early education combined with support for parents, for example, to improve their confidence in supporting their children’s learning and to deal with other challenges in their lives, such as health problems and family difficulties’ (Gibb et al, 2011: 5).

Lang and colleagues found that positive, effective communication between parents and practitioners was 'vital' as this communication helped both adults to better understand the child, resulting in a more holistic approach to learning and development support (2015: 40). These researchers described the relationship between parents and practitioners as 'co-caring' (41), and 'processes within these relationships... may encourage (or suppress) parental involvement and children's healthy adjustment to school-like environments' (41). Brooker insists that a poor relationship between a key person and a parent in a child's life, which she eloquently calls 'absence of genuine care', can affect both the adults and the child's well-being (2010:184). Communication that guarantees any show of genuine care, however, is practically impossible if the only opportunity to converse is during the morning drop-off or afternoon pick-up, say MacNaughton and Hughes (2011). They found in their research that there was, in many settings, no real thought given to developing a mutual dialogue about children's learning between parents and practitioners that was allowed to evolve in a comfortable, unhurried fashion. Roberts states that 'time (or lack of it) can be a barrier to best practice' (2017: 5), going on to say that spending time developing a relationship with a parent is 'vital', especially if problems that need sensitive handling arise. However, Brooker found in her extensive study of an early years classroom that parents were reduced to trying to 'catch' the teacher in the twenty minutes that she was available in the morning if they 'had anything to say' (2002: 125). Although the teacher felt that this informal approach was relaxed and inclusive, Brooker observed that it 'required persistence and skill' on the part of a parent to make use of this opportunity (*ibid*), which some of the parents in the study did not have. MacNaughton and Hughes similarly found, in their conversations with early years teachers and parents, that communication at these times were 'stressful for teachers and unsatisfying for parents' (2011:4). What was of more concern to these authors though, was that this practice could 'silence' some parents and relegate communication to 'mere necessities' (*ibid*: 6 and 7).

If one accepts that parents know their own child best, and that practitioners usually know more about children's learning, it follows that a 'partnership' approach works best for everybody (Fitzpatrick, 2012: 262). However, the word 'partnership' suggests a 'close co-operation' with 'joint rights and responsibilities' (www.meriam-webster.com) which

recognises 'complementary expertise' (*ibid*: 264). This positional balance may be lacking in many parent-practitioner relationships, particularly those relating to funded places, if what Simpson et al found (2015a) is replicated in other settings. In many settings, parents are asked to fill in lengthy EYFS jargon-riddled documentation about their child on their first visit, reinforcing Moss's belief that 'early childhood centres are factories for early learning goals and 'school readiness' (2015: 231). This introduction of an unexpected and, possibly, intimidating 'assessment' procedure may do little to make a parent feel comfortable, an essential prerequisite of developing a warm relationship between parents and practitioners, say Hughes and Read (2012). Indeed, Callanan and colleagues found that it was crucial to establish 'good relationships with parents before making suggestions for home learning' (2017: 72), implying that if a good relationship was not in place, these suggestions would either be ignored or make a parent feel under-confident and inferior.

For both the 'triangle of trust' (Goldschmeid and Selleck, 1996 *in* Elfer et al, 2012: 36) and Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem interactions (1979) to be truly successful, there must be an equal regard for the skills of each person within them, meaning that the positioning of the practitioner as 'expert' may make for an uncomfortable dynamic (Sims-Schouten, 2015) from the outset. This positioning could explain why some parents feel deskilled. Hunt and colleagues' research into levels of home activity found that parents who were not in employment did fewer home activities once their child started nursery (2011), suggesting that some parents may be particularly susceptible to feelings of inadequacy. Sammons et al found a similar outcome in their evaluation of children's centres, noting that home learning activities reduced when the parents in their study used childcare, although they attributed this tendency to 'less time spent with the child in the home' (2015: 8) rather than parents feeling deskilled. However one interprets it, the natural process of supporting a young child to learn has become something professionalised and packaged as something remote and unfamiliar, according to Robinson and Harris (2014). 'Family educative practices' as these authors called them (page 26) have been colonized as an extra facet of the curriculum.

While practitioners may see that forming a good working relationship with parents of their key children as an inescapable part of their job, parents are under no such pressure to co-

operate, as Hughes and Read point out (2012). In fact, Keyes suggests that partnerships between practitioners and parents are not a natural pairing but occur 'by assignment rather than by choice' (2002: 177). Practitioners that keep trying, in a spirit of sensitivity and genuine interest, may reap rewards but it can take a long time and involve a series of prolonged attempts as Watt's paper about effective practices with 'hard to reach' parents described (2016). Georgeson and colleagues found that the practitioners they interviewed were surprised by 'the scale of support and the extra time needed' to work with families who were living in disadvantaged circumstances (2015: 3), a point which was stressed by Boag-Munro and Evangelou in their review of the literature on families that practitioners found difficult to engage with (2012).

For parents who may themselves have had a negative experience within the education system, the perceived distance between themselves and the practitioners can be catastrophic, says Sims-Schouten (2015). Their reluctance to put themselves into a position where they may feel uncomfortable or patronised is often misinterpreted as a lack of interest (Boag-Munro and Evangelou, 2012; Brooker, 2002) and they may be accused of lacking aspirations for their children (Goodman and Burton, 2012; Erola, 2016). Studies such as Siraj-Blatchford's (2010) have shown that this attributing of low aspirations to poorer parents is, again, not true. What is much more likely is that certain parents, lacking the social and cultural capital of parents with more advantages, feel baffled and uneasy with formal discussions about children's learning. Practitioners need to be aware that, no matter how friendly and kind they think they are in their interactions with parents, there may be some who are intimidated by the whole 'schoolification' (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016a: 127), of the early years sector, especially if this was not what parents expect when they sign up for a nursery place for their two-year-old children.

2.11: Summary

In summary, there are a range of factors which have emerged from popular discourses; these have combined to position practitioners almost in opposition to parents whom they perceive as 'deficient'. The compelling 'evidence' from neuroscience reinforces their belief that the first three years of a child's life are the most important, which leads practitioners to

subscribe to the idea that some children are better off in 'quality' early years' provision rather than at home where they feel that not much is done to help children's learning (Brooker, 2002). This difficult starting point sets the stage for relationship-building that, in deference to the legal obligation, may be approached half-heartedly or even reluctantly by practitioners who hide behind the 'hard to reach' narrative, making token efforts with no 'genuine care' involved (Brooker, 2010: 184).

According to some studies, practitioners are largely unaware of two major issues; the difficulties facing families living in poverty, and how they could be bridging the gap between home and school (Pascal and Bertram, 2013). In conjunction with this, the role of the early years practitioner has become multi-faceted and, in recent years, requires a dedication to the 'performativity' that is required of educators at all levels of teaching (Cain and Harris, 2012: 343). Early years practice is now strongly-influenced by policies that reinforce the need to 'prepare' young children for school-life and eventual employment, to become productive members of society. This pressure has altered the focus of the early years sector into a preparation period for formal education, a starting point for assessment and a striving towards 'achievement' and progress. Co-existing with this narrative is the notion that practices which are helpful to this preparation are not taking place in the 'home learning environment' of lower-income families, meaning that children of these families should be handed over to professionals (in this case early years practitioners) to do the job of 'good' parents. This often means that 'respectful reciprocity' (Brooker, 2011: 194) between practitioners and parents is not happening, a reciprocity that, in its fullest sense, would mean a sharing of ideas and knowledge to support a child's learning both in the setting and at home, with lasting impact well into adulthood. As Bronfenbrenner declared almost 50 years ago:

'day care programs can have no lasting constructive impact on the development of the child unless they affect not only the child himself but the people who constitute his enduring day-to-day environment in the family' (1970: xvii).

The literature in this chapter has informed and framed the research study that follows, in that it offers possible explanations for practitioner perceptions, which may affect opinions and behaviour. By looking at the broader picture, it is apparent that the work of an early

years practitioner is shaped by discourses and policy requirements, largely outside of their control. This study will explore how these pressures affect a group of practitioners' day-to-day work with the families of the children in their care, in particular those who are, according to these same discourses and policies, deemed to be 'disadvantaged'.

The next chapter outlines the methodology used in a research study that I undertook over a period of seven months with a group of 22 early years practitioners in a large city in the North West of England. All were working, or had worked, with two-year-old children on funded places and most of the settings they came from were based in areas that could be described as 'disadvantaged'. These practitioners opted to be involved in the research at different levels, by filling in a questionnaire initially. 15 of these practitioners then opted to take part in a semi-structured interview and, finally, four practitioners agreed to discuss their own practice in still more detail. The questionnaires and interviews, with questions based on the review of literature above, gave me an insight into the attitudes and behaviours of early years practitioners towards their work, the funded places and the parents of the children accessing these places. These questionnaires (Phase One of data collection) and interviews (Phase Two) provided useful background data and helped to frame the final stage of data-collection at Phase Three.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research questions

- ✚ How is parental engagement in general perceived and enacted by a group of early years practitioners working with two-year-olds?
- ✚ What awareness do these practitioners have about issues which affect their capacity to **'seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home'** (DfE, 2017: 1.10), particularly with parents accessing free early education and childcare for two-year-olds?

3.1: Introduction

The research questions for the study were based upon my personal observations of practice, where, in my experience, practitioners generally seemed to struggle to fulfil the statutory requirement to **'seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home'** (DfE, 2017: 1.10). This seemed to be the case when working with certain parents whom practitioners considered to be 'hard to reach' (Watt, 2016: 32). Engaging with the literature encouraged me to see possible reasons why this might be: the increasing demands of the practitioners' roles; the lack of time given within the workplace to plan and discuss wider issues that affect children's learning and development; negative attitudes towards parents who may not fit the pre-conceived model of a 'good parent'; practitioners' lack of awareness of the importance of the home learning environment and a lack of understanding how they might help to support its development, whether by offering suggestions for learning at home or by building on home learning in the setting. The research questions encompassed these concerns and, when planning how to go about collecting data, I chose methods that could be used for different purposes: to confirm or dispute my personal observations; to acquire more knowledge of how particular issues

shaped practice; and to provide a safe space for practitioners where these issues could be reflected upon and discussed.

In my experience, and as MacNaughton and Hughes (2011) observed, busy practitioners are seldom given the time or space to reflect upon their practice or discuss with colleagues pedagogical or wider social issues that may impact upon the children in their care. This sometimes results in settings that exist as entities which are set apart from the communities in which they are based. Lack of time and space for reflection may be an important reason why policies, whether national or in-house, may not be enacted as thoroughly as intended or why workplace initiatives do not last. As an advisory teacher and trainer, it had long concerned me that Continuing Professional Development (CPD) sessions tended to lose impetus if time and commitment in which to develop and implement suggestions were not given to attendees once back in the setting. Conversing with practitioners in my training sessions, I often found that they had interesting ideas and perspectives about their own practice as well as that of their colleagues and wider setting provision. However, they were not often encouraged to voice these opinions unless they were part of the senior management team. Alternatively, their opinions were often valued only if they were in accord with the manager's philosophy or, even better, they led to practical changes that could be photographed and used as 'evidence' for their Ofsted records.

The rest of this chapter looks, firstly, at my own positionality in the research process. In an effort to remain 'methodologically self-conscious' (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012: 39) throughout, after discussing my positionality, the chapter goes on to cover the following: the research paradigm chosen; the research design, the research participants and ethical considerations; the methods used and how data were analysed; and finally, the reliability of the data and the limitations of the study.

3.2: Researcher Positionality

Clough and Nutbrown state that 'social science research is saturated ...with positionality' (2012: 10). Nightingale and Cromby (1999) assert that it is impossible for a researcher to remain outside of their own research, which Mao et al argue makes it essential that

researchers are constantly questioning their own 'positionality, social location, power and privilege' (2016: 6). As McGarry points out, the interactions that take place between the researcher and those being researched inevitably contain 'complex and nuanced power dynamics' (2015: 340). O'Leary (2017) states that, even when a researcher tries hard not let power relations affect the relationship, the privileged position of leading the study, deciding what to investigate and how to interpret findings all weigh the balance of power in the researcher's favour. Cohen et al agree, saying that 'it is often the case that those with more power, information and resources research those with less' (2018: 306). O'Leary (2017) stresses that it would be wrong to underestimate the impact of the researcher's power and this should be recognised and acknowledged at every stage of the process.

Cohen et al (2018) insist that positionality is a matter of good ethics and I was careful to approach the research in a transparent, sensitive manner, being responsive to the practitioners and respectful of their confidences. There were times when I was perhaps a little over-responsive, when my position did not feel at all powerful. As I had recruited the practitioners through their setting managers, I was aware that there was a possibility that they felt coerced into taking part in the research, although I did check that each practitioner was happy to continue when they were signing their agreement slips. This, perhaps, made me over-sensitive to the enthusiasm (or lack of) of practitioners' responses and issues such as changes to setting timetables.

Although it may be desirable to some that a researcher maintains an objective stance throughout the research, Denscombe reminds us that, when involved in collecting qualitative data, 'the researcher's self should not be regarded as a limitation to the research but as a crucial resource' (2010: 302). Within the first two phases of data collection, the questionnaires and the interviews, it was relatively easy to maintain an objective 'outsider' role, although the interviews did require more personal input from me to establish rapport and show that I understood the particular challenges that practitioners face. The third phase of data collection, which was conducted through 'informal conversational interviews' (Cohen et al, 2018: 510) required more personal input from me than an outsider might be expected to give as I strove to dig a little deeper to investigate the issues that were being uncovered by the practitioners.

An 'informal conversational interview' (*ibid*) is a form of unstructured interview which was employed to 'elicit people's social realities' (Wildemuth, 2017: 239). It originally emerged as a method of data collection from conversations that would spontaneously occur between a researcher and a study participant during observations; the sort of fact-checking or questioning that a researcher might use when asking for further information or clarification (Turner III, 2010). This type of interview 'resembles a chat' where 'most questions will flow from the immediate context' (Berry, 1999: online). Although no observations of practice took place in this research study, the same principles were applied in that there was a general topic in mind but there was no specific set of questions and the 'conversation' was allowed to proceed at its own pace and in the direction that the practitioner took it. There are advantages to this way of interviewing in that

'the interview is highly individualized and relevant to the individual. Thus, it is likely to produce information or insights that the interviewer could not have anticipated.'
(Sewell,1998, online)

During the research process, I was aware that my previous career experiences, known to setting managers and practitioners, as an Ofsted inspector and an Early Years Advisory Teacher, would have to be problematized and carefully managed. This applied on a personal level, frequently reminding myself to damp down a propensity to question or direct practice and, also, to the practitioner-participants for whom my perceived 'expertise' might prove to silence their sought-after opinions for fear of being 'wrong'. Fortunately, this did not appear to be the case: I found that most, if not all, of the practitioners were relaxed enough to freely discuss their opinions and attitudes during both stages of the interview process, but particularly during the 'informal conversational interviews' (Cohen et al, 2018: 510).

3.2.1: A dual role and a personal dilemma

Some adjustments had to be made to my plans for phase 3, as I had to separate the purpose of data collection in order to answer the research questions alongside the need to 'give something back' to the setting in terms of practical advice. Therefore, I planned two parts to

each session: we would start with a discussion about an issue (or 'informal conversational interview' which would be recorded and later analysed), followed by shared planning for at least one activity or event (which would be chosen by the practitioners) that supported learning in the home. For this reason, within Phase 3 of the process, I adopted a dual role of a researcher and tutor. These roles were not intended to be combined or in contention with each other; at any given time during the session I was *either* researching *or* advising, but it was not always easy to separate the two in my mind. As these sessions had a more informal, collaborative quality, these planned 'separate' periods sometimes overlapped, particularly when the practitioner was not able to spend a lot of time with me, as was often the case. It was then a balance between trying to explore practitioners' perspectives about the topic in hand and satisfy their need to go back to their manager with practical ideas to implement.

The first session that we had together was a shared evaluation of documents, artefacts, displays or activities pertaining to 'parental engagement' that practitioners provided (see Appendix 2), followed by a discussion about the practitioner's interview transcript, to which I had added suggestions as to how to improve practice (see Appendix 3). Originally, I had loosely planned for up to five more sessions depending upon practitioners' availability and setting co-operation. I had hoped that each practitioner would feel confident to talk about their opinions and perspectives about topics such as poverty or making relationships. In addition, we had agreed that I would help each practitioner to take the lead on a project (such as starting a book-sharing provision) that would satisfy the statutory requirement to 'seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home' (DfE, 2017: 1.10). I was aware that the setting managers were, quite reasonably, expecting something back from the research in terms of increased or improved actions, as they were allowing their practitioners time away from the children to take part in the study. This meant that managers often had to take over the practitioner's key person duties to enable this to happen. Under these circumstances, it was not always easy to perform both roles satisfactorily.

Although I can now articulate these two roles and clearly see the discrete purpose of each, I found the process of switching from one to the other a little confusing; at times I had to remind myself that my main duty was to collect data which would help to answer the

research questions, tempting though it may have been to explore in detail the activities that were implemented by the practitioners. McNiff refers to periods such as this as ‘cognitive and emotional dissonance’ (2017:72) for the researcher. I felt relieved when I read that ‘role conflict, role strain and role ambiguity are to be expected in qualitative research’ (Cohen et al, 2018: 311) and I concluded that, in this instance, the situation demanded that I could be an advisor alongside, or in conjunction with my role as an ‘objective researcher’ (O’Leary, 2017: 182). I have not included any of the ‘advisory’ input in the Findings chapter as it is not relevant to the research questions.

3.3: Research paradigm

A paradigm is defined by Sikes (*in Opie, 2004*) as ‘a basic set of beliefs that guides action’ (page 18); Sikes reminds us that, in the past, there were only two major paradigms for researchers to choose from, which clearly depicted the worldview of the researcher. Garratt (*in Somekh and Lewin, 2011*), however, points out that in Kuhn’s ‘seminal text’, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970), the author uses the term ‘paradigm’ in over twenty different ways. This mirrored an explosion of theories about research itself at that time (p. 213) and leads one to suppose that now, nearly 50 years later, a fixed, agreed interpretation of the term ‘paradigm’ may be elusive. Cohen et al echo this when they say that ‘social science research is marked by paradigmatic pluralism and multiple ways of construing paradigms’ (2018: 8). Garratt agrees, explaining that more recent definitions of the term have ‘tended to exploit more nuanced and fluid understandings’ (213), and goes on to describe various researchers’ disparate definitions. However, ambiguity notwithstanding, Somekh and Lewin (2011) provide a glossary in their research textbook, in which the word ‘paradigm’ is defined as ‘a term used to describe an approach to research’ (page 326) and it is this simple explanation that I, as a relatively novice researcher, find more helpful.

This ‘approach to research’, as Somekh and Lewin describe it, both encompasses and influences the choices made by a researcher throughout the research process, choices which demonstrate the researcher’s ontological and epistemological stances or the

researcher's 'basic set of beliefs' (Sikes *in* Opie 2004: 18). Opie asserts that epistemology, which he describes as 'your view of how knowledge is acquired and how it can be communicated to others' (2004: 13), will be the most significant factor in deciding the approach chosen. Opie's basic question about how one views the characteristics of knowledge points clearly to the best paradigmatic option to pursue; either one views 'knowledge' as objective and fixed or one views it as subjective and experiential. This leads back to a simpler either/or choice of paradigms; positivism or post-positivism, also known as interpretivism. These two opposing paradigms will most often lead to a particular choice of methods, and so particular outcomes, according to Sikes (*in* Opie, 2004). Espousing a positivist approach is most likely to lead one to employ 'quantitative' data-collection methods that look at large groups and use numerical, statistical measures to quantify findings, while an interpretivist approach looks at smaller groups or individuals and uses appropriate 'qualitative' tools to investigate their experiences and perspectives. Sikes (*ibid*) cautions that taking different approaches to a research problem will lead to different outcomes, so researchers must always be cognizant of this and transparent in their choices, making justifications throughout the whole research process, from initial paradigm to the analysis and writing up of the findings from collected data.

Niglas (2001) points out that purists are more likely to subscribe to the view that positivist and interpretivist paradigms are 'mutually exclusive', but the fact that research is seldom 'clear cut' has, Niglas declares, led to a more pragmatic view of research in recent years and a belief that the paradigm should evolve from the research problem, not the other way around. Indeed, it is now commonly accepted that a mixed approach, driven by the more practical notion of 'fitness for purpose' (Cohen et al, 2018: 34) may be both more sensible and even more honest, according to Sikes (*in* Opie, 2004). Cohen et al's chapter on Mixed Methods Research (MMR) in their popular text *Research Methods in Education* (2018: 31-50) states that this approach recognises that we live and conduct our research in a 'mixed world' (page 31) and the 'mix', they say, can be applied at all stages of the research process, including the paradigm(s) that may be established at the outset. Indeed, Cohen et al go on to say that MMR 'answers complex research questions more meaningfully, combining particularity with generality' (page 33), while Denscombe agrees that the use of mixed

methods provides 'a fuller and more complete picture of the thing that is being studied' (2010: 141).

The starting point of any research, it is generally agreed, is the research questions. O'Leary stresses the importance of getting research questions clarified and articulated, saying they are 'absolutely fundamental to good research' (2017: 36). After a number of reworkings, my research was driven by the two inter-linked questions at the head of this chapter.

My 'basic set of beliefs' (Sikes, *in* Opie, 2004: 18) about the world was that particular perspectives (that may be different to my own) cause people to act in certain ways, and that selected knowledge, skills or ways of behaving are often prized above others. This results in the marginalisation of some groups of people who do not possess this knowledge, have these skills or behave in the socially-approved manner. This personal set of beliefs meant that an interpretive approach was essential to gain some insight into the perspectives held by the individuals in whom I was interested, namely a sample of early years practitioners.

It also occurred to me, as I was planning my research design, that there were distinct types of data that would need to be collected in order to answer these questions. First, I wanted to find out factual information about their general practice from individual practitioners; then I wanted to explore some of that information provided by seeking personal opinions and challenges; and, finally, I wanted to dig a little deeper with individuals to understand their opinions more fully. Teddlie and Tashakkori's '*sequential mixed designs*' (2009: 21) seemed to describe a model that would be the best fit for my research. This advocated a mixed methods approach where each stage of data collection, which may be quantitative or qualitative, run one after the other, each previous stage influencing the next.

3.4: Research design

Petty et al declare that 'methodology is a strategy of enquiry that guides a set of procedures' (2011: 378) and, in this instance, an exploratory case study seemed to describe the most appropriate 'strategy of enquiry'. Cohen and colleagues state that 'the purposes of

the research determine the design of the research which, in turn, informs the methodology' (2018: 173). Yin asserts that a case study approach is effective when one is seeking to explain a phenomenon in its real-life context (see Yin 2012 and 2014). The term 'case' or even 'case study' can be used to describe a procedural approach or a sample of data within the complete data set; both definitions were applicable here when I decided to use a practitioner's 'story' (or 'case') to answer part of the research questions.

It was appealing to collaborate with practitioners, rather than simply researching 'on' their practice from an objective, detached position (Noffke and Somekh in Somekh and Lewin, 2011: 94). This led me to plan the research study with two clear perspectives in mind: 'What is the situation?' (clarification and, possibly, confirmation) and 'Why is this the case?' (an investigation into the reasons behind attitudes and behaviours). Each of these perspectives demanded that data be collected using a variety of methods at three distinct stages of the study, which I referred to as 'phases'. Data would be obtained from a larger sample of practitioners initially via a questionnaire, then distilled down at each subsequent phase into smaller samples (interviews followed by shared discussions) that would increasingly offer more scope for 'rich' or 'thick descriptions' (Guba and Lincoln, 1981: 375). As the shared discussions, which I later called 'informal conversational interviews' (Cohen et al, 2018: 510), used for phase 3 of the data may be considered a less-traditional method than questionnaires and interviews, I looked to the literature again for validation. McNiff suggests that shared dialogue is a way to produce knowledge and an understanding of a situation, saying, 'We think differently when we are in dialogue with another: conversation itself becomes the site for the creation of new knowledge' (2017: 26). This confirmed to me that the research design I had planned was appropriate and would give me access to the information that I required, and I looked forward to the in-depth discussions the practitioners and I would share in phase 3 of the project.

3.5: Methods

In order to collect data that answered the research questions, I decided that the data collection should be on a continuum starting from a broad sweep asking first for factual

information then reducing the number of practitioners to explore opinions, worldviews and justifications more fully at each phase (See Figure 3.1).

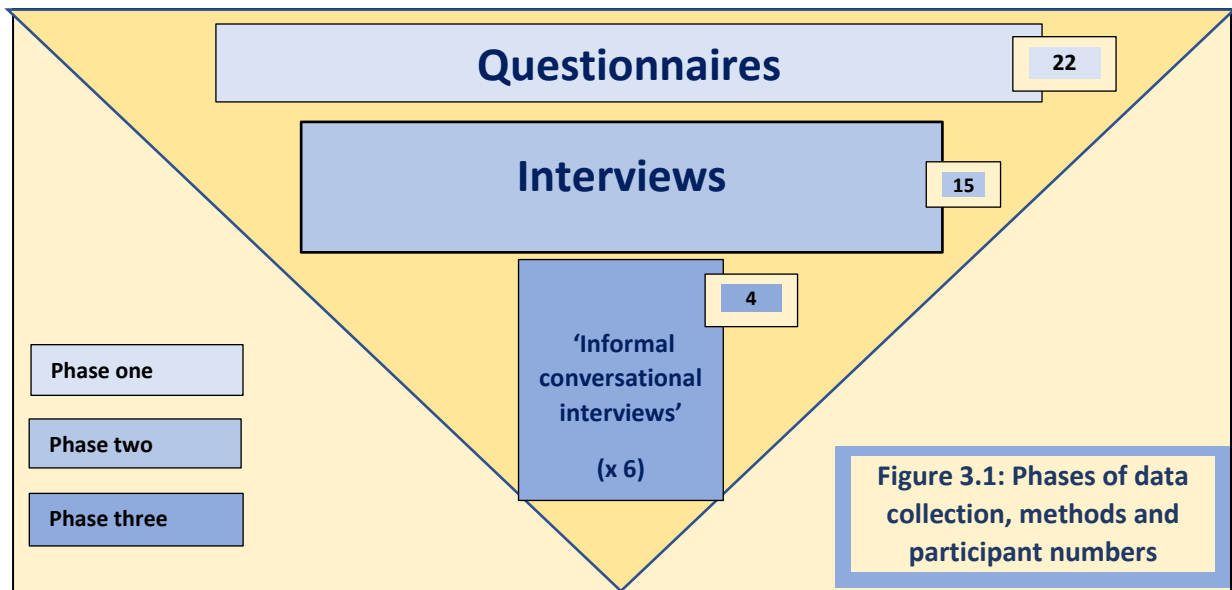


Figure 3.1: Research data were collected systematically over a period of ten months: phase one of data collection (22 questionnaires) was completed throughout January; phase two (15 semi-structured interviews) was conducted through February to mid-March and phase three ('informal conversational interviews' (Cohen et al, 2018; 510) with 4 practitioners) lasted from April through to July.

Firstly, I wanted to see if practitioners acknowledged whether there were any concerns with how they worked with parents generally. I had observed when inspecting, advising and training early years staff that many practitioners seemed to be more than satisfied with the attempts they made to engage parents, even if those attempts were mostly information-transmission and did not lead to any two-way exchanges that supported children's learning. For this reason, after I had recruited and met with the practitioners, I sent out a questionnaire (see Appendices 4a-4d) to provide background information about each person taking part but, more importantly, an insight into their views on how important they considered parental engagement to be and the strategies they currently used. I considered that a questionnaire was the best 'tool' with which to collect the data needed to answer the first part of the research question. Clough and Nutbrown point out that questionnaires are an appropriate data-collection instrument when one wants a 'broad impression' of practitioners' viewpoints (2012: 159), which was my purpose in this phase of the project. I did not, at this stage, make much of the 'home learning environment' or the 'disadvantage'

focuses. I wanted an overview of provision initially, but I did note how prominent (or not) was support for children's learning in the home in the inventory of activities on offer to parents.

The advantage of using a questionnaire was that it was relatively easy to administer and seemed to be a gentle way in to engaging a practitioner; it did not require lengthy responses and would not take much time to complete. I had met each practitioner to explain the purposes of the research and to get consent forms signed. I considered that in doing this, practitioners would be more likely to return the questionnaire, and this did seem to be the case; 22 questionnaires were returned out of 26 sent out, a good return rate. Denscombe says that 'questionnaires do not set out to change people's attitudes or provide them with information' (2010: 155) and this questionnaire was designed to elicit information. The questionnaire was also standardised (Lewin, 2011), in that it provided every respondent with the same questions which could then be analysed by a quantitative process of statistical analysis.

The questions were mostly straightforward, 'closed' questions that each offered five or six possible responses, apart from the last two questions. One of these two questions asked for a brief explanation for the practitioners' answer to the question that preceded it: *'How important do you think it is to involve parents in their child's education and care?'* The other was asking if there was anything else that practitioners did that they would call parental 'engagement'. This was the term I had chosen to use in the title of the questionnaire. Although I was aware that terms such as 'parental involvement', 'parental partnership' and 'parent support' can refer to different levels and types of activity, they are often used by settings to mean the same thing and, during this research study, I did not consider that getting involved in a semantic debate about terminology was necessary for answering the research questions.

Leading on from the questionnaires, my next task was to find out in more detail about practitioners' perspectives of issues that they may have been addressing or struggling with in their own setting. For this purpose, I had decided to use semi-structured, audio-recorded interviews (see Appendix 5) with twelve of the practitioners who had filled in the questionnaires (ultimately, 15 were interviewed because they volunteered). I had trialled both the questionnaire and the interview questions with an early years practitioner ex-

colleague whose characteristics were similar to the practitioners involved in the eventual study (see section 'Pilot' below). A few adjustments were made to the interview questions to ensure that practitioners could answer the research questions more fully and produce 'useful responses' (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012: 145). The ambience generated by a semi-structured interview appealed as, within a private but relaxed environment, I hoped to be able to tease out practitioners' 'real' thoughts rather than the 'right answers' that may be expressed in line with setting policy statements. I wrote a series of open-ended interview questions, allowing enough flexibility for practitioners to explore any tangents that they felt were applicable. One benefit of semi-structured interviews is that they are usually held within an environment that is familiar to the practitioner, and, assuming that the researcher has taken the time to develop some rapport (Thomas 2011) and ensured privacy, they are a safe space for practitioners to express their views and feel listened to, which often makes them feel valued. As Wolgemuth et al point out in their research into practitioners' feelings about being interviewed:

'the experience of being listened to with the aim of understanding was at the core of our practitioners' talk about the benefits of interviews' (2015: 161).

I conducted all of the interviews in the practitioners' places of work, away from children and other members of staff so that the practitioners could feel comfortable in their surroundings. I established rapport through my initial meeting with each practitioner by chatting about early education in general; later I sent a personal email along with the questionnaire attachment. On receipt of the completed questionnaire, I sent another email thanking each practitioner and arranging the interview.

The interviews were all recorded, after getting permission from the interviewees to do so and assuring them that, if they felt uncomfortable at any point in the process, we could stop at any time. I also reminded them that anything they said to me during the interview would remain confidential and, if used in the eventual report, comments from individual practitioners would be anonymised.

For the final phase of my research, data were collected via further unstructured 'interviews' as Cohen et al describe them; in some cases:

'Interviews enable practitioners -interviewers and interviewees- to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view' (2018: 506).

In summary, the research data were collected systematically over a period of seven months: phase one of data collection (22 questionnaires) was completed throughout January; phase two (15 semi-structured interviews) was conducted through February to mid-March and phase three (discussion and planning sessions with 4 practitioners) lasted from April through to July.

The pilot

An early years practitioner (actually my grandson's key person in the nursery he attended at the time) agreed to pilot the questionnaire and interview questions for me. She was 'typical' of practitioners in age, gender, experience and qualifications. She completed the questionnaire which I sent to her as an attachment to an email, and then I asked for her opinion about the questions (see Appendix 6). She offered some good suggestions as to what could be added to the list of possible activities that settings might offer parents, but I decided not to use them as there was already a fairly comprehensive list on offer and I wanted to give practitioners the chance to add their own that may not have been on the list. She said that she found the questions straightforward and easy to understand. Although she said that she would have liked to expand upon her responses, I felt that this opportunity would be provided in the next phase of data collection, the interview.

I went to her setting at a time that was convenient to her colleagues and conducted the interview in exactly the same manner as if she was actually taking part in the research. Again, I asked her afterwards how she had felt about the questions, and I also noted down some things that had occurred to me while I was asking the questions. Based on her responses, I adjusted some of the questions that, once asked, seemed to have already been covered by a previous question. I also added in some additional questions which I would have in reserve and which may or may not be asked, depending on the responses given by the practitioner. I asked if the recorder was a problem, but the practitioner assured me that

it was not. She said that she felt at ease during the process and enjoyed being asked her opinion about these matters. She also confirmed that she liked the ‘conversational’ style that I adopted as it made her aware that we shared a common understanding of her workplace practices.

3.6: Participants

As my research questions focussed on early years practice with families who may be termed ‘disadvantaged’, I decided to seek the perspectives of practitioners who were, or had been, directly involved with two-year-old, funded children. The main criterion for a two-year-old funded place is low family income which, some research has shown (e.g. Donkin et al, 2014), may be a major ‘disadvantage’ in children’s lives. In this way, I used ‘purposive sampling’ (Denscombe, 2010: 34) of practitioners working directly or indirectly with these children, depending upon the phase in which they took part. For the questionnaires, the practitioner would have to have had some dealings with two-year-olds but not necessarily with those deemed ‘disadvantaged’ as the purpose was to ascertain how these practitioners interpreted ‘parental engagement’ with the parents of two-year-olds in more general terms. For phase two, I selected for interview only practitioners that had some dealings with two-year-olds that were funded; for phase three, the practitioners were only selected for the ‘informal, conversational interviews’ if they worked directly as a key person to a small group of two-year-olds that were funded. In this way, I intended to go from the ‘general to the particular’ (Cohen et al, 2018: 33) to explore the issues in more depth as the research went on.

When I first started the recruitment procedure, I did not solely select practitioners with whom I was familiar because I was concerned that people who knew me may feel obliged to take part, and this might suggest an element of coercion. With this in mind, I sent out over 150 separate emails to setting managers or school heads that I knew had funded two-year-olds in their setting (see Appendix 7). I accessed this information from the *Early Help Directory* on the local government website. However, perhaps not surprisingly, it was mostly settings where I was known to the manager that expressed an interest in taking part in the

research. I was aware from the outset that there was a possibility that managers may be agreeing to take part as a courtesy to me, possibly hoping for some practical advice about how to 'do' parental engagement, rather than having an interest in the purpose of the research, which was in exploring practitioners' perspectives of their practice. Another consideration was the fact that I was requesting to work with a member of staff who had at least some dealings with two-year-olds on a funded place. This person would be appointed by the manager so, in effect, told to work with me, which raised ethical considerations. To minimise this possibility, I arranged to meet the elected practitioner without their manager, so that I could describe the whole process to them, taking time to answers any questions they may have and reassuring them about matters such as confidentiality, anonymity and how they could opt out at any time. Out of 26 such meetings when all the practitioners agreed to take part and signed the relevant documentation (see Appendix 8), there were 22 responses to the questionnaire (see Table 3.1 for a summary of their characteristics). The practitioners that agreed to be involved were representative of practitioners working with this age group in England in terms of gender, age, experience and qualifications.

**Table 3.1 Characteristics of Practitioners in Phase One of Data Collection:
The Questionnaire**

Gender	3 males, 19 females
Age	Up to 20 (2); 21-30 (4); 31-40 (6); 41-50 (4); 51-60 (5); 61+ (1)
Length of experience in childcare	1-5 years (6); 5-10 years (6); 10-15 years (4); more than 15 years (6)
Length of experience with 2-year-olds	Less than one year (3); 1-5 years (8); 5-10 years (5); 10-15 years (3); more than 15 years (3)
Highest qualification	GCSE or equivalent (2); NNEB [#] or equivalent (3); NVQ 3 (12); NVQ 4 (1); Bachelor's degree (4)

Type of settings	Nursery class in school (4); PVI (8); Sessional early years setting (3); Children’s centre nursery (0); Other [‡] (7)
Currently based with 2-year-olds	Yes, full time (13); Yes, part-time (6); Yes, occasional cover (1) No, but oversees practice (2); Not at all (0)
Level of responsibility*	Manager (1); Deputy Manager (3); Room Leader (5); SENCO (3); Key person (8); Other [‡] (7)

**As stated by practitioner # NNEB as a qualification ceased in 1994. ‡ As stated by practitioner*

After I had received the questionnaires back, I then sent a ‘thank you’ email and asked each respondent to indicate if they would like to be interviewed (Phase 2 of the data collection). Although I had originally stated in my research proposal that I would conduct 12 interviews, 15 respondents requested to be interviewed. I did not wish to jeopardise phase 3 of the research by unwittingly discarding a potential practitioner, so I went again to their settings and conducted a semi-structured interview with each of the 15 respondents (see Table 3.2 for practitioner characteristics).

Table 3.2 Characteristics of Practitioners in Phase Two of Data Collection: Semi-structured Interviews

Gender	1 male, 14 females
Age	Up to 20 (1); 21-30 (3); 31-40 (5); 41-50 (1); 51-60 (4); 61+ (1)
Length of experience in childcare	1-5 years (3); 5-10 years (3); 10-15 years (3); more than 15 years (6)
Length of experience with 2-year-olds	Less than one year (3); 1-5 years (4); 5-10 years (3); 10-15 years (2); more than 15 years (3)
Highest qualification	GCSE or equivalent (0); NNEB [#] or

	equivalent (2); NVQ 3 (8); NVQ 4 (1); Bachelor's degree (4)
Type of settings	Nursery class in school (4); PVI (8); Sessional early years setting (2); Other (1)
Currently based with 2-year-olds	Yes, full time (9); Yes, part-time (3); Yes, occasional cover (1) No, but oversees practice (2)
Level of responsibility*	Manager (1); Deputy Manager (3); Room Leader (4); Key person (5); Third-in-charge (2)

NNEB as a qualification ceased in 1994.

‡ As stated by practitioner

After each interview, I told managers and the interviewees about the next phase of data collection and asked them to consider the time commitment and organization that would be required to take part in this next phase, saying that I would email them with a formal offer within a week. This phase was offered as 4-6 fortnightly sessions, each lasting up to 2 hours, starting with a shared evaluation of current practice with parents, leading onto what I termed a 'mentoring' programme that aimed to encourage practitioners to reflect on and, where identified, make improvements to their practice of working with parents. ***(Please note that data were not collected for this aspect of the programme and is not included in this report)***. Alongside this, as described earlier, I explained that within each session, I would be discussing certain issues with each practitioner and data would be collected from this part of each session. These were later referred to as 'informal conversational interviews' (Cohen et al, 2018: 510). This was to ensure that only data that answered the research questions were collected and used in the eventual report.

Table 3.3 Characteristics of Practitioners at Phase Three of Data Collection

Gender	Age	Experience in childcare	Experience with 2s	Highest Qualification	Current setting	Based with 2s	Level of Responsibility*
F	51-60	More than 15 years	Less than 1 year	NNEB #	PVI	Full Time	Key Person
F	61+	10-15 years	10-15 years	NVQ 3	Other-	Part Time	Key Person
F	Up to 20	1-5 years	1-5 years	NVQ 3	Nursery in school	Full Time	Key Person
F	31-40	1-5 years	Less than 1 year	Degree (plus level 4 Montessori) ‡	Sessional day care	Full Time	Key Person

NNEB as a qualification ceased in 1994.

‡ As stated by practitioner

Six practitioners expressed an interest in taking part in phase 3; I eventually worked with four practitioners, all female (see Table 3.3). Of the other two potential practitioners, one immediately dropped out due to college commitments and the other did not fully meet the criteria as she was not based in the room with any funded two-year-olds at the time.

3.7: Ethical considerations

I applied for ethical approval months before starting the research project and it was granted after a minor adjustment about keeping parents' personal details confidential when discussing issues with practitioners (see Ethics Application in Appendices). I had also successfully completed a compulsory module based on ethical dilemmas. It might have been tempting to assume that 'ethics' were satisfactorily taken care of but it soon became clear that ethical consideration must be an ongoing state of mind and behaviour for a researcher. Cohen et al state that issues to do with ethics 'run throughout the entire research process'

(2018: 111) and affects even the decision of which topic to research. I had been planning to research this topic for a long time before having the opportunity to do so, hoping to build on the good relationships that I had always had with early years practitioners while investigating a concern that had puzzled me for some time. There was no doubt in my mind that I would be able to treat practitioners with respect and sensitivity, at the same time as getting useful, rich data that would not only answer my questions but would also benefit the practitioners in some way. There is potential that what has been discovered through this small-scale research project might be disseminated, not only by the individual practitioners to colleagues, but also to a larger audience of early years practitioners. This study may ultimately help to improve a situation that previous researchers have recognised (Cottle and Alexander, 2014; Payler and Wood, 2014; Simpson et al, 2015a) and the practitioners in the research had themselves identified.

Although Cohen et al remind researchers that the purpose of research is to 'answer worthwhile questions' and 'make a significant, relevant contribution to knowledge' (2018:121), the code of ethics consists of a set of principles. Most ethical guidance places protecting research practitioners from harm (Hammersley and Trianou, 2012), psychological as well as physical, as the primary principle. O'Leary, referring to the power that researchers have in any research study, reminds us that this power confers responsibility and makes clear that it is the 'dignity and well-being of respondents' that remains paramount (2017: 68); indeed, where questions may arise throughout the process, ethical considerations must always take priority, O'Leary states. While Hammersley and Trianou (2012) allow that, over the course of the research period, the researcher and respondents may develop a more relaxed relationship, Denscombe insists that there is an 'expectation that researchers act professionally and with integrity' (2010: 7) throughout.

Following ethical guidelines not only protects practitioners but also protects the researcher, the research institution and the wider research community (Sikes *in* Opie, 2004), and ethical review committees act as both useful guides and strict regulators to a researcher (Sikes and Piper, 2010). Although ethics approval, once granted, provides a cushion against premeditated issues, there are often matters that occur which could not have been

foreseen when seeking ethical approval originally (Hammersley and Trianou, 2012). These 'risks and ethical dangers' can mean that decisions may have to be made quickly, without advice or regulatory guidance (Simons *in* Somekh and Lewin, 2011: 28). Simons, referring to this type of decision-making as 'situated ethics' (page 27), suggests that looking at each situation from different perspectives may be helpful, but Sikes reminds researchers that the first and most important principle is to avoid doing any harm (*in* Opie, 2004) to practitioners. Cohen et al go even further, saying that the welfare of the research practitioners must be placed above any other consideration 'even if it involves compromising the impact of the research' (2018: 128).

Cohen et al assert that 'informed consent is a cornerstone of ethical behaviour' (2018: 123) and one way of protecting practitioners is to ensure that they are fully informed of the purpose and the scope of the research. Informed consent is the practice of giving would-be practitioners information about the research project before it begins, so that they can decide whether or not to take part. They must also be supported to understand what the research entails and how it might affect them if they choose to be involved. However, this ethical practice may not be as straightforward as it sounds (Hammersley and Trianou, 2012) as, before the study begins, there may be aspects of the process still unknown to the researcher, despite many hours of careful planning and a thoroughly-scrutinised research proposal. There is also the question of how much information to provide; Denscombe points out that 'adequate information' needs to be provided to the practitioners, at the very least about what level of commitment will be needed from them (2010: 333). Hammersley and Trianou wonder whether it is ethical to only provide information that is relevant to their decision to participate, cautioning that too much information may alter practitioner behaviour. For example, practitioners in my study may have stated that they were very positive about parental involvement in an interview situation, but their practice might not necessarily reflect this. Cohen et al point out that, although informed consent may mean better 'rapport and trust' between the parties involved, too much information about the project may result in the 'Hawthorne Effect', where practitioners behave in a manner that they think may please the researcher (2018: 126) and so distort the findings.

O'Leary advises that informed consent assumes that practitioners are 'competent' and 'autonomous' and have not been 'coerced' or 'induced' to take part (2017: 71). There are possible issues when practitioners have to be accessed via a 'gatekeeper' who may agree to their participation on their behalf. This, says Cohen et al, may amount to practitioners feeling 'railroaded' into taking part (2018: 125). My research study practitioners were practitioners who worked with two-year-olds; most of them were not in leadership positions, working in a profession where practitioners often feel undervalued (Gambaro, 2012). It was imperative, therefore, that I was certain that the practitioners who had been nominated were happy to take part, and I took care to explain everything thoroughly to them. Bell cautions that would-be practitioners 'should never be expected to sign any protocol form unless they have had time to read and consider the implications' (2010: 46) and I gave the information sheets and permission forms out on my first introductory meeting with them. I spent time going through the information, answering any questions they might have before the consent forms were signed. I always checked on every subsequent occasion that the practitioner knew what would be asked of them and was happy to continue. As it turned out, all of the practitioners said that they were very pleased to take part; they appeared to enjoy the opportunity to be consulted and to be able to air their views.

In addition to the use of consent forms, the right to withdraw without explanation is a crucial element of giving practitioners some control over the process; O'Leary refers to this as the 'right to discontinue' (2017: 70). While seeking informed consent, I particularly stressed the statement that practitioners could withdraw from the research at any stage 'without giving any reason' (see Appendix 8, question 4). In addition to this, assurances of 'confidentiality' and 'anonymity' are approaches that are commonly employed by researchers in a bid to protect practitioners in their projects. However, despite good intentions, Bell warns of the 'many broken promises' that often happen in reality (2010: 49). Bell goes on to suggest that these broken promises may arise, not because of intentional deception but rather a lack of understanding about these terms' real meanings. She points out that 'anonymity' actually means that practitioners should be anonymised from the outset, so that even the researcher does not know which data belong to each person taking part, particularly important at the analysis stage. While this might be applicable when using

a questionnaire or a survey, and possibly even a focus group, recorded discussions over a period of time do not lend themselves to anonymity, particularly if the researcher may be trying to chart the personal narrative of practitioners during a particular process. For this reason, it was necessary to go back to the four practitioners who took part in phase three of the research and provide them with another consent form, which contained a statement stating that their data would not be anonymised before analysis (see Appendix 8a, question 5). However, like responses from all practitioners, responses that are used in this report have all been anonymised and every care taken to protect the identity of each person taking part in the research at every stage.

Confidentiality, likewise, is generally regarded as an absolute necessity; Cohen et al (2018) stress that this means discussions between researcher and individual practitioners are not shared with anyone else (unless a safeguarding issue arises) and that, in the reporting and analysing of data, none of the practitioners can be recognised by name, status, or other identifiers. However, Cohen et al muse that ““thick descriptions” of interpretive research require a level of detail that cannot be obtained if privacy, confidentiality and anonymity are required’ (2018: 132). This was something that needed careful handling when writing up the final report, particularly when reporting on phase 3, where the intention was to bring the stories of the practitioners ‘alive’.

Sikes urges researchers to ‘think about what they can give back’ (*in* Opie, 2004: 29) to practitioners and this desire to reciprocate in terms of time and advice influenced the research design and the final method of data collection. One of the principles espoused by the ‘deontological’ view of ethical practice, says Cohen et al, is not simply to ‘do no harm’ but actually to ‘do good’ as well (2018: 112). It was my hope that, within the final phase of data collection, I could not only collect useful data but could also ‘give back’ advice and guidance to settings by exploring opinions and perspectives with the practitioners.

3.8: Data analysis and report writing

Although I had hoped to be able to partially analyse data as I collected them in preparation for each of the phases that followed, I was only able to do a broad sweep at the end of

phases one and two instead of any sort of detailed scrutiny. I had not appreciated the volume of data that 22 questionnaires and 15 interviews would provide. However, I was able to get enough of an idea about the data to put together some interview questions for phase two and to be able to plan what issues to cover for discussion at phase three.

The questionnaire

The questionnaire provided, as expected, the most straightforward data to analyse and I utilised, in the main, simple quantitative measures. As I had used a selection of questions with a range of answers on a Likert scale (see Box 3.1 for example) that practitioners could choose from, it was an uncomplicated task to count these questions up and present their answers in sets according to the type of information they designed to elicit. The first set of questions (1-6; see Appendices 4a and 4b, and Box 3.1 for example) required practitioners to give factual responses, including how long they had worked with two-year-olds and what was their highest qualification. These data were then presented as a table (see Table 3.1 above).

Box 3.1: Sample 'factual' question from questionnaire

1. *How long have you worked with the 0-5 age group?*
 - a) Less than 1 year
 - b) Between 1 and 5 years
 - c) Between 5 and 10 years
 - d) Between 10 and 15 years
 - e) More than 15 years

The next set of questions (7-9; see Appendix 4b) required practitioners to express their opinions and rate their confidence regarding parental engagement matters, again using provided answers showing a range of commitment to this aspect of their work (see Box 3.2 for example). Again, this was straightforward to quantify, and data were presented as a table (see Table 4.3 in Chapter 4).

Box 3.2: Sample 'rating' question from questionnaire

8. *How confident are you talking to the parents or carers of the children in your care?*
 - a) Extremely confident
 - b) Mostly confident
 - c) Confident when I have 'positive' things to say
 - d) Not confident talking about some issues
 - e) Not confident at all

However, question 10 (see Appendix 4c) asked for an explanation of their choice of answer to the previous question, which was '*How important do you think it is to involve parents in their child's education and care?*' and this required a different analytical approach. For this, I sorted the responses into sets or themes of similar concepts using Thematic Analysis and presented the data as a pie chart so that one could easily read the range and frequency of responses (see Appendix 9).

The next data set that came from the questionnaire was where practitioners were asked to identify (again from a list of suggestions) which 'parental engagement' activities or strategies they were currently using or had used in the past. The responses to these 24 statements, which I labelled at analysis stage from A to X, were then quantified and data were presented as a simple bar chart (see Figure 4.2 in Chapter 4). After the data were collated and presented, I summarised the main points as a basis for the direction of the questions for the semi-structured interviews to follow.

The interviews

The interviews were 'semi-structured' in that, although there were pre-written questions, there were additional 'reserve' questions that were not always asked. In addition, questions were asked in a conversational style, allowing for me to probe or pick up on certain comments that the interviewee might make. This semi-structured approach also allowed tangents to be explored and meant that questions may not have been asked in the same order, or that a question may even be embedded within another question. This type of 'active listening' (O'Brien et al, 2014: 173) led to responsive questioning which allowed the interview to be, as much as possible, an informal dialogue between colleagues rather than on a strictly interviewer/interviewee basis.

This made data analysis trickier than simply studying answers to the questions in order, as might have seemed a logical way to proceed. Instead, as I had used a voice recorder, I first listened through the recordings as a reminder of what had been discussed, then transcribed each recording. To ensure anonymity, I allocated each practitioner a number and removed all references to names within the transcripts.

As I had used an informal conversational style, there were parts of my own input that were left out (for example, where I might relate a short anecdote that was similar to something that the interviewee had said), but the practitioners' input was transcribed verbatim wherever possible. There were a few occasions where the practitioner went off the subject and this was not transcribed if it did not add anything to answering the actual question. I then uploaded all of the transcriptions to NVivo and sorted statements from each individual interview into titled folders, which I later identified as themes. Some of these themes I had already noted from my broad sweep of the interviews, but some were added as I went through the transcripts.

I started with practitioner one and generated NODES (as they are known in the NVivo programme), allocating statements to these themes. Then I categorised these statements still further and called these sub-themes. Then, using the Constant Comparative method, I continued with the rest of the transcripts, using the categories already generated and adding to them when a new concept was introduced. Eventually all relevant statements were grouped into these named categories and the contents checked to ensure that there had been no duplication or statements assigned to the wrong code. In the end, I had seven overall categories containing a total of 40 sub-themes, which generated a lot of data. However, I realised that I had not been strategic enough in selecting data but had simply coded all the statements within the transcripts, possibly out of fear of missing anything important. Some of the data, however, when looked at objectively, did not answer either of the research questions and so did not end up in the report (See Table 3.4 for data used).

Table 3.4: Themes identified from Phase Two interviews

Categories/Themes	Sub-Themes
Perceived Barriers	Parent difficulties Setting constraints Not knowing much about the family Practitioner internal issues
Practitioner Beliefs	Focus on children’s achievement Mismatched expectations between parents and practitioners Deficit expectation of poorer parents Setting is best place for children
Practitioner Knowledge	Understanding of poverty effects What they think an effective HLE is like Training or research on parental engagement Understanding of funded place

The ‘informal conversational interviews’ at Phase 3 of data collection

Data for these sessions were a series of notebook entries that I made during or after each session. These were later supplemented by recordings of the conversations that I had with the practitioners, which were then summarised rather than transcribed verbatim. The practitioners were also given a journal and asked to keep notes about any thoughts they had, changes they were making in their setting or anything else that they thought was relevant. The four practitioners between them generated masses of data so, again I was compelled to return to the purpose of this phase of data collection, which was to gain a deeper insight into practitioners’ perspectives about their practice. As I met each practitioner at least 4 times for, on average, 90 minutes each session, a lot of data were collected. However, not all of the data were relevant to this particular research enquiry as, within this phase of the project, there was a dual purpose to my collaboration with these practitioners.

Being mindful of the limitations of this research project and the ultimate report, I looked at different ways that I might present these data succinctly in an informative and, above-all, relevant manner. I thought about presenting excerpts from each practitioner as they progressed through the stages of the process but considered that this could end up rather piecemeal and ultimately unsatisfactory. In the end, I decided to focus on just one of the practitioners and tell her 'story' in full. This would not, of course, be wholly representative of all of the practitioners but that was not the intention. There needed to be no element of comparison of practitioners as, I decided, the purpose of the data was not to document recurring themes, but to present an example of how one practitioner reflected upon her practice. I justified that this way of presenting the data would give a richness to the narrative, showing one practitioner's journey of self-reflection and adjustment, which, I reasoned, would be instrumental in this practitioner 'solving' the issues that she had identified in the first two phases of data collection.

3.9: Generalizability, reliability, credibility and trustworthiness

Given the 'purposive sampling' of the practitioners who took part in the study, data received from the questionnaire and the interview could be said to be representative of wider issues raised in the research literature on this topic. In this way, the first research question and part of the second could be said to fulfil criteria to be classed as 'generalisable' (Thomas, 2011: 109). The case used eventually to demonstrate one practitioner's reflections is not generalisable in the same way. Instead, Bassey recommends that, with a single case, the researcher makes claims of 'relatability' instead of generalisability, in that the findings may be relatable to another person in a similar situation, given a similar set of circumstances (1981: 85). Later, Bassey introduces the idea of 'fuzzy generalisations' that infer that similar situations are likely to cause similar outcomes (1999: 12).

Data were collected systematically and rigorously throughout the process with strict adherence to the ethical guidance (BERA, 2011; 2018). The collecting and transcribing of data are only part of the process however, and it is in the interpretation of that data that

trustworthiness may have to be demonstrated more convincingly. There were decisions to be made about how much data could realistically be included in this report, without the risk of either missing some crucial elements or cherry-picking data that fitted a particular outcome. Using the principle of using data that answered the research questions (McLean *in* Jupp, 2006: 267-8) led me to make choices about what to use in the report, but more importantly, what to leave out. These data that are not included in the report are fully available for supervisory staff to see and could be used to explore another facet of the subject at a later date. They were left out simply because they did not add anything to the data already chosen to answer the research question.

Data that were not included were not contradictory (although not all of the practitioners in phase three obviously had the same experience as the chosen case), nor did they 'disprove' the fundamental findings of the data that were used. Experienced researchers talk of the 'messiness' of research and this was indeed one of the messiest stages that had to be grappled with, what to include and what to leave out. Internal, searching questions were asked to ensure that the data presented were an honest representation of what had been found overall.

All of the returned questionnaires from phase one were used to make up the data set but two of the recorded interviews from phase two were not included. One interview could not be transcribed as there was too much noise in the background to decipher what had been said, while the other, which had been with a practitioner and her manager, I later deemed unacceptable as the manager mostly answered the questions, leaving me unable to ascertain the practitioner's viewpoint. In addition, this practitioner and her manager did not fully fit the sampling criterion as they did not work in in a 'disadvantaged' area, although they had one child in the setting who fitted the 'two-year-old' and 'funded' criteria. In consequence, although the responses of this practitioner and her manager did not form any part of the phase two interview data, some of the setting's approaches to parental involvement were referred to in the third phase as practical examples of activities and strategies.

Trustworthiness and reliability

In a paper on ethics and education, Fendler describes the concept of 'trustworthiness' as, coupled with 'credibility', being 'similar to the efforts to establish validity and reliability in quantitative research' (2016: 218). The author cites the work of Lincoln and Guba in 1985 who drew up a list of four essential points that were needed to demonstrate that research was 'trustworthy'. These included: how truthful the researcher had been in collecting and interpreting data; how applicable the research would be if carried out in other contexts; how consistent would the findings be if the research was carried out with the same practitioners by somebody else; and how neutral has the researcher been in analysing and reporting on the data?

Bell (2010) warns that the researcher's selection of data may lead to accusations of deliberate bias towards a certain outcome and Scaife (2004) advises that researchers should always state their own biases, values and views of the world within any report that they may write using the data. Put simply, my belief when applied to this research project is that early education can be a powerful way to support parents who may not be using 'educative' practices (such as play, reading books together, telling stories and rhymes and sharing every-day practices such as shopping and cooking) in the home, either because they do not know what these practices are, or they are unaware of their importance in helping children's learning. However, my experience has led me to believe that early years practitioners do not pursue the potential of the home learning environment as well as they could for a number of reasons, and until those reasons are identified and pondered over, this situation will not improve.

Triangulation is seen as a way of endorsing that data have been collected appropriately and scrupulously; O'Leary refers to this as a strategy 'for achieving credibility' (2017:144). Triangulation is usually done by ensuring that the same methods are applied to each practitioner, or that different methods are applied to an individual. By using case study as a research design, the researcher chooses to look at all elements of the case from different angles; Thomas advises 'case studiers' to 'think small but drill deep' (2016: 67). His definition of triangulation, therefore, incorporates the use of various methods at different times of the data collection period, which is how my research was conducted.

The fact that social sciences qualitative research is unlikely to be verifiable in the traditional manner (in that it could be repeated by another researcher with similar findings) does not negate the necessity to stress that every attempt has been made to be truthful and rigorous throughout the process.

3.10: Limitations of the study (see also 5.9)

This research enquiry was limited mainly by the fact that I collected much more data than I could use in a relatively small-scale study. This led to decisions that were uncomfortable and, at times, worrying, as I was concerned about favouring some data over others and even of deliberately skewing the findings. Reminders that a researcher should select data that ‘answers the research question’ (notwithstanding the tendency for a novice researcher to want to describe all of the data collected) were really helpful. Ultimately, one should only use data that is relevant and ‘tells the story’ that the research questions have generated, and so I concluded that choosing just one ‘case’ at phase three was justified. Had I tried to include all of the data collected by the four practitioners at phase three, I ran the risk of repeating the same thing over and over, albeit in a slightly different way as different people were involved. I had to be clear about the purpose of this phase of the research; I concluded that it was not to compare practitioners’ responses or build up a cumulative perspective (as in phases one and two) but to show how, given the opportunity, practitioners might begin to question their attitudes and approaches to parental partnership.

3.11: Summary

In this chapter, I have described in detail how and why decisions were made about the initial methodology and methods used in this research project. I have given a brief outline of the practitioners and the process of data collection, then discussed how that data were categorised and selected. I have summarised ethical considerations and how issues such as generalisability, credibility and trustworthiness were considered and dealt with. The next chapter goes on to discuss the findings of the data and presents an analysis of data collected at each phase of the research project.

Chapter 4: Findings, Discussion and Analysis

4.1: Research questions and how data were collected:

- ✚ How is parental engagement in general perceived and enacted by a group of early years practitioners working with two-year-olds?
- ✚ What awareness do these early years practitioners have about issues which affect their capacity to *'seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home'* (DfE, 2017: 1.10), particularly with parents accessing free early education and childcare for two-year-olds?

Data were collected over a period of seven months with a range of practitioners in a city in the North West of England. All of the practitioners that took part had some responsibility for two-year-old children on government-funded places; most were Key Persons of a small group of these children.

In the following chapter, phase one and phase two data are each presented as a summary of the data found at each phase, then analysed and discussed in sequence. At the end of each data-collection phase there is a summative discussion about what the findings from the data may mean in relation to the research questions.

Phase three data are presented as a single example of a practitioner's responses, then analysed and discussed as were phases one and two. This chapter concludes with a summative discussion about the main findings from all three phases.

4.2: Phase 1 data results, analysis and discussion

Phase one data were collected through a **questionnaire** (see Appendices 4a-4d for questions) which was sent by email to most practitioners or a paper copy for others if preferred.

The questions are displayed in groups and the responses follow. The first two categories contain data collected at the initial meeting where practitioners were given information about the project and signed the consent forms.

Questions 1 to 6 ask for factual responses, using pre-populated responses from which practitioners were asked to choose. Questions 7 to 9 use prepopulated answers also, while question 10 asks for an individual response. For this reason, questions 1 to 9 were analysed using numerical scorings, whereas question 10 was tabulated using a thematic approach, assisted by NVivo software.

Table 4.1 **Background data (collected at initial meeting)**

Gender	3 males, 19 females
Age	Up to 20 (2); 21-30 (4); 31-40 (6); 41-50 (4); 51-60 (5); 61+ (1)

Background Information

A largely female workforce

There were over six times more women practitioners than men, which reflects the fact that women 'overwhelmingly' (Simon et al, 2015: 3) outnumber male practitioners (Gambaro, 2012) in the early years workforce.

Age of practitioners

Practitioners' ages ranged from 20 years old to over 60, which provided a wide spread of representative perspectives. A study of the workforce found that over a quarter of all childcare practitioners in Britain were aged under 25 (Simon et al, 2015) so it was interesting to note that the practitioners' ages ranged so widely. This may possibly be due to the fact that the managers of the settings who selected the participants, may have chosen those with more experience. It is important to consider that age could have been an important factor in the data findings, as younger practitioners who have only ever known the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) documentation (2008; 2012; 2014; 2017) may be less likely to question the statutory regulations or the guidance documents that accompany them. Older, more experienced practitioners might be more critical of the growing demands of their increased workload since the introduction of the EYFS.

Summary of data for questions 1 to 6

Table 4.2: Practitioner answers to questions 1-6 (see Appendix 10 for individual responses)

Length of experience in childcare	Less than one year (0); 1-5 years (6); 5-10 years (6); 10-15 years (4); more than 15 years (6)
Length of experience with 2-year-olds	Less than one year (3); 1-5 years (8); 5-10 years (5); 10-15 years (3); more than 15 years (3)
Highest qualification	GCSE or equivalent (2); NNEB or equivalent (3); NVQ 3 (12); NVQ 4 (1); Bachelor's degree (4)
Type of settings	Nursery class in school (4); PVI (8); Sessional early years setting (3); Children's centre nursery (0); Other (7)
Currently based with 2-year-olds	Yes, full time (13); Yes, part-time (6); Yes, occasional cover (1) No, but oversees practice (2); Not at all (0)
Level of responsibility*	Manager (1); Deputy Manager (3); Room Leader (5); SENCO (3); Key person (8); Other (7)

Note: Practitioners identified as having more than one level of responsibility in some cases, so these categories do not add up to the overall number of practitioners. Most practitioners in senior roles also act as a key person to a group of children while childminders assume all roles as they often work alone.*

Experience with two-year-olds

Nearly a third of the practitioners had not worked as long with two-year-olds within their range of experience as with other age groups; one practitioner had worked with young children for 'over 15 years' but had only started to work with two-year-old children within the last year. Until the funded places for 'disadvantaged' two-year-olds were offered in 2013, children under three were usually in private settings or with childminders, paid for by their parents while they were at work. Many of these two-year-old children may have been in those childcare settings since they were babies and would be well-settled into nursery life by the age of two. The two-year-old children that now make up a sizeable percentage of those in nursery settings are those given a funded place due to 'disadvantage' and may, according to some studies, have speech, language and communication delay or behavioural issues (Hanson et al, 2013; Wilkinson, 2016) that may require particular skills from the practitioners. Many of these funded two-year-old children are now in a school setting, a culture that is quite different to that of the private sector. There is some debate about children as young as two being in a school setting; although steps have been taken to make the environment and staff suitable for their needs, there may be more of a focus on educational standards and attainment, often filtering through from the wider school agenda (Greene et al, 2015) as well as the EYFS.

Practitioner qualifications

Over half of the practitioners (55%) had an NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) at Level 3, although 18% had a degree at bachelor level, Level 6. This accords with studies that have found that most early years practitioners with higher qualifications do not work directly with two-year-olds but are usually placed with the over-threes. This may be due to a belief that working with pre-schoolers is somehow more important than working with children under the age of three (Georgeson et al, 2015), as it is within the pre-school room where the 'school-readiness' agenda really takes hold (Whitebread and Bingham, 2012).

Settings

Practitioners came from a range of settings and the differing cultures of these settings may have shaped perspectives about fundamental issues such as the purpose of the early education places. School-based settings and settings within the private and voluntary sector, while appearing similar in practices, are different in their underpinning philosophies about what is best for two-year-old children. Possibly these differences emerge from the historical principles of 'education' or 'care' that these settings were set up to deliver and these may be difficult for practitioners to abandon. In addition, some practitioners worked in settings that have been set up to cater especially for 'disadvantaged' two-year-olds; most of these practitioners had previously worked in the private sector and were now in schools. Greene et al (2015) found that practitioners working in school-based provision for two-year-olds were more aware of the rationale behind the funded places and were more likely to have had the benefit of training on working with parents who were living in disadvantaged circumstances.

School-based settings follow school term dates and times, whereas private sector settings can be open from 7am to 6pm, all year round. School-based practitioners usually work as part of a team overseen by a qualified teacher who may take overall responsibility for the setting's planning and assessment. Practitioners in private sector settings are allocated their own 'key children' and, as such, have ultimate responsibility for every aspect of their education and care. This difference in hours worked and responsibilities mean that practitioners working in either sector may understand their roles and responsibilities differently.

Working with two-year-olds

In the study sample, 86% of practitioners were working full-time or part-time with two-year-old children (those who stated that they were 'part-time' with the children were usually part-time practitioners overall). Working with lively two-year-olds who are keen to explore, yet have very little understanding of danger, can be more physically and emotionally demanding than caring for younger or older children; this may have some bearing on practitioners' responses and attitudes towards parents. The two practitioners

who responded as not having full-time responsibility for two-year-olds were deputy managers with other duties, not included in the 1:4 ratios every day. Again, this may influence their attitude and general enthusiasm for working with parents. These two practitioners were also SENCOs (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators) within their settings who have had the benefit of SEN training, available from their local authority consortium as an ongoing programme of support. As a rule, practitioners with SENCO responsibilities work more closely to support parents of children with identified needs than may be the norm.

Responsibility within the setting

36% of practitioners identified themselves as being a Key Person, as opposed to any other level of responsibility. In reality, any practitioner will usually be a key person, responsible for the day-to-day care of a small group of children and acting as an important liaison between the home and the setting. Excluding data from the manager and the two deputies that were not working as key persons, this brings the number of key persons up to 83%. The role of the key person, and the responsibilities they have towards a child outside of the setting may be understood differently by practitioners based in schools or in private sector settings.

In addition to having the responsibilities of a key person working directly with the children, almost a third of the practitioners identified as having other responsibilities within the setting, including Room Leader and SENCO (Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator). The responsibilities of a setting's SENCO have increased since the EYFS came into effect in 2008 (see also *SEND Code of Practice*, 2015) and Room Leader duties may include staff supervisions and monitoring activities. These additional duties may directly impact upon practitioners' availability to work closely with parents.

Summary of data for questions 7-9

Table 4.3 Questions 7-9: Practitioner attitudes towards parents in general

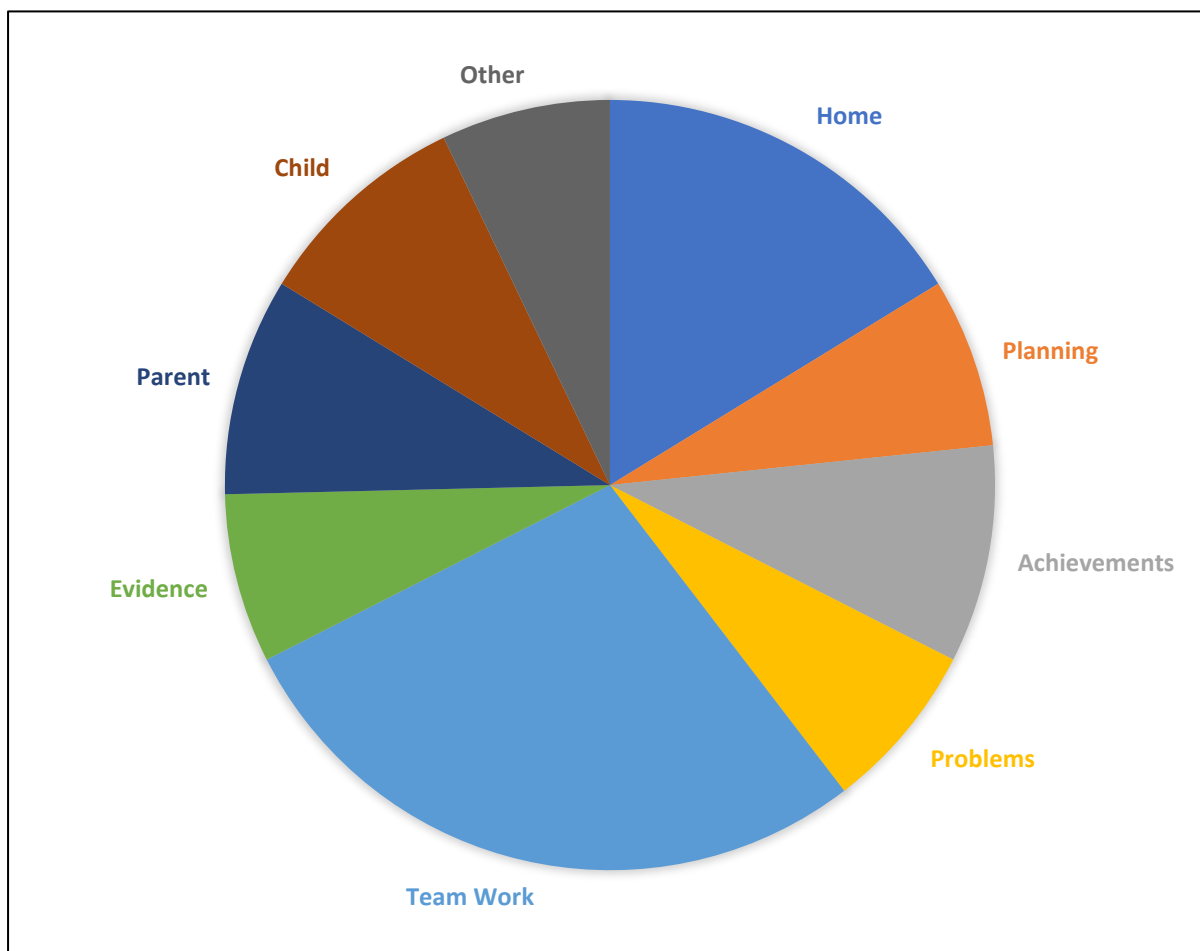
How often do you talk to parents?	Every day (19); When the child has done something (3); Concerns about the child (0); To give reminders (0); Never (0)
How confident are you talking to parents?	Extremely confident (16); Mostly confident (5); Confident when I have 'positive' things to say (0); Not confident talking about some issues (1); Not confident at all (0)
How important is it to involve parents in their children's education and care?	Extremely important (22); <i>all other categories (0)</i>

Most practitioners (86%) stated that they talked every day with parents, and later I would explore these exchanges in more detail with those who took part in phase 2. Similarly, most practitioners felt either 'extremely' or 'mostly' confident when talking to parents; there was only one practitioner who identified as being 'not confident when talking about some issues' and, as this practitioner elected to take part in phase 3, this was explored later. It is worth noting that this practitioner was in the youngest age-group category and so had less experience in early years care and education. This practitioner openly admitted to a lack of confidence and this openness spurred her on to reflect on her own and the settings' practice.

100% of the practitioners answered that it was 'extremely important' to involve parents in their children's learning. This was not surprising, given that practitioners knew the focus of the study and a 'Hawthorne' effect (Cohen et al, 2018: 321) is worth consideration, especially as this finding did not appear to match practice in some cases. To explore this finding further, practitioners were asked why they had answered question 9 in this way (see Figure 4.1).

Summary of data for Question 10

Figure 4.1 Reasons why practitioners gave their individual responses to Question 9



KEY

Team work: Working as a team to support the child (55%)

Home-: Building on home learning (32%)

Achievements: Letting parents know about what child has achieved in setting (18%)

Child: It benefits the child (18%)

Parent: It benefits the parent (18%)

Problems: So that parents know when child needs help (14%)

Planning: To get information for planning activities in the setting (14%)

Evidence: Research or experience 'proves' benefits (14%)

Other- (14%)

Some practitioners identified more than one reason why they had answered question 9 in a particular way, which is why the percentages do not add up to 100%.

Question 10 sought more specific and considered opinions about each practitioner's philosophy behind their practice with parents. Responses to this question were given as a statement, usually contained within one or two sentences. As these statements provided qualitative data (i.e. practitioners were not given pre-selected answers to select), these statements were separated out into themes, which are presented below. Responses are shown as the percentage of practitioners who made similar responses, but a greater number of responses are not presented as more important than any other at this stage.

Building on home learning is not common

Apart from a statement declaring that '*a parent is the child's first educator*' (practitioner 15), which needed some clarification, 32% of practitioners recognised that learning did go on in the home and could be optimized within the setting. This suggests that practitioners may have seen themselves and the learning opportunities which are provided in the setting as separate activities to what went on in children's homes.

Information from home is not being maximised

Planning and assessment features prominently in the daily life of an early years practitioner, so it was surprising that only a small number of practitioners (14%) made the link between a child's interests in the home and how knowledge of these interests could be used to plan activities within the setting. This reinforced the theory that many practitioners saw the home and setting as entirely separate parts of a child's life, with neither impacting particularly upon the other.

The need to evidence children's achievements

Slightly more practitioners (18%) reported that involving parents in their children's care and education was important so that parents knew about their child's 'achievements' within the setting. Here begins the idea that a child attends an early years setting primarily to 'achieve', a belief which emanates from and adds to the attainment culture that is the driver of current provision. This finding also suggests that parents would be otherwise unaware

that their children could 'do' certain things and reinforces the idea that practitioners may know more than parents about supporting children's learning in structured, planned ways. However, it is important to point out that children's 'learning' in the home may be qualitatively different to that which goes on in a setting and may be perceived by practitioners as not as valuable or as relevant.

When children need support

Of the three practitioners (14%) that mentioned the importance of parents knowing about their child's lack of achievement, one said that, '**...it is important that parents are aware of any failings or milestones not being met**' (practitioner 26). Tied in with the previous theme, this theme suggests that parents need to be made aware when their child is not displaying 'typical behaviour' for their age (DfE, 2013: 4) in any of the 'areas' of learning and development outlined by the statutory framework (DfE, 2017). Again, this indicates that the practitioners who responded in this way have fully accepted the push for children to be seen to making 'progress' and 'achieving' (*ibid*: 13); this socially-constructed discourse in the EYFS drives how practitioners are forced to demonstrate their continuous support for each child's learning and development in order to be policy compliant. The notion that young children can and should be graded according to norms of child development 'goals' has become early years' practitioners' principal responsibility. It is also noticeable that the language of success and failure is embedded, implying that some practitioners have a narrow understanding of the purpose of early years education, as determined by the EYFS. Thus, it may be possible that parents and practitioners see the early years of a child's life in different ways; they are speaking a different 'language' when talking about children.

'Working as a team' with parents

Nearly half (45%) of practitioners wrote about 'working together' or the importance of being in 'partnership' with parents, usually citing benefits to the child. Again, the EYFS-driven language of 'achievement' is noticeable, with practitioners using words like 'teaching', 'areas' and 'development'. Practitioners also stressed that partnership working ensured 'consistency' and 'continuity' of approaches '**so as not to cause confusion for the**

child' (practitioner 5). These statements suggest that practitioners understood and used the rhetoric of 'parent partnership' (Fitzpatrick, 2012: 262), implying that they had at least a theoretical understanding of the principles and philosophy. This occasionally led to broad statements such as:

'... it is beneficial to the child if parents and care givers are working together to help the child achieve their full potential' (practitioner 2).

Parental engagement shows benefits to a child's learning

One practitioner mentioned that she had read studies that showed the benefits of parental involvement in children's learning:

'... I am aware of evidence showing that children's learning and development is greatly enhanced when the level of parental involvement is high' (practitioner 2).

Two more statements (one from practitioner 2 again) showed some evidence of reflective skills, having seen the difference in children whose parents were involved in their learning:

'I have seen how children with parental involvement in their education tend to flourish when compared to those who do not have the involvement at home' (practitioner 6).

'In my experience when parental engagement is high it is evident in not only their development but their attitude to learning and their enjoyment of attending the setting' (practitioner 2).

Both practitioners had a bachelor's degree; research has shown that higher qualifications may lead to better practice in terms of supporting children's learning (Mathers et al, 2014).

Some practitioners have a 'deficit' opinion of certain parents

Some practitioners (18%) reported that efforts to get parents involved in their children's education would benefit the parents as much as the children. These practitioners talked of the need to 'support' parents, suggesting that a 'deficit' notion may be adopted by some, reinforcing the idea that practitioners may assume a specialist knowledge when talking to

parents about their children's learning. While most of those practitioners linked the benefit to the parent as being support for helping their child, one practitioner suggested that there might be broader issues to consider; that of seeking personal support for issues unrelated to their child's learning:

'Parents may feel they are more able to confide or ask for help if needed'

(practitioner 10).

Feeling able to request help may be particularly important for parents who are living in poverty; many on low incomes are subject to multiple areas of disadvantage, such as inadequate housing, lack of play spaces for children to play or ill-health (Cooper and Stewart, 2013). Practitioners who are knowledgeable about the communities in which they work may be able to signpost parents to services that could assist them.

Parental engagement benefits the child

Fewer than a quarter of practitioners (18%) suggested that parental involvement in their child's learning would benefit the child. In the main, these few suggestions did not provide concrete examples but instead talked of parental engagement supporting ***'development and growth'*** (practitioner 22) or being ***'imperative for the success of the children'*** (practitioner 4). These statements may have been absorbed through policy documents or training, reflecting the opinion that it is parent(s) that have the biggest influence on a child's future.

One practitioner, however, felt that parental engagement was beneficial at the beginning of childcare experience: ***'Children will settle much quicker when they see good relationships between parents and staff'*** (practitioner 10), implying that a good reason to involve parents is that everyone will ultimately benefit but seeing engagement as a strategy to assist a child's transition into nursery rather than as a vehicle for increasing a child's learning.

Parental engagement can benefit the setting

Practitioners often measure the effectiveness of an event or activity by the quantity of parents engaging with it. High parental engagement, where lots of parents turn up and join in, is valued as it can be showcased to Ofsted and other regulators as a practical demonstration of 'quality' (Harms et al, 2014).

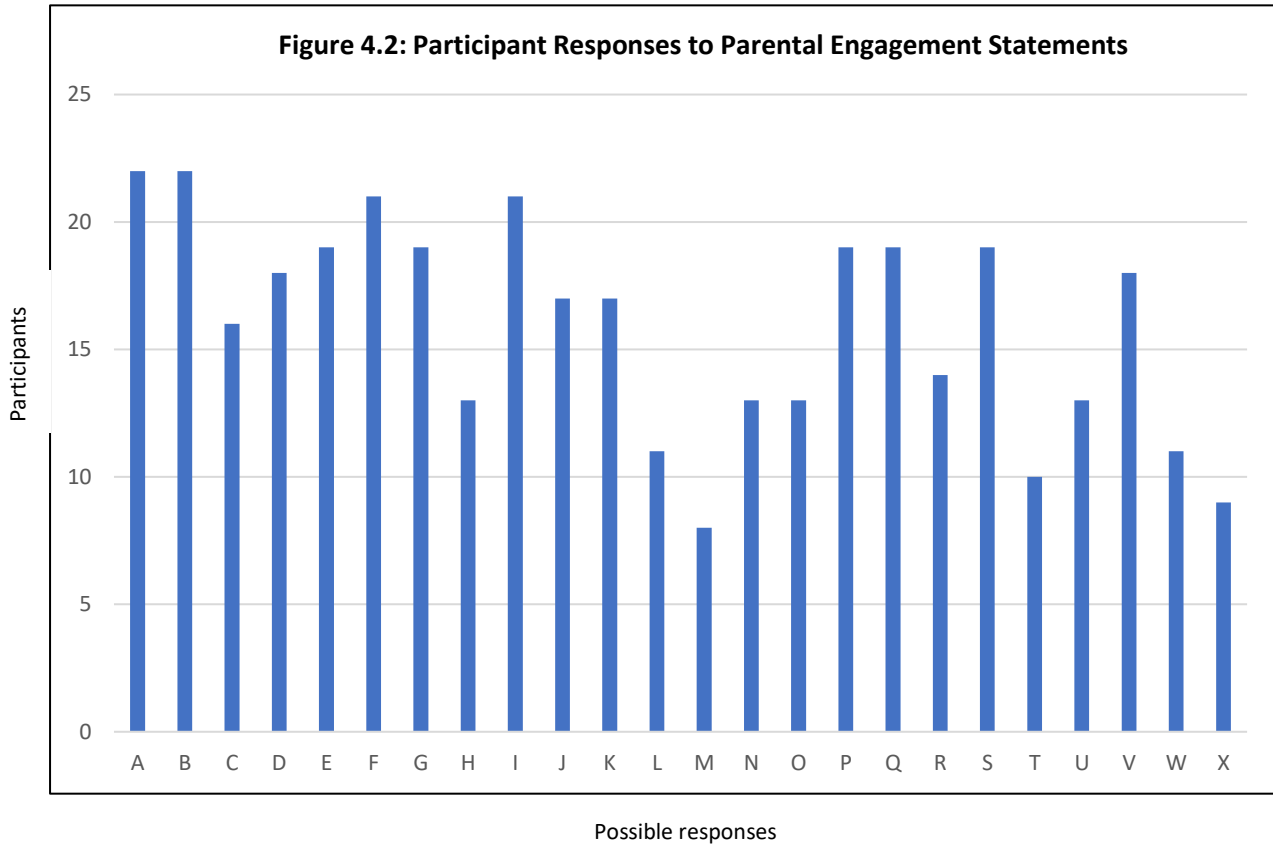
Another statement inferred that there may be some resentment about the lack of recognition that practitioners receive for the work they do:

***'It (parental engagement) lets the parents see that we don't just play with children.'** (practitioner 13)*

This comment relates to practitioner concerns that parents possibly place a relatively low value on their work with young children. It is possible that this practitioner thinks that she and her colleagues must continuously demonstrate how 'professional' they are. This shows the disunity between what practitioners and parents understand as the responsibility of those caring for children; practitioners see themselves as 'educators' but parents may not. It is also worth pointing out the word 'just' when talking about play; by making this statement, the practitioner may be demonstrating an ambivalent attitude towards the role of play in early learning. There is a hint here that this practitioner does not want to be seen simply as a facilitator of play, a child's playmate, but as a professional who gets on with the serious business of teaching, assessing and recording progress.

Parental Engagement Questionnaire; final questions

Practitioners were asked to identify activities that they offered parents (see Appendices 4c and 4d, pages 3 and 4). There were 24 possibilities (A- X)



Two statements were highlighted by all 22 (100%) participants as being part of their practice. These were:

Talked about children's learning informally (e.g. 'She counted up to three today.')

Talked about children's care informally (e.g. 'He ate all his dinner today.')

The two statements least highlighted as being part of participants' practice were:

Given a parent the opportunity to see you reading to their child (e.g. invitation to story time). 8 respondents (36%).

Invited a parent to accompany their child on a trip (e.g. to the zoo, a pantomime). 9 respondents (41%).

Responses to final questions

Practitioners were provided with a list of possible parental engagement activities to highlight (see Appendices 4c and 4d); these were a compilation of activities that I have either used myself, observed being used in other settings or suggested in the literature on parental engagement activities (e.g. Sargent, 2013;). Although these activities might be considered as 'good practice', it is important to recognise and acknowledge my own bias here and the subjective nature of judging provision 'good' when it is more in line with one's own practices and beliefs. I pondered over whether to include them or not, but, ultimately, I did include them as I wanted to explore the range of strategies for engagement and considered that this would be likely to generate a wider response, if only by reducing the need to write a lot by avoiding 'too much strain' for the practitioners (Cohen et al, 2018: 474).

I was especially interested in those activities related to support for home learning (G, H, I, J, K, L, O, P, R and S), which were embedded within a range of other 'involvement' activities. Other suggested practices may have a more indirect impact on parental understanding (A, C, D, E, M, N, T and U), as they are situations where practitioners demonstrate what they do, as a model for parents to replicate at home.

- a. Statement 'I', which was the statement that would most directly answered the research question (*'Given a parent some ideas about what they can do at home to support their child's interest or needs'*) gleaned a response of 86%. Statements 'P' (*'Given a parent ideas about mark-making and writing'*) and 'S' (*'Given a parent information about speech and language issues, e.g. dummy use'*) were each marked by 79% of respondents. These high responses indicate that parental engagement in their children's learning was a high priority for many settings, at least in theory.

Practitioners were asked to highlight activities that they had used, with no boundaries as to when or how frequently, so it is possible that statements were highlighted based on just one occasion or with one parent. On reflection, it might have provided better data if I had presented response to these statements as a scale of frequency or importance.

- b. Comparatively few practitioners (33%) agreed that they had 'given a parent the opportunity to see you reading to their child' (e.g. invitation to story time)', statement 'M'. It is difficult for anyone but the most confident practitioners to 'perform' in front of parents, so it is not surprising that modelling storytelling is not a popular option. Another reason may simply be lack of time or opportunity to do this particular activity.
- c. Invitations to events in the setting such as 'Stay and Play' sessions are a common feature of parental involvement strategies. However, attendance rates are often quite low, to the disappointment of the practitioners who have planned activities for them, reinforcing a belief that some parents do not care about their child's education, as was suggested in later interviews.
- d. The average number of statements highlighted were 17.5 out of a possible 24, ranging from two practitioners who highlighted all of the statements to one practitioner who highlighted only 11. Looking at their qualifications, the two practitioners who said that they offered all of the stated activities were educated to degree level, suggesting that higher qualifications may increase the likelihood of engaging parents effectively, possibly due to increased confidence in one's own ability and expertise.

4.3: Summary and discussion of themes emerging from Phase 1 data

Data from phase one showed some possible lines of exploration for phases two and three of the research study, that would help to examine how practitioners perceived their work with parents, particularly those of children accessing the funded Early Education Entitlement, who may be classed as 'disadvantaged'. The questionnaire that was used to collect data at

phase one did not focus specifically on practitioners' work with this specific group of parents; after deliberation, I considered that an overview of the work that goes on with all parents would be useful in establishing a context for the research questions. By allowing practitioners to talk freely about their attempts at engaging parents generally, I reasoned that we could then move into the particular more naturally at phases two and three. Issues that emerged from the research practitioners' responses would be investigated in more depth at these phases through semi-structured interviews and informal conversations.

The questionnaire, therefore, was largely used to collect factual data to answer research question one: ***How is parental engagement in general currently perceived and enacted by a group of early years practitioners working with two-year-olds?***

The discussion that follows explores themes that were found within data collected from the questionnaire.

The themes that emerged from Phase One are as follows:

- ✚ Early years practitioners are mostly female.
- ✚ Practitioners with higher qualifications are more likely to be given additional responsibilities and are less likely to be working directly with two-year-olds.
- ✚ Two-year-olds can be found in school settings as well as private day care.
- ✚ Practitioners overwhelmingly state that involving parents in their child's education is 'extremely important'
- ✚ Practitioners may not understand that the most effective 'parental involvement' is when a parent supports their child's learning in the home.
- ✚ Practitioners recognise that parental engagement helps children and the setting, but this is often for different reasons.
- ✚ Practitioners generally seem content with the parental involvement strategies offered by their setting.

Themes found from data emerging from phase one

Early years practitioners are mostly female.

That practitioners proved to be ‘overwhelming female’ (Simon et al, 2016: 13) is unsurprising but, in relation to this research, it may be worth considering what this may mean to those outside of the profession and particularly to those using early years provision. Until fairly recently, ‘childcare’ has been considered as a woman’s work; it is also a career option that is associated with low status and low pay (Gambaro, 2012) with a presumption that women who choose this as a career option do so for ‘love’ rather than financial reward (Page, 2011:3). However, practitioners have seen a dramatic increase in the responsibilities that their role entails (MacNaughton and Hughes, 2011). Practitioners are now required to address issues such as ‘disadvantage’ and the underachievement of children from poorer backgrounds, a ‘responsibilisation’ (Done and Murphy, 2018: 142) that may not have been made clear to them or factored into their daily responsibilities, all the while satisfying increasing policy requirements of accountability and performance monitoring.

The gendered nature of the profession may also affect the relationship between the ‘parent’ and practitioner as it is usually the child’s mother that will have most contact with the female key person. Brooker found that some of the practitioners she interviewed in two settings referred to their key person role as ‘a mother substitute’ or ‘a second mother’ (2010: 191). This may create another psychological undercurrent to the relationship; practitioners in their role as a substitute for maternal care while the child is in the setting may judge mothers whom they decide are lacking in some way. Mothers, in turn, may feel uncertain or even undermined by the position that practitioners take in their child’s life (Sims-Schouten, 2015).

One of the important findings of Desforges and Abouchar’s intensive review of parental involvement was that the ‘maternal level of education’ most impacted upon the level of involvement in the child’s learning (2003: 32) which places the spotlight, whether fairly or not, on mothers. This possibly carries the expectation that it will be the mother who takes

on the duties of educational support for the young children in the home and it will be the mother who is judged if she does not.

Practitioners with higher qualifications are more likely to be given additional responsibilities within the setting.

McDowall-Clark and Baylis (2012) found that practitioners with Early Years' Professional Status (later Early Years Teacher Status) were less likely to be working directly with two-year-old children. Of the 22 respondents to the questionnaire, fewer than a quarter of them had been educated to degree level, suggesting that practitioners with degrees are less likely to be working with two-year-olds, as was found by Georgeson et al (2015). There are now more degree-level practitioners than ever before, and these practitioners (particularly those with an early childhood-related degree) have been shown to improve standards in a setting (Mathers et al, 2014). Being educated to a higher level than most of one's colleagues often leads to increased responsibility within the setting and may confer a confidence to engage with parents more readily. Although not specifically asked in the questionnaire, subsequent interviews proved that this was the case; only two of the four practitioners with a degree worked directly with two-year-old children, all had additional responsibilities within the setting and all expressed confidence when talking to parents. While increased qualifications and training may improve a setting overall, it may make the practitioner holding these increased responsibilities less available to make relationships with parents as a 'Key Person' (Elfer et al, 2012: 23), in particular establishing the 'triangle of trust' that these authors advised.

Two-year-olds can be found in school settings as well as in private day care.

These settings have different cultures which may influence the emphasis that practitioners working in them place on education or care. Mathers and Smees (2014), used environmental measures (Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scales, Harms et al, 2014) and found that early years provision in areas of disadvantage was generally higher in schools

than in private settings (2014). Although their review was based on provision for children of three and four, there is little reason to suspect that provision for two-year-olds would be different.

Practitioners working in school settings are often under the direct supervision of a teacher with either Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) or Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) and will be used to working as part of a team planning for children's learning (Moss, 2014). There is a culture in schools of sharing expertise and a professional approach to their work that is different to that held by practitioners in private and voluntary settings or childminders and may focus more heavily on 'education' than on 'care'. Practitioners in private settings often do not have direct access to a colleague with an early childhood degree, Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) or Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) and so may lack an understanding of where early years learning fits into the bigger picture of a child's educational journey. They may also be unaware of social issues such as poverty and its impact upon children's achievements, especially under the label of 'disadvantage'.

Practitioners state that involving parents in their child's education is 'extremely important'.

However, practitioners may be confused as to what this involvement could be and how it could be implemented (Robinson and Harris, 2014). There is often a tendency in educational settings to evaluate effectiveness of an 'involvement' strategy by the numbers of parents taking part or in attendance; for example, practitioners will declare a Stay and Play session a success if most of the parents attend, regardless of their level of 'involvement' in the activities on offer at the session or whether they continue with these activities at home. Practitioners may not ponder why certain parents are regular non-attendees and may simply interpret non-attendance as lack of interest on the part of the parents. They may not be asking themselves questions about their own practice; for example, whether the format, timing or environment could be making some parents feel uncomfortable or unwelcome (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). In addition, practitioners may not always see beyond the actual Stay and Play session or try to include parents that do not attend. In this way, the strategy that they hold up as good 'parental involvement' may simply increase inequality of

provision, as those who are more 'advantaged' are often those who are more likely to attend (Brooker, 2002).

Practitioners may not understand that the most effective 'parental involvement' is when a parent supports their child's learning in the home.

It is possible that practitioners have in their minds an image of an 'interested', 'engaged' parent; one who is always pleasant, respectful, grateful for advice and keen to attend setting activities. This parent will be actively involved, understanding the EYFS discourse and assessment procedures that the setting uses. However, while settings may indeed have some parents like this, many parents do not fit this idealized mould. It may be particularly difficult for parents who are stressed, juggling busy home lives or work commitments with the demands of caring for a young family, and especially those who are considered to be 'disadvantaged'.

Such unrealistic perceptions may also drive a wedge between the parent: practitioner relationship as lack of obvious involvement is often interpreted as lack of interest (Watt, 2016) or even 'apathy' (Cottle and Alexander, 2014: 653). Brooker noted that practitioners expected parents to be appreciative of their efforts to share their knowledge and expertise (2010); practitioners may be disappointed and abandon their efforts if parental responses come across as lukewarm.

Practitioners recognise that parental engagement helps a child and the setting, but this is often for reasons not associated with a child's learning.

When practitioners were asked to highlight parental 'involvement' strategies that were used in their settings, many related to activities that would not directly impact upon a child's learning. For example, parental attendance at a social event or even a 'shared' event like a Stay and Play session may well boost the setting's 'engagement with parents' evidence in the setting's inspection but will often have no long-term effect unless what and how the child is learning is made clear. Conversely, while a parent who does not attend these

activities may be actively involved in home-based activities with their child, such as baking cakes or sharing books, this may remain invisible to the setting and therefore disregarded.

Practitioners generally seem content with the parental involvement strategies offered by their setting.

This assumption on my part was not based on ‘hard’ data but more on an impression that was formed from the number of activities respondents said they offered to parents. If the research was to stop at this point, it could appear that a proactive, positive philosophy of parental engagement was embedded into most settings, and that all practitioners in this study were committed to making it work as effectively as possible. However, the fact that the respondents were satisfied with their approaches and did not question or seek to improve this aspect of their work, made the next stages of the research imperative. It was important to understand if certain issues hindered authentic parental partnership. These were explored in greater depth in the next phase of the research.

4.4: Phase 2 data findings, analysis and discussion

It was at this stage that the research questions overlapped. While the questionnaire provided data that answered the first question, the interviews at phase two provided answers to both questions:

- ✚ How is parental engagement in general currently perceived and enacted by a group of early years practitioners working with two-year-olds?

- ✚ What awareness do these early years practitioners have about issues which affect their capacity to *‘seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their*

child's development at home' (DfE, 2017: 1.10), particularly with parents accessing free early education and childcare for two-year-olds?

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 5) with 15 individual practitioners. The questions asked were constructed from literature that was being read at the time (see Chapter 2, Literature Review) and partly affected by data from questionnaires that had been completed by the 15 practitioners (and others) in the previous month. These findings, as outlined in the Phase One summary above (see 4.3), suggested that certain avenues should be explored within the interviews.

Summary of data results from Phase Two

NVivo was used to assist in the classification of the data and thematic analysis was then employed to identify common themes that emerged from the 15 interview responses. These broad themes have been classified still further into Key Points which have been summarised, with a selection of individual responses provided as an example of what practitioners said during their interviews (see Appendix 5 for interview questions). Data results are presented in chart form showing each overall theme with its component Key Points for clarity. Each of these Key Points is then summarised, analysed and discussed separately.

Theme A: Practitioners' perceived barriers for parental partnership working

Key Points	Number of Participants making comment/15	Total of references made throughout interviews
1. Difficulties arising from parents	15	42
2. Setting constraints	13	54
3. Practitioner lack of knowledge about child's family	9	13
4. Practitioner issues (e.g. confidence)	8	10

Theme B: Practitioners' beliefs about their work

Key Points	Number of Practitioners making comments/15	Total references made throughout interviews
5. Practitioners focus on children's 'achievement'	14	39
6. Mismatched expectations of what the place in the setting is for	13	65
7. Practitioners may have a deficit expectation of parents on low income	12	27
8. Practitioners think that early years settings are the best place for children's learning	8	15

Theme C: Practitioners' knowledge and understanding of wider issues

Key Points	Number of Practitioners/15	References made throughout interviews
9. Understanding of the effects of poverty on children and their families	15	21
10. Understanding of what makes a good Home Learning Environment (HLE)	14	23
11. Training on parental engagement	14	22
12. Understanding of funded place	12	19

- The largest number of references made by practitioners in their interviews showed that that they might have ‘mismatched expectations’ of early education and care to the parents of the children that accessed a two-year-old funded place (Theme B, Key Point 6: 65 references made by 13 practitioners).
- This was followed by ‘setting constraints’ cited by 13 practitioners with 54 references made throughout the interviews (Theme A: Key Point 2).
- The third subject most cited as an issue by practitioners was that difficulties sometimes arose from the parents themselves, and this was a barrier to parental engagement (Theme A, Key Point 1: 42 references made by 15 practitioners).

These points are discussed below within the themes in which they appear.

Analysis and discussion of individual key points from identified themes

Theme A: Practitioners’ perceived barriers for effective parental partnership working

Key Point 1	Number of Practitioners making comment/15	Total of references made throughout interviews
Difficulties arising from parents	15	42

All practitioners in the interviews perceived that difficulties coming from the parents were a major contributing factor in preventing parental engagement, both in setting activities and in their child's learning. Many of the practitioners talked of how parents always seemed busy, **'in a rush'** (Practitioner 1) and **'just eager to go really'** (Practitioner 11). Some practitioners interpreted this as the parent's lack of interest in their child's learning, for example:

'some parents just don't want to know. They just want to pass the child over and they don't want to chat.' (Practitioner 21)

Analysis and Discussion of Key Point 1

Practitioners make assumptions about parents based on their show of interest in what they have to say.

Goodall and Montgomery suggested that practitioners ‘can often make assumptions about groups of parents based on very little actual knowledge’ (2014: 400) and the practitioners in this study appeared to be making assumptions about parents who did not engage regularly in conversation with them. Not only are assumptions often unfair, they may also hinder relationships between practitioners and parents and limit the communication between them.

Communication between the key adults in a child’s life is of crucial importance, according to Lang et al (2015) as it affects not only the quality and likelihood of parental interest in suggestions made by the child’s key person, but also affects the child’s transition into, and well-being within, the setting. Significantly, all of the practitioners in this research study thought that a major hurdle in getting parents involved in setting activities was the responses of the parents. Many gave specific examples of parents who did not react positively to practitioner overtures, which was interpreted as a lack of interest. Practitioners assumed that parents’ lack of engagement, even at the most basic level of exchanging greetings and pleasantries at drop-off or pick-up times, showed a disregard, not just for the setting or for what the practitioner had to say, but for the child as well. This echoes the work of Boag-Munro and Evangelou, who found that practitioners interpreted parental lack of attention to setting activities as being uninterested in their own child’s learning and development, earning such parents the label of being ‘hard to reach’ (2012: 210). Similarly, Cottle and Alexander (2014) found that the practitioners that they researched interpreted parental lack of enthusiastic response as apathy; in addition, these researchers found that this judgement was mainly directed towards parents from low-income homes.

Practitioners may, therefore, make assumptions about parents’ attitudes about their child’s learning based solely on their willingness to listen and show interest in what is said to them by the practitioners. Assumptions like these can be damaging to relationship-building, as a

perceived lack of interest on the part of one member can lead to a situation where, as Brooker describes it, there is an ‘absence of genuine care’ (2011:184) between the practitioners and parents. Once the relationship has deteriorated into this state, it may affect the willingness of one to continue making efforts to connect with the other. In other words, practitioners who feel that they have been rebuffed by a parent, will not persist in trying to converse with that parent, and opportunities for shared discussion about a child’s learning will be greatly reduced.

Discussions about children’s learning may naturally evolve from a bedrock of frequent, mutually-agreeable ‘chats’ between practitioner and parent; Callanan et al (2017) pointed out that these conversations, which might naturally develop still further into practitioner suggestions for a parent to try, are not likely to happen until a groundwork of relationship-building has been done. This may take longer to establish with some parents than with others. It is more likely, as Brooker (2002) found in her year-long study of practitioners and parents, that the more confident, articulate parents are only too willing to share information about their child with the practitioner while others shy away. This, warned Brooker, can lead to a situation where some parents get a lot more of a practitioner’s time and attention than others simply because they initiate more interactions.

Theme A: Practitioners’ perceived barriers for effective parental partnership working

Key Point 2	Number of Practitioners making comment/15	Total of references made throughout interviews
Setting constraints	13	54

Most practitioners considered that time was also an issue from the setting point of view, particularly if they were expected to speak to parents while also supervising other children. Practitioner 18 who worked in a private day-care setting discussed how, in theory, practitioners should be available to talk to parents at any time, but in practice it was difficult:

'...of course, we are always there to talk to them but sometimes it can be a bit hard. Especially if you're in the room on your own'.

The occasions when practitioners and parents naturally meet, drop-off and pick-up times, are not always conducive to any discussions about a child other than a quick summary of the essentials. This means that discussions about a child's learning would often have to wait for more formal feedback sessions where parents would be allocated a specific time for this to happen. This issue of time was a concern for most of the practitioners who realised that the current set-up was not ideal, a concern that was stated by Practitioner 3 who said:

'...on a normal day, it's that busy sometimes, you don't get... you'll say, 'Hello' and everything but you don't get chance to say something that you want to say.'

Other constraints were practitioners having to be moved from their key children to cover for absences or breaks, and shift patterns (private nurseries are often open from 7.30am until 6.00pm) which meant that practitioners might not always be on hand to speak to the parents of their key children. Having to be fully available for the emotional needs of new children during their settling-in phases was also highlighted by some practitioners as this meant even less time to be able to converse with parents.

Practitioners are also compelled to keep any comments that could be construed as a criticism to themselves. They may see and hear things that they realise are not particularly helpful to a child's learning but are not allowed to speak out, as perhaps a health professional might. As Practitioner 12 commented:

'I mean, if we were so honest saying that...there has to be changes in your house, we can't say that, because they will leave.'

Analysis and Discussion of Key Point 2

Practitioners make attempts to talk to parents most days.

Although practitioners had said in their questionnaires that they mostly talked to parents every day, 'talk' in this case may be general chat rather than anything meaningful about children's learning. Mathers and colleagues (2014) argued that practitioners should be

capable of having an ongoing dialogue with parents about their children's learning. Pascal and Bertram (2013), however, found that the practitioners they studied were generally not aware of the powerful role that they could be playing in the lives of the families they came into contact with each day, and this seemed to be the case for most of the practitioners in this research study.

In fairness, this lack of in-depth talk may be regulated more by the time available rather than being a deliberate strategy of avoidance. Practitioners in this study showed that they were knowledgeable and mostly willing to engage in 'learning' talk but lacked the structural support, amongst other things, to do so.

Practitioners need time to prioritise relationship-building with parents.

The process of relationship-building takes time and effort which practitioners do not always have. It appears from the data that, although practitioners acknowledge the importance of building relationships with parents, no time is committed by setting timetables to ensuring that this happens. Building relationships takes time and the process cannot be hurried (Cottle and Alexander, 2014), especially if parents are stressed or initially mistrustful of people that they do not know well. Some parents may also be wary of talking to someone that they see as an authority figure; practitioners, with their increased 'professional' personas, may come across as such (Faulkner and Coates, 2013).

Respondents showed in their interviews that it was not recognised that practitioners needed designated, protected time to be able to talk to and listen to parents in an unhurried manner. MacNaughton and Hughes found that practitioners were 'time poor' (2011: xi) and this was reflected by the interviewees in this study. Whether this is due to the pressure of their increased workload in general (Brooker, 2010) or simply because of the need to attend to the needs of children at the same time as conversing with parents, lack of time for conversations was cited as a significant issue for the practitioners who were interviewed.

Yet another factor that affected the quality (and quantity) of practitioner-parent conversations was where they had to take place. At present, most conversations happen at

the start and end of sessions within full view of everyone and with the children still present. It is likely that, at these times, practitioners may be communicating an air of distraction or disinterest as their attention is inevitably elsewhere; they may be guilty of the very thing that they find irritating in parents (see Key Point 1). Talk about children's learning then, which of necessity may have to be longer than an exchange of a few words, does not happen apart from timetabled feedback sessions where practitioners tell parents about their child's achievement of 'targets' within the setting (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016a: 127). The type of talk that a formal situation engenders could affect parental confidence as supporters of their child's learning (Sime and Sheridan, 2014), as they often are compelled to look through the copious documentation that the practitioner provides.

Practitioners are constrained by practices within the setting that limit their freedom to talk to parents.

Practitioners may be nervous to overstep unseen boundaries with parents, which may make relationships uneasy. It was suggested that some practitioners hold back from giving advice for fear that a parent may take offence and move their child to a different setting. Practitioners, especially those who work in private sector settings, often have to labour under the constraints of what behaviours and approaches managers or owners decree acceptable; the 'customer' (in this case, the parent) is always right. This may mean that suggesting certain practices (such as stopping the use of a dummy or giving advice about a child's diet) has to be done sensitively and cautiously. This, in turn, might result in issues affecting a child's learning or well-being only being challenged in particular circumstances, such as a suspected safeguarding matter. A general fear of 'offending' could extend to a reluctance to make suggestions for a child's learning in the home, worrying that a parent might interpret suggestions as a criticism of their parenting in general. This again points to the necessity for developing 'positive relationships' (Hayes et al, 2017: 30) of mutual regard between key persons and parents, to ensure that children are supported in the best way possible.

In addition to the concern that a parent might remove their child, there is the prospect of a parent making a complaint to Ofsted if they are unhappy with a setting's practices. These

complaints are then followed up by an investigation, sometimes triggering a full inspection of the setting (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted/about/complaints-procedure>) with possible repercussions for the whole staff.

Settings generally do not provide extra cover to allow practitioners to settle in new children.

New children may be upset at being separated from their parent and need comfort from their key person. Transitions can thus be stressful for practitioners and may limit the time that they can spend with parents. Dealing with children who are upset takes a lot of emotional energy and meeting the needs of two-year-old children, often the most physically challenging anyway (Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2015), can be particularly fraught at transition points. A facet of everyday life, particularly in the private sector, is that new children are constantly starting and being settled in; children who are based in school settings are more likely to start together at the start of a new term or staggered over a few weeks. Some practitioners mentioned in their interviews that settling in new children takes up their full attention; they are conscious of being able to do little more than comfort or try to distract a crying child at drop off times and deal with anxious parental queries at picking up time. Unfortunately, there is seldom funding for extra staff that can be utilised to cover at such periods (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2017) so this can lead to practitioners being stressed and tired when they come into contact with parents at the end of the day.

Theme A: Practitioners’ perceived barriers for effective parental partnership working

Key Point 3	Number of Practitioners making comment/15	Total of references made throughout interviews
Practitioner lack of knowledge about child’s family	9	13

A number of practitioners reported that they felt hampered by their lack of knowledge of the some of the families with which they worked. Practitioners suggested that it was on the parents' terms how much they wanted to share with the setting, leading one to point out that, **'it's difficult really to say what's going on at home'** (Practitioner 16). This left practitioners uncertain how far they could go in finding out about family situations:

'...then you're kind of wondering, 'What is the situation here? What do I need to do to help—this mum?' (Practitioner 6).

Practitioners' practice was at times impeded by a key person system that was not fully adhered to. This affected the relationships that they were able to build with parents; a practitioner noted that parents may not know who their child's key person was, saying:

'... I think sometimes as well, that they don't actually know who's who. I mean, key person? They probably think, 'Who's that?' 'What does that mean?'

(Practitioner 11)

This practitioner went on to say that there was a display in the reception area about the key person groups within the setting but **'I don't think they read them.'**

However, one practitioner reported that the key person system helped her own confidence; she recalled how she felt more confident working with parents when she had done their initial transition procedures, because she knew more about their children:

'I feel that I've got more of a definite bond with the ones that I first of all settled in...there is a little bit more...' (Practitioner 18)

Analysis and Discussion of Key Point 3

Some settings do not have a robust key person approach in place.

The Key Person approach is a statutory requirement which should have been fully in place in all Ofsted-registered settings since 2008, when the EYFS was first introduced. Interpretations of the role of a key person (Elfer et al, 2012) may, however, be a nominal figure assigned to take responsibility for the child's learning documentation. In cases where

a key person approach is not fully adhered to, setting managers who authorise this may not be considering the impact that seeing a range of different practitioners could have, not just on the children but on their parents as well. Parents have to trust (Roberts, 2017) the person who will be caring for their child and this is difficult when there is inconsistency in staffing. Some respondents mentioned in their interviews that they are moved around when other members of staff are absent. As one practitioner commented, this can make things difficult when a parent wants to know how their child has been in the setting that day:

'I haven't actually been around my key group as much because I have been covering a lot in baby room. So, there's a little bit of a – thing there where... I mean, I am around, I'm just not there from the minute they come in until the minute they go home, no-one is actually like that anyway, but I just sometimes feel that I'm not there... too much.' (Practitioner 18)

While covering for staff absence may be unavoidable at times, it is not advisable to use this as a long-term practice as, not only does it unsettle children, it leaves parents confused and possibly reticent to talk to a person they do not know very well. As Roberts found, trust was especially important for 'families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage' (*ibid*: 4).

Being moved around too much could mean that practitioners have only a superficial knowledge of the families of the children they care for; they also do not acquire the deeper understanding of the responsibilities of the key person beyond the setting. In addition, they may not come to recognise the powerful position that they, as a key person to the child, could hold as a trusted adviser to the child's family. This is likely to only come about by seeing first-hand the effects of advice or guidance given to a parent that has had a positive impact upon a child's learning. As one practitioner pointed out when talking about twins that needed a referral to Speech and Language therapy:

'...when they left she (*the children's mother*) cried and she was like, 'I can't believe what you've done for us.' But, point blank, going back six months previously, she didn't want anything to do with it... it took ages for me to coax her around. That's how... to me, that's what a key person is.' (Practitioner 13)

Theme A: Practitioners' perceived barriers for effective parental partnership working

Key Point 4	Number of Practitioners making comment/15	Total of references made throughout interviews
Practitioner issues (e.g. confidence)	8	10

Some practitioners considered that colleagues sometimes struggled with issues such as confidence when talking to parents. However, one practitioner commented in her appraisal of her colleagues, '**sometimes it's confidence but sometimes it might just be – lack of interest...**' (Practitioner 20).

Practitioners also appear to be aware that the approach they are obliged to take with parents may be confusing. Practitioner 6 described how parents may be bewildered by a change in manner when talking about the 'serious' business of children's learning:

'...so then, when you all of a sudden rock out with stuff, maybe you want to talk about developing a play plan for a child, or you want to talk about their – developmental needs, all of a sudden it's like, 'Ohhh. You were talking to me about the match two minutes ago and now you want to talk about...' (laughs). And sometimes you'll see this barrier come down...'

Analysis and Discussion of Key Point 4

There may be a dichotomy between how practitioners view themselves and how they think parents view them.

Practitioners may be aware that parents do not always see them as the professional educators that they are. This could affect practitioners' confidence or commitment to approaching parents about their children's learning. They may also be conflicted about the different roles they have to play. Although, on the one hand, practitioners rightly view themselves as professionals (in their dealings with children and their learning), they may

feel troubled by a perceived lack of status in parents' eyes. In the interviews, practitioners expressed a reluctance to have certain conversations with parents, possibly feeling that they do not have the right to ask certain questions as, perhaps, a health visitor or a medical practitioner might. They appeared to feel embarrassed to ask parents about their home circumstances for fear that parents may think they are 'prying', which is consistent with other research findings (Boag-Munro and Evangelou, 2012: 230; White and Karabon, 2016: 213).

The reluctance that practitioners reported in this study may extend to their conversations with parents about children's learning, due to an internal struggle that the dual role of the 'friendly carer' and 'professional educator' creates. Practitioners may try to establish friendly relationships with parents but could also realise that, if they are to make any headway towards impacting upon children's learning in some homes, they might have to adopt a different approach, one that may seem at odds with the light-hearted conversations they have previously had with a parent.

Early years practitioners may resent the increased responsibility of supporting a child's learning at home as well as within the setting.

Practitioners may feel that their job is difficult enough with the increased 'schoolification' (PACEY, 2013: 9) of their workload resulting in extensive record-keeping. While lack of confidence may be an issue for some (and this could be for different reasons, such as confidence in their own knowledge, in their right to give advice, or in conquering their fear of possible confrontation), it was suggested by some practitioners that certain of their colleagues are not interested enough in the families of the children in their key group to initiate engagement strategies, or may not always see the need to do so. As Practitioner 20 remarked:

'...when you do have new staff or even some of the older staff, they don't kind of see how important it is to involve parents. They think, 'As long as I'm doing my job, they should be doing, whatever, their own thing at home.'

Theme B: Practitioners' beliefs about their work

Key Point 5	Number of Practitioners making comments/15	Total references made throughout interviews
Practitioners focus on children's 'achievement'	14	39

Talk of children being **'behind'**, **'below'** or **'what stage in development they are up to'** was common throughout the interviews (Practitioner 12; Practitioner 13; Practitioner 7). If there were **'concerns'** about children (Practitioner 11), practitioners talked of the need to **'move them forward'** (Practitioner 16) and felt obliged to share this with parents at their appraisal sessions.

Practitioners seemed aware of their responsibilities as instigators of children's learning, talking of observing, assessing and evaluating the children. Of necessity, their interactions with parents of children who were not achieving as well as the EYFS developmental guidance documents dictated, were sometimes fraught. For example, one practitioner described how interactions about a child's learning might go in her setting:

'A lot of parents don't understand the EYFS. When we show them their learning journeys and we show them the observation, what they've done, what we've written what they've done, and when you start linking the areas, they'll go, 'What does that mean? PSED?' So, you've got to try and explain to them what it means.'
(Practitioner 21)

This practice of constant observation, assessment and planning for individual progress generated a lot of paperwork, which practitioners were keen for parents to see and at least acknowledge. Tensions arose when it appeared that parents were not as interested in these documents as practitioners thought that they should be:

'So, you think you're doing all that file for nothing because they haven't read it... and it's for their child's best interests at the end of the day.' (Practitioner 21)

The pressure to keep files up-to-date and to show 'evidence' of a child's learning coloured many of the interactions between practitioners and parents. A couple of the practitioners were mindful that parents would not necessarily know about the EYFS and took steps to explain it as best they could in a short space of time:

'... when the parents—when the children start, on their taster sessions, we'll go over then what the EYFS is, and come together with some starting points for the child ...and what we need to work on' (Practitioner 20)

Even when acknowledging that parents should not be expected to know early years documentation in detail, there remained a desire that parents should know more than they did:

'... if they knew a little bit more about the EYFS and stuff...if they could know what areas they could cover...' (Practitioner 6).

Practitioners were particularly frustrated that parents did not seem as concerned about their children's learning and development as their key persons were:

'...they're (*parents*) not really focussed on the learning side of things, as long as they're... safe, happy... as long as they're eating, sleeping.' (Practitioner 20).

Some practitioners reported that they knew they should persist in attempts to engage parents in their children's learning; this was often stated as a need to ensure that the children (and parents) should be 'ready' for formal school entry. This was despite the fact that the focus of the interviews was on parents of two-year-olds; the perception seemed to be that one could never start this process too soon, echoing current policy discourse. One practitioner echoed research findings around poverty and the 'achievement gap' at school entry:

'...if we didn't have funding, I think a lot of children would miss out on a lot and then that would have an impact on them when they start school.' (Practitioner 3)

One practitioner, based with two-year-old children in a school in what was called the 'pre-nursery class', described how they took opportunities to accompany both children and their parents to school events, as if slowly transitioning them into school life:

‘...we have dinner in the canteen with the rest of the school.... And some of the school assemblies, if they feel that our children will sit through it, if it’s a bit of a fun one, we’ll go over...’ (Practitioner 5)

Analysis and Discussion of Key Point 5

Practitioners overwhelmingly use the language of ‘achievement’ when talking about the children in their care.

Comments that some practitioners made suggests that they see the main reason for a child to attend an early years setting is to make continuous progress in line with ‘outcomes’ summarised by the EYFS and related developmental guidance documents. The days when children attended a setting to play, make friends and experience new activities appear to be long gone. Practitioners are now compelled to show ongoing evidence that they are supporting children’s learning and development, observing, assessing and planning individual programmes to ensure that each child ‘achieves’ according to age-related norms (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016a). Practitioners now use a language that is difficult to understand if one is not familiar with early years documentation. This language may be different to what parents are expecting to hear, suggesting a misalignment between policy demands and parental views on the purpose of an early years experience for their children.

Furthermore, this language, which is often used in practitioners’ formal discussions about children’s learning, may serve to widen the division between them and parents (Boag-Munro and Evangelou, 2012). Practitioners are well-versed in EYFS-related terminology, such as ‘areas of development’, ‘prime and specific areas’ and ‘characteristics of effective learning’, for example (DfE, 2017). It is possible that practitioners use this language in order to be increase their credibility as professionals in the eyes of the parents, or it may simply be that they are so immersed in the language of policy documents or Ofsted reports that it has become habitual to them. Whatever the reason, practitioners’ use of this specialised discourse may serve to create a distance from the parents that they are trying to connect with, as they are, literally, speaking a different language to that which most parents are familiar and comfortable with when talking about their children.

Practitioners think that their main responsibility is to prepare children for school.

Practitioners may be frustrated with parents who do not appear to be helping their children to 'achieve'. The 'school-readiness' agenda swept into the world of early childhood when the focus of Ofsted inspections changed from an emphasis on care and nurturing to how well a provision was supporting 'education' and 'preparing children for school' (Whitebread and Bingham, 2012). With an increased surveillance of progress charts and data sets, provision for children has become a project in which time and money is 'invested' (Allen, 2011b), with those supporting them held responsible if progress is not consistent and in line with the early learning goals in the EYFS (DfE, 2013; DfE, 2017).

It is clear from the interview comments that many of the practitioners have accepted the values and practices of the Early Years Foundation Stage and its guidance documents without question or, if they do have misgivings, lack the confidence or capacity to question these practices. Because they have to refer to documents like *Development Matters* (Early Education, 2012) or *Early Years Outcomes* (DfE, 2013) every day, documents like these have become their definitive guides on how to work with children. Publications such as these are not without their problems as they focus too heavily on child development; the progress that children apparently should make is measured by statements purporting to show 'typical' development. It is possible that practitioners become frustrated because parents do not follow the same guidance, and so do not know what children 'should' be doing or why early learning is so important. In this way, practitioners' affiliation to this framework and its developmental view of early childhood may create a divide between them and parents. While progress in learning has to be the most important factor in practitioners' eyes, due to the focus of Ofsted or local authority inspections, parents may be more interested in whether their child is happy in the setting, has friends, is eating well and making progress with things like potty-training or listening to stories. Thus parents and practitioners may indeed have, as Hornby and Lafaele put it, 'opposing goals and agendas' (2011: 44).

Practitioners feel the need to demonstrate what children are doing in the setting.

The drive to continually demonstrate that practitioners are supporting children's progress is due to the imperative to provide 'evidence' for inspections and other advisory bodies ([www.gov.uk>organisations>ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/organisations/ofsted)). Part of the 'performativity' culture (Cain and Harris, 2012: 343) that now directs every level of education, this evidence-gathering compels practitioners to document every step of a child's learning against the goals in the EYFS. The progress that a child does or does not make reflects upon the support that the child has received from his or her Key Person; practitioners try to show their impact upon children's progress from when they started at the setting. There is often little consideration of what children may have learned at home, or their different cultural repertoires and family practices.

Another use for the evidence compiled for each child may be to show parents what goes on behind the scenes in the setting to support their child's learning, demonstrating the time and effort that practitioners 'invest'. In this way, evidence of planned activities may be used to show that, if a child is 'falling behind', it is not due to any failure on the part of the Key Person. If blame is to be levelled at anyone, documentation like this may lead to an implication that it should be directed towards parents who are, perhaps, not considered to be supporting their child's learning in ways that are consistent with the demands of the EYFS.

Theme B: Practitioners' beliefs about their work

Key Point 6	Number of Practitioners making comments/15	Total references made throughout interviews
Mismatched expectations of what the place in the setting is for	13	65

The most frequent number of references showed that practitioners realised they expected different things to parents from the early education place. As one practitioner stated: **'our priorities and their priorities are completely different ...'** (Practitioner 4).

Practitioners also seemed to expect parents to behave more like they did and practice certain behaviours with their children. Assumptions were made about what was happening in the homes of the children they cared for, based on snippets of conversation that they had had with parents:

'...sometimes they think, to sit a child in front of a TV and things like that, is – good and stimulating for the child.' (Practitioner 15).

This mismatch between assumed parental behaviours and practices in the settings was reiterated by others, such as Practitioner 2, who said:

'...they (parents) don't understand why they've (children) got to get messy, why they've got to get wet, why we're playing outside when it's cold...'

Although practitioners tried hard to be professional and not show disapproval directed at specific parents, negative emotions such as frustration and disappointment permeated their reflections. As one practitioner said, **'... sometimes you feel a bit down because you expect more'** (Practitioner 13).

There was also a feeling that parents may not be sufficiently respectful of the work that practitioners did, with no understanding of the demands of their role:

'Some parents look at us as... we're just here to mind children, they're not bothered about home link books and stuff like that.' (Practitioner 21)

Conversely, practitioners were bothered by the activities that certain parents did do with their children, when these did not fit in with nursery practices or neatly matched EYFS learning guidelines. Some were troubled by the use of popular culture and digital technology such as i-pads or the television. One practitioner described a conversation with parents about their child's learning:

'...the dad piped up, 'Oh yeah, we've always got Youtube on for him! And the telly, the songs, Paw Patrol and that.' And I'm thinking (*pulls a face*)' (Practitioner 13)

Another practitioner gave an example of where parents and practitioners may have different ideas of what constitutes learning:

'I've got a parent who, every time she picks her little one up, most of the time she'll say, 'Do your dance! Do your dance!' when she comes in ... and it's like, 'Well, that's a lovely dance but...how else could we move? I like it when we move slowly with scarves. I like how we move to this kind of music.' We're sharing all of this but... often you feel like, 'Yeah. I'm hitting a wall here.' (Practitioner 4)

Although it was generally felt that most parents did not share observations of their children's learning at home, one practitioner talked of parents who used the online observation facility in her setting, where parents could send in photos or videos of children at home. However, this practitioner was frustrated that these activities could not be matched to the predetermined categories of the EYFS guidance documents, saying:

'I mean, sometimes they'll upload things that aren't really of – relevance and don't really link into things.' (Practitioner 15).

There were some parents who resisted practitioners' attempts to talk about their child's 'progress', which frustrated some practitioners. Practitioners reported comments such as:

'I say, "You've got to teach them to count" but they go, "They're only two!"'
(Practitioner 13)

Nevertheless, practitioners kept on trying to get parents involved but it was, at times, frustrating work:

'...I might say, "I'm a bit worried about their speaking. Do they have a dummy at home?' And they've repeatedly, just ...doing it, continuing it." (Practitioner 11)

In addition, practitioners reported that some parents were expecting them to take on full responsibility for their children's learning:

'Some parents make comments like, "Oh no, I wouldn't have paint in mine. Or play dough." Things like that. They say, "That's what they come to nursery for."' (Practitioner 15).

While some practitioners were unperturbed about this expectation and absorbed the additional responsibility, others were more scathing:

'...they expect miracles from us and it's... we have had to tell them that, it's at home as well.' (Practitioner 11).

Analysis and Discussion of Key Point 6

Practitioners are frustrated when parents do not appear to be impressed with their efforts.

Practitioners expressed their frustration when parents did not respond in a positive manner to the work that they put in to their children's 'learning journeys' or 'files'. Practitioners spend an inordinate amount of time recording children's actions, assessing what those actions mean (using developmental guidance such as *Development Matters*) and planning activities to help them 'progress'. Their work is closely monitored through ongoing supervisions by their superiors. It is possible that this increased workload and intense monitoring makes practitioners feel resentful and stressed about their work, and this stress increases when a child is not making progress as development scales suggest they should.

Parents who are accessing the funded place for their children are likely to have no idea that the view they have of the setting place is completely opposite to the view that the practitioners working there have. Parents may see the setting primarily as a place where their children can play and make friends and that the practitioners are pleasant people who 'look after' their child. Practitioners, on the other hand, are under pressure to show that

those same children are making 'progress' in all areas of 'learning and development', because of the efforts that they put into supporting them.

Practitioners feel frustrated when parents persist in behaviours that are not particularly helpful to a child's learning.

The pressure to show evidence of a child's ongoing progress may create a tension within the relationship between that child's key person and parents, particularly if the key person holds those parents largely responsible for their child's aptitude for learning (Lee et al, 2014). Parents, who are largely unaware of the pressure that practitioners are under, may carry on with practices at home that exasperate practitioners. They are then seen as unsupportive or even obstructive to what practitioners are trying to do. As an example, practitioners may understand that use of a dummy is not beneficial to a child's speech development, as it can alter the movement of the tongue when forming sounds (see www.wordsforlife.org.uk). However, instead of pointing out the very sound reasons why dummies may not be helpful after a certain age, practitioners become frustrated, assuming that parents who persist in giving their children a dummy do so because they are lazy or cannot be bothered to deal with the inevitable consequences.

Practitioners may think that some parents are abdicating their responsibilities about their children's learning.

Although there appeared to be a general frustration among the practitioners about parents who were not doing the 'right thing', it is possible that parents are getting mixed messages about how much and even what they should be doing with their children at home. Hunt and colleagues (2011) found that some parents lost confidence in themselves when their children started in nursery. Practitioners complain that parents often leave anything to do with learning to the setting and do not take responsibility for providing learning opportunities in the home. They do not seem to have considered that parents may feel uncertain or undermined when faced with an efficient professional who appears to know so much about bringing up a child. Harris and Goodall suggested that some parents may not

feel that it is 'part of their "job" as a parent' to support their children's learning (2008: 281); others may feel that they do not have anything of value to contribute, feeling that it is beyond their capabilities. These parents may not recognise the importance of everyday home and family practices in supporting their child's learning.

It is possible that some parents assume that leaving it to the 'experts' is what they are supposed to do when their child starts at nursery. After all, this is often the case when children start school and, in recent years, provision for two-year-olds is growing more like that of schools. Sime and Sheridan (2014) found that parents on lower incomes, who often had an unimpressive educational background themselves, lacked confidence in their own ability to support their child's learning and lacked the finances to buy the resources that might help them to do this.

Parents may also have a different idea of the meaning of 'supporting children's learning' to practitioners. It is possible that they realise that certain activities are not looked upon favourably by practitioners and they may not talk about these for fear of criticism. It appeared from the interviews that parents are seldom asked about what their children do at home, but if parents do attempt to share information about home activities (such as the parent who talked of the Youtube videos his child enjoyed or the parent who wanted to show the practitioner her daughter's dance) these may be dismissed as irrelevant or not 'real' learning. Hornby and Lafaele (2011) suggested that parents will not get involved if they feel that their child's teachers do not show that they value their input. This impression could be consolidated by the fact that, because practitioners hardly ever ask parents about what their child does at home, a general belief prevails that learning happens in the setting, not the home. This, suggest Goodall and Montgomery, may be because practitioners see the process of supporting children's learning as 'rightly theirs' (2014: 406) and may be unwittingly communicating this to parents.

Practitioners are restricted by the EYFS developmental guidance documents and this makes it difficult for them to see a child's learning creatively.

A parent is not constrained by developmental goals in the EYFS and so may look at their child's learning in different ways to a practitioner. They are also largely unaware of the EYFS with its 'areas of learning' and age-related outcomes (DfE, 2017). One of the most significant comments came from the practitioner who bemoaned the fact that some parents (who had attempted to engage in conversation about their children's learning at home via the setting's online facility) occasionally uploaded videos that '**don't really link in to things**'. What is meant here is that these videos excerpts (about a place the child had visited that weekend, for example) did not fit neatly into one of the age-related descriptors of *Development Matters* (DfE, 2012) or *Early Years Outcomes* (DfE, 2013). Because of this, the practitioner felt that these records of the child were of no value and had no place in the child's 'Learning Journey'.

Practitioners appear to think that parents should be more like they are and replicate the practices of the setting.

Practitioners do not appear to take into consideration activities that parents do with their children at home, unless they are activities that are similar to those that take place in the setting. To complicate this matter further, when practitioners do ask what parents do at home with their children, responses may fall short of what they regard as helpful to a child's learning. Activities such as painting, making play dough, engaging in water- and sand-play may not be regularly on offer in many homes; instead of these 'approved' activities, some young children may be spending a lot of time on ipads or watching television, activities that practitioners do not hold in high regard. The practitioners in this study were not generally in favour of young children using technology, seeing it as a passive, unstimulating pastime.

While there may be ongoing debate about young children and the possible dangers of too much 'screen time' (Stiglic and Viner, 2018; Tamana et al, 2019; WHO, 2019) there is little doubt that online learning will continue to be incorporated into children's education, play

and leisure activities. It is recognised as an ‘area of learning’ in the EYFS: *Understanding the World: Technology*.

Theme B: Practitioners’ beliefs about their work

Key Point 7	Number of Practitioners making comments/15	Total references made throughout interviews
Practitioners may have a deficit expectation of parents on low income	12	27

Some practitioners, particularly those who worked in settings that were specifically set up for funded children, had low expectations of families on low incomes. Although they were mostly careful not to denigrate parents explicitly, their generalisation of parents on low income was not positive. It appeared that assumptions were made (often based on experience of individual families) that parents on low incomes were ‘poor at parenting’ (Dermott and Pomati, 2016: 125), as Practitioner 2 surmised:

‘...low income tends to lead to... the parents are less educated. Which, in turn, means that their parenting skills are not fantastic.’

Practitioners reported that, because of these perceived parental failures, a large part of their job was to act as a substitute parent, providing children with the experiences they were missing out on:

‘We go museum trips, we go trips to the zoo ... different things that they might not have had their eyes opened up to.’ (Practitioner 4)

A common theme was that the setting was superior to the home environment in many cases for the ‘opportunity’ (Practitioner 18) it presented to ‘develop’ children who may not be receiving the right ‘input’ (Practitioner 16). It was generally recognised that practitioners’ behaviours may be different (and possibly superior) to those of some parents.

There were some practitioners who, while still holding deficit opinions, were a little more understanding of the reasons why certain parents were not as skilled as practitioners would like them to be:

'...it's not like the... it's intentional, sometimes they just don't know any better.'
(Practitioner 2)

This assumption of parental ignorance was echoed by Practitioner 6 who touched on intergenerational issues related to poverty and parenting:

'...their parents—didn't do it with them so... it's not that they don't want to do it, it's just they don't know how to do it because they've never seen it.'

Analysis and Discussion of Key Point 7

Practitioners' deficit assumption about parents on lower incomes may mean that they attribute undesirable characteristics to them.

A deficit opinion affects practitioners' expectations of parents as well as their willingness to pursue strategies to engage parents in children's learning. This 'poverty stereotyping' (Gorski, 2012: 312) may be formed through past experiences, anecdotal stories between colleagues, social media or television exposés of neglectful or abusive parents. Such views are exacerbated by the belief that there is no point in trying to get certain parents engaged due to their 'reluctance' in supporting their child's learning (Cottle and Alexander, 2014: 653).

'Attribution theory' (Malle, 2011) takes effect when one person (in this case, the practitioner) has a fixed idea about how another individual (the parent) is likely to behave. This notion may be based on previous experiences but is often formed through acceptance of a popular narrative about a certain 'type' of person and how they can be expected to behave. Expectations can lead people to unconsciously select evidence that fits their theory; other 'evidence' that does not fit may be disregarded. This type of assumption is damaging to the practitioner-parent relationship because, as Hornby and Lafaele suggest:

'A partnership that is based on the premise that one party is a problem is likely to be doomed from the start.' (2011: 47)

Deficit opinions are not always condemnatory but can be assimilated and expressed in a non-judgemental, sympathetic fashion. When a person believes that another individual is a victim of circumstances rather than personal failure, the outcome of this belief may still result in low expectations of that individual and a 'pathologizing' mentality (Osei-Kofi, 2005: 367). Thus practitioners, even if they are sensitive to possible reasons for parental non-engagement, may still shy away from initiating any 'involvement' strategies, assuming that certain parents will not have the wherewithal to take part. Consequently, whether coming from a place of sympathy or condemnation, deficit assumptions serve to keep expectations low.

Practitioners may, therefore, be benign in their appraisal of parents who do not fit the accepted mould of a 'good' parent, assuming that some parents do not actually know the best ways to support their child's learning and development, as Practitioners 2 and 6 suggested. The model of 'good parenting' that practitioners may have as their template usually coincides with behaviours that are considered 'middle class' (Duncan et al, 2014) and accord with the behaviour that practitioners hold up as 'good practice' in their settings. The practitioners interviewed showed that they have lower expectations of the parents who access the funded places. They assume that these parents will be unlikely to be 'educated' and equate this with inadequate knowledge of the 'correct' ways to raise their children.

Although the practitioners interviewed were careful not to single out poorer parents specifically, one or two remarked that they had noticed a difference in the way parents with children on funded places responded, both to their children and to the practitioners themselves:

'...in general, I find that the ones (parents) that I can engage better in their children's development are usually the non-funded children, if I can put it like that. It might not- it doesn't sound great but...that's the reality of it.' (Practitioner 6)

As this comment suggests, practitioners may find it easier to associate with parents whom they regard as being more like themselves. Brooker (2010) found that early years practitioners, no matter what their own background might have been, adopt the middle-

class practices and behaviours of the educational milieu that they inhabit and may, therefore, gravitate to those parents who they feel are similar to themselves. This may be especially the case when a practitioner is based in a school setting as the culture of the school, with its focus on progress, tracking and evidence of the ‘value added’ (Bradbury, 2011: 255) to the child’s level of achievement, will affect a practitioner’s way of thinking and behaving.

Theme B: Practitioners’ beliefs about their work

Key Point 8	Number of Practitioners making comments/15	Total references made throughout interviews
Practitioners think that early years settings are best place for children’s learning	8	15

There appeared to be a consensus, from over half of the practitioners interviewed, that attendance at nursery was a good thing and that all families should aspire to have their young children in one. This was especially true for children from lower-income families who would ‘miss out’ (Practitioner 6) if they could not attend. Reflecting on the home situation of one of her key children, Practitioner 18 suggested that:

‘...now the child comes to nursery, obviously he’s got more opportunity than what he would do at home.’

Practitioners were concerned that some children were excluded from the opportunities that nursery provided as their parents had not applied for a place. Practitioner 3 voiced strong concerns about children who were not accessing these funded places, saying that they would struggle when they started school:

‘They’d have no social skills or...life skills. They wouldn’t have any communication... probably their speech, it would affect their speech as well...’

Analysis and Discussion of Key Point 8

Practitioners think that children only ‘learn’ in the setting.

Practitioners assume that children will ‘miss out’ if they do not attend a setting when they are two years of age. This suggests that they think setting provision is the only way in which a child can be supported to learn and develop. The practitioners in this study appeared to be unaware of the evidence-based research (e.g. Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Sylva et al, 2004) that has shown parental engagement in a child’s learning ‘holds the greatest chance of benefit for the child’ (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014: 405).

There is also a presumption, in the case of the children who are eligible for a funded place, that their home life is so devoid of any stimulation or support that they would have ‘**no social skills or life skills**’ if they did not attend nursery, where they would be taught these things. This statement gives a powerful insight into how this practitioner views the parenting practices of parents on low incomes (those eligible to access free places), as not only unsupportive but essentially damaging to their children’s development.

Practitioners may consider activities in the setting are superior to those provided in the home.

Practitioners who do not regularly converse about a child’s learning with his or her parent will miss opportunities to find out what that child is doing at home. There may be a tendency, therefore, for practitioners to assume that there is not very much ‘learning’ going on in the home and that the activities on offer in the nursery, planned as they are to cover all of the ‘areas’ set out in the statutory guidance, are superior to anything that a home environment can offer. While there may be some truth in this (given that most nurseries have a wealth of resources, space, peers and interested adults to support children’s learning), this does not mean that home activities are necessarily inferior. While they may be different, (for example, there may be more use of technology such as i-pads or merchandise linked to popular culture), they form a large part of a child’s interest-based

learning. To ignore or devalue these choices is to miss many opportunities for setting/home links.

There was no suggestion from any practitioner interviewed that the work they do in the setting might extend what is happening in the home, despite the relatively short time that the child spends in the setting. Practitioners try to discover as much as they can about the child at the first meeting with the parent(s) usually through an ‘All About Me’ questionnaire or something similar. The practitioners interviewed appear to see the benefit of this parental discussion either as way to settle a child more quickly in the setting or as a way to learn about the child’s interests and needs and, therefore, plan effective support for learning. In many settings, this dialogue appears to peter out after this initial discussion.

Theme C: Practitioners’ knowledge and understanding of wider issues

Key Point 9	Number of Practitioners/15	References made throughout interviews
Understanding of the effects of poverty	15	21

Most of the practitioners said that they had had no training on the effects that poverty might have on children’s attainment but two of them (both based in a school) had attended an in-house course. The majority of the practitioners said that they had not considered the issue of poverty too deeply, their opinions apparently based mostly on what they had gleaned from experiences of families on low incomes or media coverage.

One practitioner mused that low income may directly affect children through lack of decent food or parents’ smoking habits, showing that she had an image in her mind of what a home might be like where there was not much money:

‘I would say, even down to their diet and nutrition, they’re not likely to be having balanced meals which will affect their learning and their well-being.’

(Practitioner 3)

Practitioners did realise, however, that having to worry about financial problems may make a parent more distracted and not as focused on their child's learning as practitioners might wish them to be:

'...obviously, when you've got no money, you've got lots of things to worry about haven't you?' (Practitioner 11)

Analysis and Discussion of Key Point 9

Practitioners are generally unaware of the wider effects that poverty has on families.

Very few practitioners in this sample had had any training or were aware of research on the impact that poverty has on families' day-to-day living or the disparities between children's academic achievements. Considering that the point of the funded early education place is to help to close the 'achievement gap' between children at school-entry, this may be an alarming oversight on the part of local authorities.

Being made aware of the causes and effects of poverty may affect a practitioner's opinions and behaviour. Apart from adopting a deficit perspective of a parent on a low income, lack of awareness about poverty and families may mean that a practitioner makes unreasonable judgements about how parents 'choose' to spend the money that they have. For example, a practitioner may think that children should have resources like paints, crayons, paper, etc. at home and that their 'creative development' is being hindered if these items are not available to them. This practitioner would have no awareness of how some parents, with little spare money after paying bills and buying food, may not see the advantages of buying such items which have to be replaced often.

In addition, lack of awareness of how poverty impacts upon a family may lead a practitioner to unwittingly make demands upon a parent who may have to juggle family finances. Things that others may take for granted may not be within the reach of some families who only have enough for life's essentials. For example, in early years circles, there is a common practice of dressing a child as a character from a favourite book on World Book Day, or of

making Easter bonnets for a competition (the more elaborate, the better). Fun activities such as ‘pyjama days’ for Comic Relief or a trip to a farm where wellingtons are essential may also be a stretch financially for some families. Even borrowing books from the setting library might be avoided by some parents as they worry that the book may get lost or ripped and they would have to replace it. Simpson et al, in their research of practitioners working with low-income families in the North East of England found that they had limited ‘poverty sensitivity’ around the issues that these families struggled with (2015a: 325), which was echoed in this research.

Theme C: Practitioners’ knowledge and understanding of wider issues

Key Point 10	Number of Practitioners/15	References made throughout interviews
Understanding of what makes a good HLE	14	23

Practitioners had a range of ideas when asked what they would consider a good home learning environment (HLE) should have. Some practitioners mentioned resources such as ‘books’ (Practitioners 5, 12, 13, 16 and 18), while others talked of ‘getting outside’ (Practitioners 7 and 18) while one suggested:

‘... it’s not all about what toys they’ve got at home, it’s about the interaction that’s going on.’ (Practitioner 16)

They were also aware that resources did not have to be expensive or even toys as such:

‘...you can go to the park and count leaves, anything like that. Just whatever you’ve got in your house, pots and pans and do music.’ (Practitioner 1)

Consistent routines were also mentioned as important and the dangers of too much screen time highlighted, for both children and their parents. Again, a deficit expectation of a low-income home seemed to suggest that there would be no interaction or routines at all:

'I'd like to see children read more books with their parents and sing more songs... telly turned off, no i-pads, and one-to-one facing and watching' (Practitioner 13).

Other practitioners were forthright in their wishes for parents to be more 'practitioner-like' in their dealings with their children and appeared to think that 'normal' parenting would naturally cover setting-like activities at home:

'...for me, it's the three Prime areas...environments that cover those 3 prime areas are so important...' (Practitioner 6)

Others described situations that mirrored those within the setting. Practitioner 20 described an effective learning environment as having: **'Space to sit down and talk, quietness... resources....'**, while the parent would be **'involved, paying attention. Actually, sitting on their level, listening to them...'**

Although practitioners were aware that home learning activities could be supported by providing resources for parents to use or borrow, most were reluctant to do this.

As practitioner 16 said:

'we did used to send books home but, I've got to be honest, we have stopped it now.'

While practitioner 13 commented:

'...we have got storybags but we tend to use them in school instead of sending them home because they are so expensive.'

On the whole, practitioners did not share ideas or resources with parents on a regular basis. Only one practitioner talked of sharing ideas in this way:

'...every time we have parents' evening we give out leaflets...for my college course, I had to do a leaflet where I put activities for things, like cheap easy activities parents can do at home.' (Practitioner 11)

Analysis and Discussion of Key Point 10

Practitioners are confused about what a good home learning environment might be.

Most of the practitioners interviewed did not appear to have thought about children's home circumstances. They did not ask questions about what children do at home as if this had no bearing upon what children did or could learn. Practitioners were generally unaware of research such as the seminal government-funded EPPE project (Sylva et al, 2004) which shows not only that parental engagement has the strongest influence upon children's learning, but also points out the factors that make up an effective home learning environment. In addition, this report was clear that family income, level of education or occupation were not the deciding factors for whether a child succeeded academically, stating that:

'What parents do is more important than who parents are' (*ibid*: ii).

The authors of the EPPE report were clear about the activities that make up a good learning environment for all children. While it might be argued that these activities are largely based on middle-class practices, the authors found that the following practices had been shown to be effective across all socioeconomic groups:

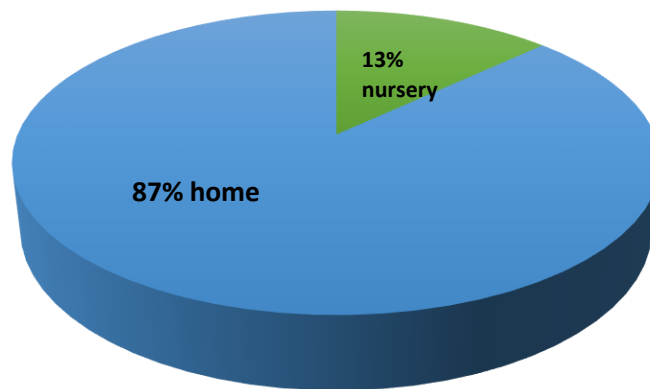
'...reading with the child, teaching songs and nursery rhymes, painting and drawing, playing with letters and numbers, visiting the library, teaching the alphabet and numbers, taking children on visits and creating regular opportunities for them to play with their friends at home...' (Sylva et al, 2004: v)

Practitioners may not be using information from home in their planning for children in the setting.

Children's home interests do not appear to be taken very much, if at all, into consideration in practitioners' planning. Children learn from the environments around them, and those

who are accessing funded places are allocated 570 hours in the early years setting over a year (assuming they take up their place as soon as they are two). This usually works out to 15 hours a week over a period of 38 weeks. Clearly, then, these children are at home much more than they are in the setting (see Figure 4.3) and it is short-sighted to ignore what is happening in the home, as this could be developed further in the setting.

Figure 4.3: The period of time that a child accessing the Early Education Entitlement spends in nursery and at home (discounting hours asleep)



Practitioners have good ideas that parents could do with children at home but do not generally share these ideas.

Assumptions about parents' lack of interest in their child's learning may dampen practitioners' willingness in sharing ideas with parents or there may be other reasons why practitioners do not generally share ideas or resources with parents. Practitioners may think that they have no authority to tell parents what to do; they may assume that it is pointless to share ideas as parents are unlikely to do them anyway; they may feel aggrieved that this is one more responsibility that has been foisted upon them; they may think that certain parents have enough to worry about without loading more pressure on to them; or they

might be worried that resources may be lost or damaged. Some of the practitioners interviewed said that they would not 'risk' sending books or toys home with certain families as they were unlikely to see them again. For whatever reason, few of the settings that the practitioners worked in regularly sent ideas home for parents to do with their children, or shared resources with them such as book or toy libraries or activity bags.

Practitioners have an idealised image of the role of what a 'good' parent will do when supporting children's learning.

This concept of the 'good parent' (Allen and Duncan-Smith, 2008) seemed to be firmly fixed in the minds of the practitioners who were interviewed. In fact, the idea of 'parenting', say Lee and colleagues (2014), is a social construct that has evolved over the last few decades and has gained traction alongside early years policies and government reports (e.g. Field, 2010; Gutman et al, 2010; OECD, 2011) which suggest that the ways in which a child is 'parented' is the main determinant as to why some succeed in life and others do not. No consideration is given to other factors such as housing, health or family income.

Brooker (2002) suggests that educational practices are solidly based on middle-class ideals, a point that was recognised many years before (Bernstein, 1971; Bourdieu, 1984). The way that practitioners speak to and act around young children may be different to the way their parents speak and behave. The philosophy of 'quality' childcare practice today is that children's needs and interests should be at the centre of everything that is provided for them, from activities to environmental layout. This would include how adults interact with the children, such as taking time to explain, being patient and listening carefully. The practitioner who stated that '**normal parenting**' would support a child's development across all of the prime areas of the EYFS (Communication and Language Development, Personal, Social and Emotional Development and Physical Development) supposes that there exists an ideal of parenthood that provides a template for supporting a child in the best way possible. Certain parents may, apparently, have innate qualities that reflect this template; they put their child's needs above all else and willingly sacrifice their own desires or needs. However,

it could simply be that some parents have more time, money, friends and a strong support network, which makes attainment of this ideal easier to achieve.

Theme C: Practitioners’ knowledge and understanding of wider issues

Key Point 11	Number of Practitioners/15	References made throughout interviews
Training on parental engagement	14	22

Almost all the practitioners, when asked if they had received any training on parental engagement either during their training period or as continuing professional development, said that they had not. Even experienced practitioners admitted:

‘Even when we went to college, there was never anything on involving parents... they didn’t even go on about how important it is, to be honest. Parents just got—bypassed. It was never something that we dealt with.’ (Practitioner 15)

Practitioners who had attended university were more likely to have been offered some form of training on working with parents as part of one of their modules:

‘I’ve read a lot about this before, that building up a community in a setting is very, very important. So, parents are contributing as well, parents are informed, and parents know exactly what is going on.’ (Practitioner 12)

However, in the main, the practitioners said that they had had to learn as they went along. A few settings, notably those with provision for two-year-old children that were specifically set up in response to the two-year-old funding, had spent time as a staff discussing how to engage parents in their children’s learning:

‘We’ve had more in-house training, I’ve never actually been sent anywhere out... we’ve sat there, we’ve brainstormed between each other in the staffroom what we think will work with the parents...’ (Practitioner 5)

Analysis and Discussion of Key Point 11

Training on working with parents is scarce.

There appears to be little time or commitment given to what should be a major part of a practitioner's role as a child's key person in relation to working with parents. Phair and Davis (2015) found that the practitioners working with two-year-olds on the funded programme had had little or no training on working with the parents they came into daily contact with and were supposed to be supporting, and this finding was duplicated here. Few of the practitioners had received any training on working in partnership with parents, so relied mostly upon past experience, their own judgement or what their manager told them to do.

A lack of focus within training programmes suggests that parental engagement is seen more as an optional extra than a crucial element of setting provision. As Harris and Goodall state:

'Parental engagement cannot be a bolt-on extra in order to be successful, but has to be a central priority' (2008: 287)

While this lack of relevant training in the general sphere of 'parent partnership' is problematic, this is especially the case when practitioners are caring for children as part of an intervention programme such as the Early Education Entitlement. Support for parental engagement in children's learning should be a principal feature of training; it is particularly important for supporting parents who may not routinely or consistently involve themselves in activities that promote this.

However, 'parents' are not a homogenous group that should all be treated the same, despite policies that seem to suggest that they are (Cottle and Alexander, 2014). Early years practitioners are careful to treat each child in their care as an individual, yet may not extend this principle to their families, for a number of reasons. Some parents feel excluded by setting staff who do not take the time or have the sensitivity to reach out to them in appropriate ways. Research also indicates that some parents need more time and attention than others (Roberts, 2017).

Theme C: Practitioners' knowledge and understanding of wider issues

Key Point 12	Number of Practitioners/15	References made throughout interviews
Understanding of the funded place	12	19

There was a mixed response to the question about why these funded places were available to certain two-year-olds. Most had an idea that it **'something to do with income'**, although others mentioned things like **'additional needs'**, **'immigration status'**, **'looked-after children'** as those who would be eligible, and one suggested **'single parents'**.

Some practitioners, thinking that the parents of children accessing these funded places were more likely to be unemployed, assumed that the reason that children were granted these places was so that parents could go on training or look for work. As one practitioner put it:

'I know part of it was...to encourage parents... they could go back to work. And some children just need to be in a nursery, for whatever reason at home.'
(Practitioner 1)

However, some practitioners realised that it was not strictly to do with unemployment; they knew that some of the parents accessing the places were working, earning an income that was below the threshold for funding. One practitioner confided that her child was given a free nursery place at the age of two because her own salary was below the income threshold at the time.

One practitioner (Practitioner 4) described the funded places as an **'intervention'** which provided the child with **'enriching experiences'** that might not be available at home. This was echoed by Practitioner 5 who understood that it had something to do with the notion that children from less well-off homes might need supplementary assistance to what they were (or were not) getting at home:

'Helping them where their parents aren't particularly helping at home, maybe. You know, to give them the opportunities, to start getting them used to the school, at

school age. That's the main thing and... getting them here really, getting them into the routine.'

Analysis and Discussion of Key Point 12

Practitioners are unclear about the reason why some two-year-old children are allocated a free place in an early education setting.

Practitioners in the study showed that they were mostly unaware that the funded places for two-year-olds programme is an early intervention strategy to reduce the likelihood of children failing within the education system (Phair and Davis, 2015). Because they are unclear about this, they are also unclear about their role in the process.

Many educational interventions have often been found to be ineffective in reducing the effects of inequality, and this intervention may well turn out to be ineffective in the long term. Teager and McBride (2018) found that, although many children in the first cohorts of this programme had had access to 'good' or even 'outstanding' provision from the age of two, this did not result in reducing the gap between better-off and poorer children in the end of Reception assessments (EYFSP). This suggests that the gains that a child will make by attending an early years setting will be temporary and will diminish over the years. Training and support for early years practitioners to understand their role as a support for parents might make the difference.

4.5: Phase 3 Data Sample

This phase of data collection focussed on answering the second research question in more detail as participants in this phase had already provided data for the first question.

- ✚ How is parental engagement in general currently perceived and enacted by a group of early years practitioners working with two-year-olds?

- ✚ What awareness do these early years' practitioners have about issues which affect their capacity to **'seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home'** (DfE, 2017: 1.10), particularly with parents accessing free early education and childcare for two-year-olds?

Please Note:

Although I worked with four individual practitioners in their settings over a period of 4-6 weeks, I decided to focus for this part of the report on data collected from one single case to complete the investigation of the two research questions. I considered that telling one 'story' in its entirety would prove more insightful than using a selection of snippets from all four practitioners, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Stacey (pseudonym) was chosen because her participation was felt to be representative of the challenges faced by the three other early years practitioners in this phase. I was also interested in the data that she provided as she worked in a school setting rather than within private or voluntary provision. Although being part of a school is a sought-after position, it appeared to bring additional pressures that were not found in private settings.

*The word 'disconnect' (in the title below) came from Stacey herself.

.....

Here follows a detailed narrative account of what took place over six ‘informal conversational interviews’ (Cohen et al, 2018: 510) that I had with Stacey over a period of three months.

Stacey: Perspectives on the ‘disconnect’* between practitioners and parents in an early years setting.

Background information

Stacey was aged 20 at the start of the research period, making her one of the youngest practitioners to take part in the study. She was based in a school setting that had recently started a two-year-old provision for the families in their area. She had worked in childcare for three years and had been employed initially by the school as an apprentice, working with a team of experienced practitioners in the newly-established ‘pre-nursery’ (for two-year-olds) room. She had an NVQ at level 3 and had only ever worked in this setting. Towards the end of the research, Stacey was accepted to study for an early childhood degree at university. On conclusion of her degree, she hopes to do a PGCE and become an early years teacher with QTS.

The school Stacey worked in was based in an area of high disadvantage, its postcode showing it as in Decile 1 (that is, containing the lowest 10% of scores in the country) on the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), a subset of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (<http://imd-by-postcode.opendatacommunities.org/>). Stacey had been brought up and still lived in the area where the school was based. She recognised some of the parents whose children attended the setting from her own school days.

All of the children in the setting at this time, 18 in total, were accessing the Early Education Entitlement, i.e. were fully funded for 15 hours per week during school-term time.

Stacey and I met fortnightly for about 90-120 minutes each time during the summer term 2018; we were given the staff room to work in during this time and were largely

undisturbed. Stacey was supported by a manager who took a keen interest in our discussions, asking Stacey for ongoing feedback.

Note: *I did not record our conversation during the first session together, having decided to make my own notes which I have summarised below. During subsequent sessions, I recorded our discussions (with Stacey's permission) in order to capture data more effectively. Recording the subsequent sessions gave me an opportunity to engage more closely with Stacey and gave the sessions more of a naturally-flowing, conversational feel than an interview. This had both advantages and disadvantages as the more relaxed nature of the conversations sometimes meant that Stacey explored tangents not directly pertinent to the research. However, after each session, I listened to each recording and made notes focussed only on responses that were relevant to answering the research questions.*

.....

Stacey starts to reflect on issues that may be preventing effective parental engagement during our first 'informal conversational interview' (Cohen et al, 2018: 510).

In her previous interview at phase two of the research project, Stacey had made some remarks about parents that showed disappointment with their lack of response to her and her colleagues' attempts to 'engage' them in setting activities (see Appendix 11). After that initial interview, I had sent Stacey a copy of the transcript which she agreed was a true record but made no further comment about this interview in her subsequent interviews.

Stacey had written an extensive list on the initial questionnaire of the things that the setting did to try to engage parents. We spent part of our first session together discussing what purpose these activities served by filling in a chart (see Appendix 2) and looking at samples of strategies that the setting counted as their 'parental involvement' approaches. Stacey concluded that most of the activities the setting offered to parents did not impact in any way upon the child's learning in the home. She also observed, when counting up the

number of activities that could be classed as 'giving information', that setting staff '**liked to inform**'.

We then talked about documents that the setting staff sent out to parents and Stacey reflected that, when looked at collectively, there was a lot of information that some parents may find '**scary**'. This, she suggested, may be likely if a parent had low levels of literacy or retained negative feelings from their own educational experiences in the past. Stacey decided that some of the letters and information going out to parents needed to be '**unwaffled**' so we discussed things like 'readability' and layout as well as content. Stacey was enthusiastic about this and started to look at newsletters and other communications that the nursery sent out to parents. She looked at the dense text on the inside cover of the Home Link books that were being sent home, asking parents to write about the activities and interests of the child when at home. The lack of response to the Home Link books was something that Stacey had mentioned in her interview, which she had interpreted as a lack of interest in the child's learning on the part of the parents who did not write back. She now reflected that the lack of response could have come about due to the overload of written information that was pasted to the inside of the book cover. We discussed giving parents an example so that they might understand that the activities did not have to be spectacular or complicated and that the parents did not need to write reams of notes. Perhaps more importantly, Stacey realised that parents might appreciate being told why the setting was asking for this information, so that they could use some of these activities as an opportunity for conversation with the child or for building on in nursery.

Stacey showed during this session that she was open to reflection and critical analysis of various setting practices. She was enthusiastic about the content of our discussions and was able to see clearly where some issues were happening in her setting and, more importantly, why. We were able to quickly establish a rapport, perhaps because I had worked in early years settings myself and had an understanding of some of the challenges around engaging parents. In addition, we were allowed the space and time to reflect on matters that concerned practitioners in general and her setting staff in particular. I was careful not to direct Stacey although I did engage in 'real' conversations with her, empathising with her frustrations and sharing experiences of my own but also sensitively querying some of her prejudices at times. For example, Stacey had mentioned being shocked when a parent told

her that her child had never painted at home but, after discussion, was able to see a reason why this might be so (See Box 4.1)

'Stacey told me about a parent who has 7 children and the youngest is in the nursery and how the child had never painted before at home. And we discussed how, if the parent has a lot of children, paints might be seen as a luxury, rather than a necessity...'
(Researcher's field notes on Session 1)

Box 4.1

Extracts from 'informal conversational interviews' with Stacey

Below are some of the thoughts and beliefs that Stacey expressed during our discussions. These thoughts show how she came to understand that certain setting practices were making it difficult to establish relationships with parents. This, in turn, was possibly thwarting the setting staff's efforts to *'seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home'* (DfE, 2017: 1.10).

Note: For ease, these comments are divided into some of the themes that were identified in the phase two interviews. Although comments may appear under a particular heading, there are some that may also fit with another theme but, to avoid repetition, each statement appears only once.

Setting constraints (Key Point 2)

Being part of a school can bring its own problems

Stacey suggested that, although the setting was based in a school, the staff should remember that the children in their care were only two years of age and they should resist being a **'mini-school'** but instead strive to be more like a home environment, for the benefit of the parents as well as the children. One issue that we had discussed was the setting's practice of not allowing the parents into the building when collecting their children at the

end of a session but, instead, following the school practice of sending the children out with a member of staff (not necessarily their key person). Stacey said that the staff had discussed this but:

'I said about the key person taking the children out... and I don't know how realistic that would be... but we'll have a look at that.'

This comment was interesting as it showed how quickly one can be indoctrinated by school practices. School management had decided that allowing parents into the room to collect their children was a potential safeguarding issue as a child might slip out into the playground unnoticed. Despite their best efforts to resist 'schoolification' (PACEY, 2013: 9), staff were employing a practice that acted as a barrier to relationship-building. While children's safety has to be paramount, this practice of practitioners taking turns to show all of the children out to their waiting parents (while the others were inside tidying up) does not accord with recommended key person practices (Elfer et al, 2012). More worryingly, it eliminates one of the two occasions when parents and practitioners could communicate about children's learning, effectively silencing some parents who may feel that what they have to say is of no importance (Mac Naughton and Hughes (2011). Stacey realised this as she commented later:

'I'd see a lot more of them... it would help build stronger relationships.... I feel that, if it was just purely key person taking the child out it would help to build that...you're building that trust. They're passing their child on to you.'

Stacey talked about the practical difficulties of having these important conversations and how pick up and drop off can be particularly problematic due to the number of children to keep an eye on while others were being collected. Stacey recognised this issue because it had recently happened after an afternoon drop-off:

'We had to ring one of the parents to ask, "Did you get this letter?" and she said, "Oh yeah but I didn't stay because I could see you were up the wall."'

There was no thought in Stacey's setting as to when, where and how any sort of dialogue between parent and key person was supposed to happen, a situation that may not be unusual in busy settings (MacNaughton and Hughes, 2011).

Stacey talked of how the staff in her room were not given time to prepare or do paperwork and how this impacted upon both the willingness and availability to provide resources and ideas to parents. In other words, any spare time was taken up with doing the children's learning journeys which had become a huge responsibility. Staff sometimes had to cover for each other if someone was absent, and, as they were not given time out of the ratios to do their paperwork, they often had to take work home. Stacey pointed out that she and most of her colleagues were only paid for 15 minutes after the afternoon session ended and this time was spent tidying up and setting up activities for the next day. This would also impact upon their willingness to go out to talk to parents at the end of each session as they were aware that there was so much to do. In addition, staff meetings had to take place over their 40-minute lunch break, so things were often not discussed in any depth.

This intense focus on paperwork and documentation is not unusual. As Simpson et al reported, this may in itself be a factor in the 'poverty insensitivity' they found among the early years practitioners they interviewed. They stated:

'evidence suggested children in poverty could become passive objects and their immediate needs beyond those addressed through meeting targets were potentially at risk of being played down or missed.' (2015a: 333)

It could be argued there is an 'immediate need' to build relationships with the children of these parents and make a commitment to supporting their learning in the home as well as in the setting. This will have a bigger and longer-lasting impact on their learning than a file of written observations focussed solely on a child in the nursery and disregarding the environment where that child spends most time.

Stacey talked honestly about the difficulties of assessing young children and the pressures of being within a school system:

'We do tracking, and they do that all the way up the school... I think it's a bit—you know, they're two. The whole point is we're not, we are a part of the school but we're not... and, we're told to keep them low as well... so that we can show progress.'

Stacey was again conflicted as she recognised that assessing children's progress against the EYFS goals at such a young age should not be the main focus of her practice. She and her colleagues had been made keenly aware that they were part of the school and the early education provision should show results. However, in order that, as the children progressed further up the school, 'value added' (Bradbury, 2011: 255) could be demonstrated, staff caring for the two-year-old children were told to underestimate their achievements. This made Stacey and her colleagues feel as if they were not giving parents a true account of their children's ability and they felt conflicted by these policy requirements. As Stacey went on to say:

'And we get parents asking, 'Why are they that low?' Some of it is justified because a lot of our kids are coming in low but...'

Stacey reported that some parents were annoyed by being given such disappointing information about their children, which created an unease between them and the child's key person. This is at odds with the 'openness' that Brooker suggests is at the heart of a good parent/ practitioner relationship (2010: 194); in fact, it is likely to undermine the trust that parents must have in their child's key person. The practice of underestimating children's ability may not be unusual, though it is likely that it is not widely publicised. Bradbury (2011) found in her interviews with reception teachers that they had been similarly induced to assess children from lower-income homes as being less competent than they actually were in their Early Years Foundation Stage Profiles. This suggests an ulterior motive to providing two-year-old places in a school setting, one with which practitioners are compelled to oblige whether or not it damages parental relationships.

Stacey wondered about how practitioners might make 'learning talk' more accessible to parents, especially those who may feel alienated by the language of the EYFS and policy

documents. Stacey thought that being part of a school might work against them in their attempts to 'talk the same language' as the parents:

'It is hard, with us being a school, it's like – there's certain boundaries that we can't... Obviously, we use our first names so it's a bit more personal in that way, but it is harder with us being in a school, especially things like tracking... they don't understand that, necessarily.'

Stacey brought up the ambiguity of striving to be a '**home from home**' based in a school, where a lot of interest had been shown in the children's baseline assessment results. This made it difficult for staff to know how and with what to approach parents, keen as they were to get on with 'educational' matters but being aware that some of the setting's practices could alienate them. For example, Stacey talked about the school policy of using cursive handwriting and how this had permeated down into their room:

'In our room we have to model pre-cursive writing and we're like 'Why? They (*the two-year-old children*) can't even look at a letter and say, 'That's...' you know... I feel like there's... especially when parents come in and they see this pre-cursive writing, it's like a school then isn't it?'

Lack of knowledge about child's family (Key Point 3)

The Key Person system helps to make parental relationships

Stacey had attended a Child in Need meeting about one of her key children. She commented:

'I'm just building my own confidence... I learned things about the family that I didn't even know.'

It was interesting because the parent that she had supported had been someone she had previously judged as being 'not interested' because of her failure to attend a school event with her child a few months before. Stacey was shocked to discover how much stress this young parent was under and now understood that, for this woman, school events were not

top priority. Donkin and colleagues (2014) suggested that family stress is one of the main reasons why parents do not engage with their children's learning; attending this meeting had given Stacey an insight into the difficult issues some parents were dealing with.

Stacey looked at the information sheets about the importance of building relationships with parents and how difficult it is if settings do not follow a Key Person procedure, not only for planning and care routines, but also in supporting the family to help the child with their learning. Brooker observed that key persons should listen to parents with 'responsiveness and attentiveness' in order to develop a solid 'triangle of care' (2010: 190) to fully support children's learning and well-being. Stacey realised that this was not happening in her setting as they did not adhere as fully to the principles of the key person system as they should. She even suggested that some parents did not know who their child's key person was, as demonstrated by a conversation with a parent at one of the Stay and Play sessions.

Practitioner issues, e.g. confidence (Key Point 4)

It is not always an easy matter to make relationships with parents

Stacey showed that she was starting to understand how her own behaviour may have affected the interactions between her and parents. She admitted that some parents were more difficult to get to know or even like but recognised that it was the practitioner's responsibility to keep on trying:

'You don't really want to speak to a parent if they're—annoying you. You know, if they're constantly on their phones and... you can, sort of, be distant from them... But you wouldn't think that way about a child. You wouldn't think, "Oh I'll try a few times, they don't get it, just leave them." So why would you do it to a parent?'

Stacey admitted that she found it difficult to talk to some parents. She confided that she had sometimes avoided talking to some parents as she feared confrontation, sometimes leaving the more difficult conversations to her older colleagues. However, she began to realise that she had a duty to keep trying with the parents that she personally found 'hard

to reach'; as Harris and Goodall pointed out, it was often the schools that were 'hard to reach' (2018: 277).

Although Stacey had previously admitted to a lack of confidence, she related an incident that had happened recently, where the good relationship that she had been able to build with a parent meant that she had the courage to tackle a difficult topic with her:

'The other week, I had a safeguarding issue and I had to speak to a parent, but I felt ok as I've got a good relationship with her, I felt comfortable doing it. Whereas if... it was maybe a different parent, I wouldn't have felt as comfortable...'

Confidence is an important attribute for a practitioner to have when trying to engage parents in their children's learning. Although much has been written about how a lack of confidence may affect a parent's willingness to take part in 'pedagogical discussions' (Cottle and Alexander, 2014: 653), it is interesting that, in this case, it may be the practitioner's lack of confidence that could stall the process.

Stacey said that she had noticed that some parents did not get as involved as others at events such as the Stay and Play sessions. She wondered if she and her colleagues should do more to seek these parents out:

'Some parents do just – fade into the background...'

Stacey realised during the discussion that she and her colleagues often took their lead from the parents who appeared more 'interested'. Parents, therefore, set the tone of the relationship; if they responded well to the first overtures, that gave the practitioners confidence to carry on talking to them, giving advice and making suggestions.

Mismatched expectations (Key Point 6)

Parents and practitioners and the problem of pressure

Stacey looked at the statement regarding practitioners' support for learning in the home (DfE, 2017: 1.10) and commented:

'You know, there's only so much we can do for them. You know, to tell them, 'Here's your Home Link book. Now go off and do it'—and every week it comes back and there's nothing in it. It's hard not to say anything...It's hard because you're not supposed to make them feel like they've got to do it but, at the same time, you've got to reiterate that home learning is important. So, you're stuck between a rock and a hard place, aren't you?'

This showed that Stacey still felt conflicted between wanting to be accepting of the parents' choices and feeling compelled to comply with the statutory responsibility (and pressure from the school) as the setting's reputation depended upon this compliance to secure a good Ofsted grading.

Stacey speculated that it was often the case that ideas for activities and resources offered were often not taken up by the parents that practitioners thought might benefit most from them. She suggested:

'It's almost like you need a different approach... but what? The only thing I can think of is going home and—showing them what to do, teaching them...'

While this would possibly be an effective strategy, it was not something that Stacey, in her present role, could even suggest. There would be a cost implication as visiting homes would mean that cover in the nursery would be needed; if the school was complaining about the printing costs for half-termly newsletters (as they had been), there was not likely to be any money available for cover of this kind. For such home visits to have any effect, one would need to visit at least four or five times over a sustained period and this would not be possible for most practitioners in the current interpretation of their roles. In any case, Brooker (2010) found that home visits were not always welcomed by parents; indeed, some found them intrusive.

Stacey talked about how parents might feel under pressure having to take part in assessments on their children, when asked to do a 'baseline assessment' on their first visit. Parents tended to overestimate what their child could do, while practitioners were being persuaded to underestimate, for reasons already discussed. Parents also did not understand

the educational discourse of the formal documentation that the setting used (lifted straight from *Development Matters*) and were, understandably perplexed when their child appeared to be ‘performing’ at an age much lower than their chronological age. She clearly struggled with this as she said:

‘It’s like, when you do the baseline assessment and some of them come out at 8-20 and that’s quite—low and, obviously they all know what 8-20 months mean, and some of them would be questioning, “Well, why?” So, when you tell them—the dummy, the bottle... are you playing with them? it’s... maybe they’ll think they’re not good enough.’

Here, Stacey describes a situation where she feels uncomfortable discussing with a parent their child’s low ‘score’ on the developmental guidance. When parents queried the low scores, Stacey felt embarrassed to have to ‘blame’ parents’ lack of interaction or what would be considered as unhelpful parental practices. However, it is important to remember that the school senior management had advised that scores should be kept low in order to show a bigger impact further up the school.

Stacey talked about how the setting had to have a formal parents’ evening each term. She described the usual turn-out as ‘disappointing’ (session 5), which she and her colleagues interpreted as parents not seeing the point of attending a parents’ evening when their child was only two. She wondered how the setting might find other ways to share this information in less formal ways as she realised that the formality of the event may be off-putting to many. As Brooker suggests, this is best done through ‘trust-building face-to-face exchanges’ (2010: 190), which are not likely to happen in a formal, timetabled event twice a year between people who do not regularly converse.

Stacey suggested that there was a ‘**disconnect**’ on many levels between practitioners and parents. Stacey used the example of parents thinking that the role of the child’s key person is to feed, change and ‘**just**’ play with their children:

‘I think that’s the problem ... they (*parents*) think that it is just somewhere that the kids come and play for a few hours... and all we do is just sit with them (*children*) and play, then we go home...’

Stacey again shows her ambiguous feelings about how parents perceived her role. She realised that parents had different perspectives on early childhood provision than practitioners, and that this might impact upon how they saw their own role as co-educators. Practitioners felt an urgency about getting children to 'make progress' (and, more importantly, to be able to demonstrate this) that, in Stacey's view, parents did not feel.

The comments here suggest that Stacey felt an ambivalence about her role, in which part of her thinks that practitioners should be allowed to '**just sit with them (children) and play**' (which is what she assumes the parents think) rather than be so tied up with record-keeping and tracking progress that playing with children is a rare luxury. This is despite the EYFS Statutory Framework specifically stating that:

'Paperwork should be limited to that which is absolutely necessary to promote children's successful learning and development' (2017: 2.2)

Stacey went on to talk about these different opinions about the purpose of early years provision. She said:

'...a lot of people do just think it is about—obviously it is a lot about making friends and ... learning how to share and learning how to toilet train but... they don't see what goes into it...'

Here Stacey is talking about the workload of the practitioner, the observing, assessing and planning for each child, the planned adult-led activities alongside the myriad of care routines that had to take place every day. She felt aggrieved that parents did not seem to be aware of '**what goes into it**, which may form part of the 'disconnect' between them and the practitioners

Stacey thought that many parents did not understand that a practitioner's role was fundamentally that of an educator and so did not understand some of the requests that were made of them. Stacey wondered how it might appear to a parent when a practitioner was asking for information and photographs from home (for example when doing a project on 'families' or making 'family books', as the setting was currently doing). This was

something that Stacey and her colleagues had been trying to do and they were puzzled by parents' lack of response in providing information or photographs. Stacey realised that there was an important stage that was being missed out in their requests to parents, which again came down to those daily interactions that were not happening:

'It's awkward going out to parents and saying, 'What do you do at home? How many of you are there at home? ... it can look... asking about their home life... but maybe that is down to us explaining more...'

Deficit expectations of parents on low income (Key Point 7)

Being either judgemental or sympathetic may affect attitudes and behaviour

Stacey pondered the idea that the financial situation of families was sometimes seen as the main determinant of their parenting abilities. After some thought, she suggested that 'parenting' practices may be influenced more strongly by how parents had been brought up rather than by how much money they had. Stacey had previously spoken about her own background, where there wasn't a great deal of money, but where her parents did the 'right' things such as reading to her every night. Stacey acknowledged that **'not everyone has had that...'** and this template of engaged parenting may not be familiar to some parents. This, she assumed, would have a detrimental effect upon their parenting practices. Here, Stacey was showing evidence of a belief in a 'stereotype about poor people' (Gorski, 2012: 307), the inevitability of an intergenerational cycle of parenting practices. Beliefs such as these may be an additional reason for keeping practitioners' expectations of parents (and subsequently their children) low. Stacey's statement, which could be seen as sympathetic, presupposes a lack of what could be considered as 'good' parenting practice (reading to one's child) in these parents on low income. It also shows that Stacey has been the recipient of what she might term 'good parenting', which she was keen to point out after disclosing that she had been brought up in the area where the school was situated (and so labelled 'disadvantaged').

Stacey applied this understanding to a parent of a child in her setting; this young woman had been at the same school as Stacey but had been ‘neglected’ growing up and missed a lot of school. Consequently, when Stacey was giving out magazines in the setting, this woman declined one saying she wouldn’t be able to read it. Stacey mused:

‘It made me think—we went to the same school but...maybe it’s just the different backgrounds we come from, why I can read and write, and she can’t...’

In this way, Stacey distances herself from this parent who, although she attended the same school and still lived in the community, she sees as being different to herself and her colleagues within the school. Stacey here is referring to the ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) that her parents passed on to her, which has become strengthened by working within a school setting.

It was clearly important to Stacey that she was recognised as being different to the parents with whom she shared a lot of characteristics (such as age, background, socio-economic status). However, by fitting in with the culture of school life, she was becoming further removed from the parents that she had grown up alongside, which may negatively influence the progress of relationship-building with them.

Understanding the effects of poverty (Key Point 9)

Practitioners may suffer from ‘poverty blindness’ (Simpson et al, 2017: 10)

Stacey was visibly moved by one of the videos excerpts that we were discussing. It showed a young, lone parent struggling to give her two small children a balanced diet and going without food herself to ensure that they had enough to eat. Stacey read the information sheet that I had given her about poverty and its effects on families (see Appendices 12a, 12b and 12c) and admitted that matters like this had not occurred to her before.

Stacey talked again about this the following week and said that she had told friends and colleagues about it. She said that she had started to notice things about the parents of the children in the setting and had realised that lack of money could have a negative effect on the children with regard to limiting their experiences:

'...parents round here can't take their kids swimming or do things like that, because that costs money....'

She realised that not being able to afford the many and varied activities that some families take for granted limited a child's experiences; she confessed that she had not realised that the 'home link' books that the setting sent home may not have been filled in by many parents simply because they had nothing to say that they felt was worthy of comment. This may also have been the reason, she contemplated, why 'Take-Home Ted' was not as enthusiastically received as the staff had hoped, particularly as there was an implicit assumption that 'Ted' would do exciting things over the weekend and these would be recorded in the accompanying book for everyone to see.

This 'poverty blindness' is not unusual among early years practitioners, as Simpson et al found in their extensive research into poorer families and those who work with them (2017: 7). There are calls for educators to be made aware of the reasons for and the effects of poverty on families with young children in ways that avoid blaming, scapegoating or 'pathologizing' (Ullucci and Howard, 2015: 170) parents.

Understanding of what makes a good HLE (Key Point 10)

Practitioners may be unsure what to suggest to parents

Stacey believed, from her own experience, that the home environment had a bigger impact upon a child than an educational establishment, and this applied throughout every age group. Stacey had told me in her interview that, although she lived in an area that would be considered 'disadvantaged' when she was growing up (actually the area where the school was), both of her parents had always worked, and the family had a relatively comfortable lifestyle compared to many others in the community. She had also stressed that her parents always read to her and her sister and played with them when they were young. Stacey remembered these two things in particular as she was able to realise through her training and work with children, that these were both key activities that parents did to support a child's learning.

The setting had a tradition of holding Stay and Play sessions on the first day of every half-term. These were well-attended, but Stacey confessed that parents could only bring their children to the nursery on those days if they also stayed for the full session. The Stay and Play sessions were modelled on a 'normal' nursery day (though rather more structured), with lots of activities that the children and parents could enjoy together. Staff 'modelled' interactions with the children and chatted to the parents at intervals.

Stacey, when asked to think about the purpose of a Stay and Play session, stressed the importance of play and how, as she observed, many parents do not understand the value of play or, perhaps more importantly, their own role in providing rich play and learning opportunities. She also recognised that playing with children did not come naturally to some parents:

'Don't get me wrong, before I started my apprenticeship I was like, 'You don't have to play with kids. Kids play with kids.'

Stacey showed that, before she did her childcare training, she did not have much idea about children, which is perhaps the position of most of the parents. Many practitioners appear to have forgotten that most parents have not had the benefit of their training and should not be expected to know what practitioners know. Stacey speculated further:

'It's almost like-- I mean, we're trained in it ... I know it, but parents don't get that...we just expect them to know what we know... there is an expectation of, "Why aren't you doing this with your child?"'

Stacey realised that it was unfair of practitioners, who had had the benefit of training in child-related issues, to expect parents to know what practitioners knew.

Stacey considered that part of the responsibility of early years educators would be to build up parents' confidence in their own ability to support their children's learning. As Stacey commented in our final session together:

'Even informal discussions about what their children are doing at home can make the difference and make parents feel involved and important.'

Stacey recognised that it is not until practitioners start to see parents as ‘co-educators’ (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014: 401), that any improvements to practice can be made. She appeared to realise that practitioners had a role to play in engaging *with* parents as she summarised our conversations with the following comment:

‘Obviously, it’s not... hurting anyone, the way you think of parents... but we should be in a position where we think, “What can we do to help?” rather than moan about it, and – keep moaning about it.’

4.6: Summary of data findings from Phases 1, 2 and 3

As the findings from all three phases have already been discussed in some detail, there follows a summary to bring all of the points from the three phases together.

Data established that building on learning in the home, either by bringing activities that children were doing at home into the setting or sending activities home for the parent and child to do together, was not common. However, the practitioners in this study were generally satisfied with the activities that they classed as ‘parental engagement’ which, on closer examination showed that it was largely piecemeal and unsatisfactory. Practitioners usually focused on activities that the setting provided and how many parents attended; a good turn-out generally kept practitioners happy that their parental engagement strategies were working. This showed that the practitioners are not aware that it is ‘only the engagement of parents in learning in the home that is likely to result in a positive difference to learning outcomes’ for children (Harris and Goodall, 2008: 277); this means that activities such as Stay and Play, in their current configuration, will have little long-term impact on home practices.

Practitioners stated that they were happy to talk to parents, but further investigation showed that, because no time was committed on a regular basis, this was not seen as particularly important. Such engagement was subject to the availability of the staff at

difficult times of the day such as drop-off or pick-up times. As MacNaughton and Hughes found (2011) such conditions may serve to silence some parents, leaving them with the feeling that they should only take up the practitioner's time when the matter was urgent. However, as Callanan stated, it is important to establish 'good relationships with parents before making suggestions for home learning' (2017: 72) and these relationships can only happen when parents are given time and attention by practitioners.

Talking to parents may be affected by practitioners' attitudes towards them; there was consistent evidence that many of the practitioners in the study had a deficit opinion of many of the parents and how they 'parented' their children. There were negative assumptions made about parents who were on low incomes and poverty 'stereotyping' (Gorski, 2012: 307) was apparent. This attitude affected the willingness of practitioners to sustain their efforts in building relationships with some parents. Instead of examining these prejudices, however, practitioners appeared to deflect the blame for this onto the parents themselves, suggesting that they were uninterested in their children's learning. Practitioners were drawn to parents who seemed like themselves and showed interest in what they had to say, and the practitioners generally took their cue from the parents. This meant that the 'interested' parents were given more time and attention than those who seemed 'uninterested', arguably those who needed it most.

Nevertheless, even if practitioners are willing to talk and share ideas for learning with parents, they are under pressure from the 'performativity' culture that pervades even provision for babies and toddlers (Elfer and Page, 2015: 1776). This pressure to continuously show evidence of a child's learning leads them to be frustrated with some parents for their apparent lack of support for what the practitioners are doing. They are also aggrieved that parents do not appear to recognise or appreciate their professionalism, the time and effort that goes into supporting their children's learning. When parents do not show a great deal of interest in the copious amounts of paperwork that make up their children's 'learning journeys', practitioners are irritated despite reluctantly admitting that the EYFS jargon that riddles these 'learning journeys' is largely a mystery to most parents. Most of the practitioners in this study recognised that there was a discrepancy in how parents viewed the early education and childcare place and how they had had to become accustomed to viewing it themselves. These 'opposing goals and agendas' (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011: 44)

make it difficult for practitioners to establish an equitable partnership with parents as they are starting from different vantage points.

This is not a criticism of practitioners; they are forced to follow government policies and practices that focus almost exclusively on children's outcomes and it is practitioners who are held accountable for children's progress. Practitioners, labouring under constant pressure to show results (this was apparent in both private and school-based settings but more so in the latter), have to focus on children as 'learners' if they want to achieve good results, reflected by Ofsted inspections and ratings. Perhaps because of this, these practitioners showed that they focused solely on children's learning that happened in the setting possibly because it was within their own control. The lack of focus on what was happening in the home may have been borne of a belief that 'real' learning happened only in the setting as this was learning that could be safely 'linked' to guidance documents such as *Development Matters* (Early Education, 2012) or *Early Years Outcomes* (DfE, 2013). The practitioners in this study were frustrated when their attempts to link home and school activities were unsatisfactory as parents sent in examples of activities that '**don't really link into things**'. Practitioners' affiliation to the EYFS guidance documents as the only way that learning can be documented serves to alienate parents still further and may reinforce a propensity to leave their children's learning to the 'experts'. This means that a valuable source of parental expertise is disregarded and parents' potential as supporters of their children's learning is ignored.

In addition to a weak understanding of how to support parents to be 'co-educators' (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014: 401), practitioners' lack of knowledge about a key issue such as poverty and its impact upon families combines to keep them in ignorance of the supportive role that they could be forging with children and parents (Pascal and Bertram, 2013). A lack of understanding about the day-to-day struggles of families on very low incomes leads not only to unfair assumptions about parents' capabilities or willingness, but also a lack of sympathy for situations that might keep parents away from setting-based activities. Also, attributions of carelessness or ill-discipline leads to distrust with setting resources, such as toys or books, that could be getting used in the home, especially where financial limitations mean that these items are scarce.

In summary, data gathered during this project show clearly that establishing the 'equitable relationship' that Goodall and Montgomery (2014: 401) suggest is necessary to give parents back some 'agency' (*ibid*) in their child's learning is far from an easy task. It will take time, commitment and a shift of focus away from 'outcomes' and the language of achievement back to a shared understanding of children's interests and well-being, and the crucial role that adults play in children's learning.

The next chapter brings together conclusions and recommendations based on the data collected and analysed in this chapter. It summarises Bronfenbrenner's theory as a framework for supporting children's learning and discusses how strong relationships between early years practitioners and parents of very young children may provide the key to enabling 'disadvantaged' children to start their schooling with the encouragement they need.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5. 1: A model for parent partnership that supports a child's learning

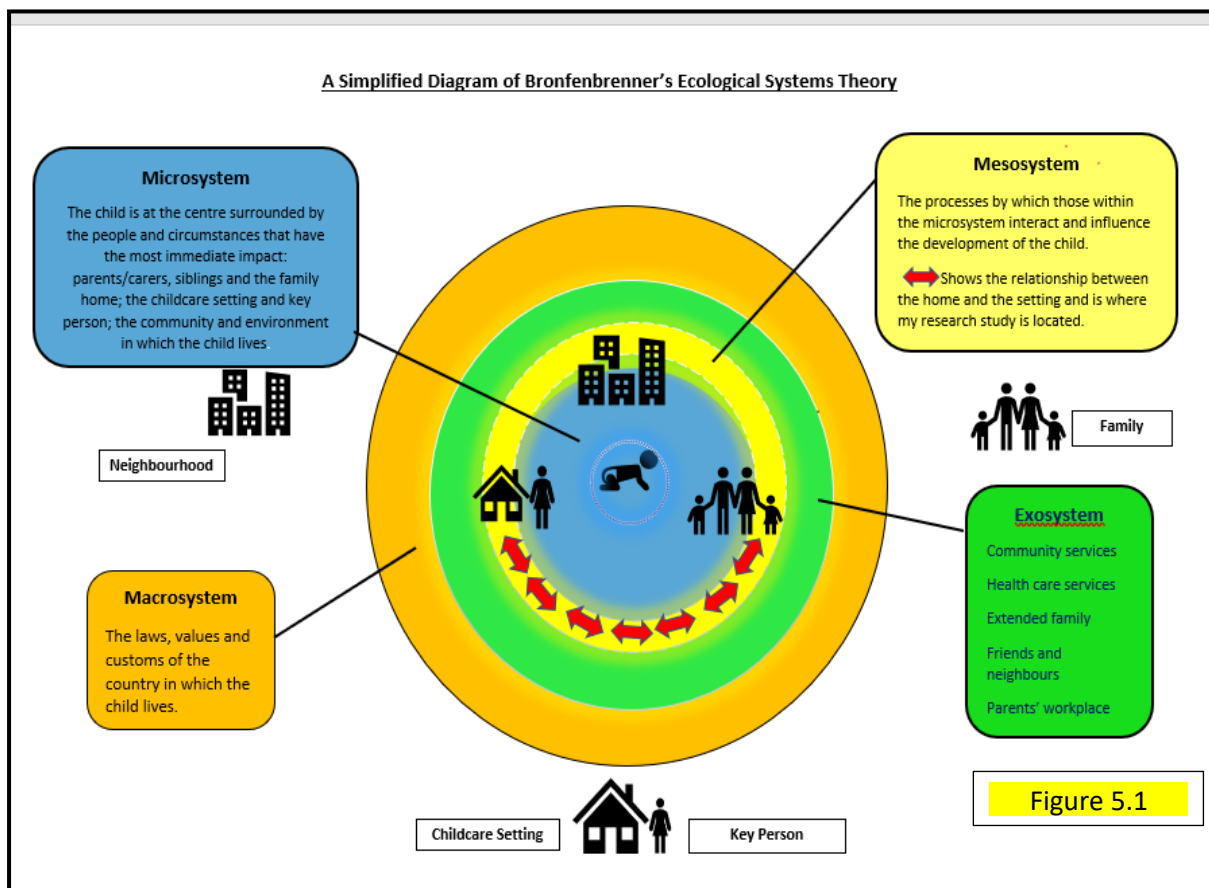


Figure 5.1 shows a simple representation of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, with the child at the centre and the location of the prominent adults in the child's life. These systems, and what they each contain, help to shape a child's learning and development. This diagram shows clearly where the relationship between the prominent adults lie, within the **mesosystem**. Also shown is the position of the **exosystem** and the **macrosystem** which, as well as influencing the child's position, also influence the adults caring for the child and may impact upon the relationship between them. For example, parents may be adversely affected by a difficult work situation or have no support network; while these factors reside within a child's **exosystem**, because they impact negatively on that child's parents, they may also impact negatively upon the child. For practitioners, policy documents and the discourses around parenting, poverty and the education system that reside in a child's **macrosystem**, are played out within the **mesosystem**, affecting their practices. These practices may impact negatively upon relationships with parents, affecting a child in an adverse way by missing opportunities to support learning in the home.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of development (Figure 5.1) illuminates how certain factors combine to influence a child's learning and development. Bronfenbrenner's model is relevant to the practitioners in this study (and the parents with whom they attempt to forge partnerships), who are similarly affected by factors that are often largely out of their control. The most pressing factors affect them directly, such as government and workplace policies and practices, pay and conditions; others may not be felt as immediately within practitioners' everyday existence, but have no less effect in shaping their thoughts and behaviour. In fact, the influences of government policies which dictate current early years practice, media bias that creates a pervasive narrative that works against a whole section of society, and political systems based on a neoliberal ideology have combined to make the world of early years education vastly different to anything that has gone before. The commendable philosophy of investment in quality educational provision for young children has been appropriated as a vehicle for 'intervention' where social problems must be tackled as a matter of urgency (DfE, 2014c; Done and Murphy, 2018; Gillies, 2014). This has meant that demands upon the practitioners who are responsible for this provision are intense. Not least is the ongoing pressure to show how their own efforts in the setting drive young children's progress towards being 'ready' for school. In addition, there is a requirement to make a difference in the home learning of children who may not be adequately 'prepared' for formal schooling by their parents, and who are subsequently 'at risk' of failure within the education system. The expectation that early years practitioners will shoulder this responsibility comes with little or inadequate training, no clear direction about how to engage parents who may be unwilling or unable to co-operate, and no extra resources or time to allow them to focus on this aspect of the setting provision.

5.2: Blame

When children are not making the required progress, perhaps due to 'proximal' and 'distal' processes interacting within their 'systems' (e.g. family stress, poor physical environment, lack of resources for stimulation), the tendency to blame may be hard for some to resist. The people that mostly get blamed are the child's parents and, most often when the child is young this will be the mother (Goodall, 2019). The modern-day discourse of 'good

parenting' dictates that mothers not only should be able to protect their children from negative influences to ensure that they thrive and are safe: a 'good' mother must also be able and willing to support her child's learning and, if she is not able to do this, then she is considered to be deficient for failing to 'prepare' her child for formal education. As Lowe et al noted (2015), these women are usually those from lower-income backgrounds, already subjected to negative opinion simply because they are poor (Simpson et al, 2015a). The discourses around poverty and parenting then lead into another dominant notion: the child is considered to be 'vulnerable' (Olusoga, 2019: 100) and must then be rescued from certain failure by an intervention programme in order that the inadequacies (from the poor parenting) can be remediated.

The practitioners in this study thought that the children on the free education and childcare places had parents who were doing very little to support their learning, although there appeared to be scarcely any concrete evidence of this. This showed a tendency towards the application of Malle's attribution theory (2011), where assumptions (usually negative ones) are made about the practices and characteristics of certain groups felt to be outside of those desired as acceptable and creditable. The data seemed to suggest that many of the practitioners felt some exasperation towards parents whom they felt were failing their children. This appeared to affect their commitment to relationship-building; a cause for concern as, if it is indeed true that there are some children whose learning is not being supported in the home, it falls upon practitioners to take appropriate action in a sensitive and encouraging manner.

5.3: 'Preparing' for school

There are many who argue against the early school starting age for children in England but, as the situation currently stands, and shows little sign of changing in the near future, children in their 'fifth year' of life will be subject to the beginnings of a formalised curriculum that favours certain aptitudes such as listening, attention, good language skills and a positive attitude to learning. Documents such as *Bold Beginnings* (www.gov.uk/ofsted, 2017) make it clear to educators that the earlier this process is started, the better; headteachers in this Ofsted report stated their keenness to take two-year-olds into their

schools so that these children would be 'primed to succeed' by the time they entered the Reception class (page 14). Although the Reception class is still within the remit of EYFS principles, regular phonics and maths sessions signalled the start of formal learning and the teachers who were held up as beacons of good practice within this Ofsted report agreed that practices such as staggered entry into school 'wasted valuable teaching time' (*ibid*: 16) for children. Indeed, many schools that took part in the study had 'used some content from Year 1 national curriculum programmes of study to plan and teach in Reception' (*ibid*: 24).

It is entirely correct to question this 'earlier is better' philosophy, as well as the idea that early years provision is simply a preparation for school (Kay, 2018; Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016b) and there are many vocal opponents to the early school starting age in this country (www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/school-starting-age-the-evidence; www.toomuchtoosoon.org). This was plainly an area of discomfort for some of the participants in this study who were mindful that we were talking about very young children in our discussions. However, as the dominant discourse of starting education early currently drives policy and practice, many practitioners did not appear to question it.

It has to be acknowledged that there is a clearly-evidenced 'achievement gap' between children from poorer homes (as measured by their eligibility for Free School Meals) and their better-off peers (Dearden et al, 2010; Warren, 2014). This means that some children are not starting school 'ready' to learn in the ways demanded by the EYFS and Key Stage One, despite the best efforts of their nursery educators. The findings from this research study suggest that this may be because support for home learning (such as sharing books together, counting, looking at letters and numbers) is not in place in many settings and practitioners are not seeing their work with parents as a priority. If 'parental involvement' is happening, it appears that it is more a matter of luck that some parents show interest in suggestions from the preschool setting (and these may, arguably, be the parents who are doing 'learning' activities at home anyway). Children who come to settings because they are 'disadvantaged' may remain so, unless practitioners are proactive in working with parents in ways that benefit their children. They may need to be more proactive, even persistent, with some families to ensure those benefits are targeted where most needed, as Watt (2016)

described. Shared learning with a parent may also improve relationships by giving both child and parent a mutual sense of enjoyment and achievement. Moreover, it has the potential to give parents the confidence and desire to see themselves as 'co-educators' of their children (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014: 401) which would have a longer-term impact upon their involvement throughout their child's schooling. This would be of particular benefit to those who feel under-skilled, marginalised or simply baffled by the dominant discourse of 'high quality early learning and care' (Allen, 2011a: 89) endorsed and enacted by early years provision today.

It is in the home where support for learning has the bigger and further-reaching impact (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; Sylva et al, 2004). Practitioners have the skills to develop aptitudes for learning in children but the evidence from this study indicates that some do not appear to be making attempts to share their knowledge with parents in any sustained way. Some parents may not yet be in the habit of seeing themselves as 'educators' and do not understand that their children will benefit from support for learning in the home as well as in the early education setting. So, it is in children's interests if the practitioner that 'teaches' them in the nursery helps their parents to 'teach' them at home as well. This does not have to be complicated or 'school-like' but can build on everyday family practices such as shopping, preparing food, and sharing interests, for example by playing games using characters from popular culture. However, opportunities for ongoing dialogue about a child's learning in the home as well as the setting are being missed, creating a situation that threatens to disadvantage some children still further. If this chance to encourage parents to share in the business of 'education' is lost, at a time when parents may be more receptive and when closer relationships can be established on more equal terms, there may not be another chance to help parents to see themselves as a crucial support in their child's educational journey.

5.4: Relationships

Good relationships between parents and practitioners are not easy to establish and maintain, especially if there are underlying prejudices and mismatched expectations similar

to those found in this research study. There are many problems that beset the building of relationships between parents and early years practitioners but perhaps one of the most significant is the different 'language' that practitioners and parents use when talking about children. This language is representative of how these two key players in a child's life view early childhood and, until there is a shared understanding of crucial concepts such as 'early education', 'support for learning' and what counts as 'achievement', relationships will always be 'a messy web of interactions' (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014: 400) destined to have little positive, long-term impact on children's learning and development.

At the same time as the free early education and childcare programme was launched, Pascal and Bertram (2013) recognised that early years practitioners were in a powerful position to make relationships with parents. Bronfenbrenner (1979) had pointed out many years before that key players in a child's mesosystem (chief of which would be the family but would also include staff in childcare settings) had a direct influence upon that child's learning and development. Children do not learn in a vacuum but in social contexts where they absorb not only knowledge and skills but attitudes, beliefs and behaviours from those important adults in their lives. These characteristics would either, in combination with other factors within the 'systems', help or hinder children's progress through life. It follows, then, that a strong relationship between these two key players in their earliest years, constructed with the express intention of supporting children's learning, not just in their 'behaviour', or to duplicate how care routines are carried out, would create the supportive processes for optimum learning and development.

The key person role was created to ensure one person would be, as far as possible, the link between home and the early years setting (Elfer et al, 2012). Long before it became a statutory requirement, key person working was seen as an efficient, but most of all a caring and co-operative way of working with families. When it works well, the practitioner can use relationships that have been forged with families to support children in the setting. These relationships can be employed to affect a child's learning in the home as well and this may be especially important in homes where 'education' may not be a priority or where parents are unsure or unaware of their own role as a supporter of their child's learning.

Many early years practitioners have expertise and knowledge about the ways that children learn and the ways in which adults can support them. They have learned, through training or experience, how to interact with children in ways that are most likely to successfully support learning. They know about different areas that children's learning might incorporate and how to provide for progress in these areas. They have become adept in observing how children learn, what characteristics they display as they play and what they are interested in. They plan activities that will meet children's interests and develop them further by linking them to other areas of learning. While it must be acknowledged that there is a wide range of competency among practitioners in general, and research has shown that a poor early years setting will not benefit a child at all (Mathers and Smees, 2014), the practitioners in this study did appear to carry out their work with children more than competently. Unfortunately, many of them do not share this expertise and knowledge with parents, or at least not as part of an ongoing programme or in ways that parents can understand, relate to and wish to emulate. Nor do they appear to value what parents do at home, helping them to see the importance of their own role as co-educators of their children. While this situation may not impinge directly upon 'advantaged' children, those who have interested, engaged parents and a myriad of resources, trips and activities outside of the setting, it may be an omission that has long-reaching effects on children that are already disadvantaged due to poverty.

However, changing this situation requires a commitment of time and energy: it is a process that must start with a genuine desire to build mutually-agreeable relationships. As Hayes and colleagues pointed out:

'...strong, positive relationships may have the power to overcome the impacts of the most damaging environments...Regarding early education, this means that we need to support the development of positive relationships between adults...' (2017:30)

5.5: Confusion

Many working in the field of education appear to use the terms 'parental involvement', 'parental engagement' and 'parent partnership' interchangeably, and this has been

reflected in this report, where these terms have also been used rather loosely to mirror practitioners’ confusion over terminology. It is important to note here that these terms are not interchangeable as they carry different, discrete understandings and, perhaps more importantly, are loaded with concepts such as agency and power differentials. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) suggest that there is a continuum of attitudes and activities that reflect the true meaning of ‘involvement’ and ‘engagement’; these position parents both within and outside of the setting, and closer examination may help practitioners to consider where most of the activities they offer place parents. Goodall and Montgomery’s model for schools encourages development from simply involving parents in setting activities, through to parental involvement with schooling and ultimately to parental engagement with children’s learning (Figure 5.2). This model could be adapted for early years setting activities to show practitioners where strategies that are currently in use could be adapted to give parents more agency (see also Appendix 2).

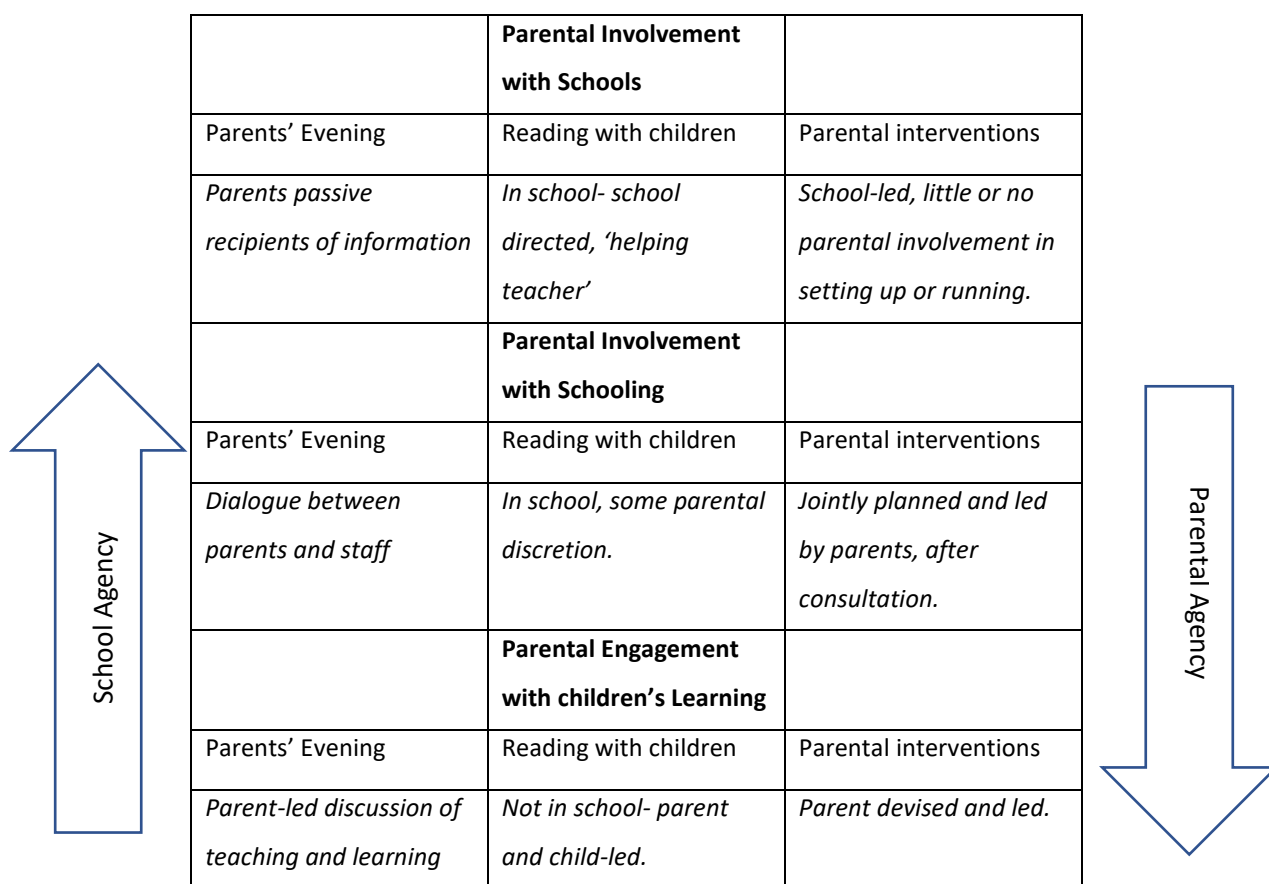


Figure 5.2. ‘Continuum: from involvement to engagement’ (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014: 403)

Allowing for differences in terminology used, this research has shown that practitioners' understanding of parental 'engagement' is principally considered as involvement in setting activities and, while there are indeed many and varied attempts to 'reach out' to parents (such as 'Home Link Books' or 'Take Home Ted'), these are largely unsuccessful. They are also not monitored and there seems to be no attempts to follow them up if parents choose not to do them. There appears to be little in the way of a strategic approach to getting parents onside, and settings seem to be satisfied with the few 'keen' parents that get involved in everything. There is no impression from this study that supporting children's learning in the home, especially where this is not happening, is an important element of early years provision. Parental engagement appears to be largely an 'add on', and practitioners seem to treat the matter as a situation that is largely out of their control. Undeniably, practitioners are not helped by the fact that they have had little or no training in working with parents or shown any information about poverty and its effect on children's outcomes. They appear to be unsupported by management which mainly leaves them to muddle through situations by themselves; although there is research on good or effective practice with parents (e.g. Foundation Years Trust et al, 2018; Goodall and Montgomery, 2014; Whalley, 2017), there is no definitive template for practitioners to follow in a format that they are familiar with. In addition, there is no statutory obligation to do so.

Mostly, though, practitioners are hindered by prejudices or sympathies that affect their willingness to persist with certain parents (as noted by Watt (2016), those labelled 'hard to reach' and arguably the ones that need support the most). In fairness, they are almost certainly hampered by the complexity of what early childhood education and care has become over recent years and their lack of understanding about where this places them and the changes it means for their role as a key person to a child. Practitioners have become 'responsibilised' (Done and Murphy, 2018: 151) for aspects of families' lives that lie outside their control, and changes to support services for health, social care and employment issues have resulted in the burden of support for disadvantaged children being passed to them. Unfortunately, many of the practitioners in this study do not appear to have realised that this is the position that they now find themselves in. This may be attributed to a lack of awareness, an unquestioning acceptance of policy requirements, or a sense of

powerlessness in the face of additional responsibilities that they see as above and beyond their remit.

5.6: A personal response

In response to Stacey's comment about practitioners' attitudes towards parents:

'Obviously, it's not... hurting anyone, the way you think of parents... but we should be in a position where we think, "What can we do to help?" rather than moan about it, and – keep moaning about it.'

I would suggest that **'the way you think of parents'** *is* hurting someone: the children who remain unsupported in the home because their key person has missed the opportunity to build 'strong, positive relationships' (Hayes et al, 2017: 30) with their parents at the best time possible for this to happen, when the child is young, and the necessary interactions are more easily facilitated. These children may be the ones who struggle at school, who, in their baseline assessments or the EYFS profile will score significantly lower than some of their peers because no system of learning support has been established in the home.

Early years practitioners are now, as never before in their profession, in a position of relative power in relation to some of the parents that they are in daily contact with. Unfortunately, the participants in this study have demonstrated that they are unprepared (Phair and Davis, 2015) or unaware of how to use this power in sensitive and productive ways that will benefit the children and families they are serving. This may be due to practitioners' uncritical acceptance of certain discourses, predominantly that which asserts that poorer parents are 'poor at parenting' (Dermott and Pomati, 2016: 125) and that which suggests that educating even very young children is better left to professional educators (MacNaughton and Hughes, 2011). Both of these discourses result in prejudices and biased beliefs that serve to disregard and even alienate an already-marginalised group.

Bias, either overt or unconscious, can affect actions, attitudes and beliefs; this was apparent from the comments that certain practitioners made about the parenting practices of poorer parents based on scant concrete evidence. Implicit bias tests show that people mostly look

more positively on those who seem like themselves, and there are some groups that are 'culturally valued' by all (Fiarman, 2016: 10) with positive traits attributed to them. Allowances may be made for these groups, as in the case of the working, professional parent who cannot attend parents' evening or get involved in setting activities but is not judged to be uninterested in supporting learning. Conversely, groups that are perceived as being different can be unfairly evaluated 'even when people think they are being fair' (Payne et al, 2018: 1). There is little doubt in my mind that the practitioners interviewed in this study would consider themselves to be fair and non-judgemental towards the parents of the children on funded places. However, interview data suggest that unconscious bias affected both their willingness and persistence with certain parents whom they assumed 'just don't want to know' (Practitioner 21) about anything associated with their child's learning.

5.7: The bigger picture

Of course, there are many reasons why one should kick against simplistic views of how best to support children's educational chances so that they are, if not entirely ready at least may be 'readier' to start the educational journey that is ahead of them. The fact of the early school-starting age (among the youngest in the world) has been debated by many early childhood experts for decades but perhaps it is not attending a learning establishment per se that is the issue, but the pressure on children to 'achieve' at such a young age, and the accountability this brings for those tasked with 'educating' them, that is such a major stumbling block for early years practitioners.

Practitioners have been swept up in government-imposed practices that have radically changed their status from 'carer' or 'nurturer' to 'teacher' because of the top-down pressure to show results quickly. 'Achievement', coupled with its counterpart 'underachievement', is a socially-constructed phenomenon and the labels that are attached to the conversation about attainment (the most prevalent being the 'achievement gap') place blame on parents principally but now also on teachers and schools (Carey, 2013). Where this affects the early years arena is that the pressure to show continuous improvement, through mechanisms such as local authority statistics and Ofsted inspections,

often leads to a search for a scapegoat which, reinforced by unfair beliefs about some social groups, limits the potential for 'equitable relationships' to be developed over time.

The Early Years Foundation Stage, both the Statutory Framework (which is legally-binding) and the guidance documents (often treated by practitioners as if they are statutory, although they are not), while being referred to as the epitome of early childhood practice by the practitioners in this study, must also take some of the blame for further marginalising some parents. The EYFS is based on a flawed assumption that it is right and fair that all children should be 'measured' against scales of 'typical' child development (see *Development Matters*, 2014 and *Early Years Outcomes*, 2013). Not only that, it introduces a way of thinking about children's learning that, while only just being meaningful to practitioners in many cases, is not meaningful to the great majority of parents. Yet settings continue to share large amounts of jargon-filled, EYFS-related information with parents, such as the age-related development grids that some of the settings in the study give to parents to fill out as 'baseline assessments' when children first arrive.

Parents who have had the benefit of a good educational experience, who have 'achieved' well themselves, might be more able to steer their way through this mass of information. On the other hand, parents who have had unremarkable levels of educational 'achievement' are likely to be daunted by the sheer weight of information in the two-year-old 'progress' check, EYFS statements, baseline assessment and the EYFSP, leading them to think that 'educating' young children is complicated and not within their capabilities. This is an, albeit unintended, error on the part of practitioners who are directed to share this information with parents. Although the practitioners may be as daunted by the process of continuous assessment as the parents they are attempting to communicate with, they still appear to wonder why they cannot get parents to 'engage' with them about educational matters.

In addition to this paradox, austerity measures imposed by successive governments mean that many of the services that were once available to parents have now disappeared. There is now nowhere that parents can go for help in understanding the information that is given to them, often with very little explanation according to this research. In fairness, practitioners do not seem to have realised that they may now be the only professional that parents of young children come into regular contact with. None of them in this study had

been made aware of the increased responsibility they bore, nor had they been advised or trained in how to approach parents in difficult circumstances

That this responsibility has been foisted upon early years practitioners without consultation or preparation is disturbing and suggests that those who oversaw the inception of the free early education and care programme had little understanding of the dynamics between families and early years practitioners. These are quite different (or should be) to those between parents and schools or parents and professionals such as health visitors. One of the most disturbing aspects of the funding of places for disadvantaged two-year-old children is that it has not been made clear that it is an intervention, to the practitioners or to the parents and so expectations are misaligned. Instead of clarity, this study demonstrated incoherent mumbblings about 'opportunities' for children, suggesting that practitioners believed that access to preschool provision alone would eradicate the effects of poverty on children's different starting points at school-entry. It has not been explained to practitioners that the effects of poverty are pervasive and far-reaching. Neither have they been shown that children may be protected from some, if not all, of the damage that being poor can bring, by having adults around them who are responsive and positive and help them to learn.

However, perhaps the most damaging aspect of this intervention policy is that some practitioners appear to think that their role is to take the place of the parent in supporting children's learning. In this study, parents largely appear to accept this, confirming practitioners' beliefs that they **'are not really interested'** (Practitioner 20). Practitioners have not been made aware that their starting point must be to consider parents as joint custodians of their children's learning, if any meaningful, sustained support is to happen. This may be especially difficult, but especially important, when parents lack the awareness, knowledge, skills or resources to have come to this realisation themselves. To consider all parents in this way, not just those who are keen and 'interested', would mean a radical change in practitioners' perspectives. The importance of including all parents in the learning support equation, helping parents to see themselves as at least equal contributors to professional educators, would mean a refocusing of purpose as well as a large investment of time and effort. This would be made a great deal easier if there was a return to the policy drawing board and the pressure of getting children as young as two 'ready' for school was

lifted. A radical change like this would involve a complete rethink about the 'intervention' aspect of the early education entitlement; not as a compensatory measure but as an opportunity to help parents see themselves as co-educators of their children. Only then might we have an early education system that truly meets the needs of children, practitioners and families.

5.9: Contribution to knowledge

This research study has confirmed other studies on parental engagement and the difficulties that prevent many settings from establishing positive practices. It has confirmed that practitioners in this research feel a deep unease about this aspect of their role and may, to alleviate this unease, choose to largely ignore the directive to '**seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home**' (DfE, 2017: 1.10)' as an ongoing principle of their work with young children. This research adds to the knowledge-base about this subject, in that it explores in some detail the reasons why practitioners may find it difficult to affect the home learning practices of the families of the children they care for and educate every day. It has uncovered not only deep-rooted prejudices but also systemic failures that intervene in forging strong 'partnerships' with parents. This study concludes that it is not only through excellent practice in the setting that practitioners might make a difference in the lives of children who are 'disadvantaged' but through the building of strong, respectful relationships with parents that enable these parents to see themselves as 'co-educators' of their children. This study concludes with recommendations for early years settings that may help them to forge such relationships (Please see Appendix 13 for these recommendations).

In addition, this research study was able to demonstrate that 'informal conversational interviews' as a method of data collection can provide a rich source of data, in that they can allow participants to explore issues that are relevant to them and to their work practices. The sad fact is that in most private day care and, to a point, in the maintained settings in which these practitioners worked, there is very little time allocated for staff to discuss their opinions or open up about their feelings and misgivings. Elfer (2012), in his paper on 'Work Discussion' (132) talks of the necessity of paying 'attention to the emotional experience of

staff' (129), recognising the need to acknowledge and support the 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) that goes into caring for young children. The concept of setting aside time to explore uncomfortable issues, such as feelings about families that are being avoided, misunderstood or judged, could be a valuable model for settings to follow.

Work Discussions (WD) are especially useful as they allow time, space and commitment to practitioners' open discussions about issues that may cause them stress, whether acknowledge or not:

'The theoretical underpinning of WD is psychoanalytic theory and the way ordinary human defences may lead professionals to avoid aspects of their work that they experience as upsetting or anxiety provoking.' (Elfer, 2012: 133)

This is an important point as data from this study showed that conversations with certain parents were being avoided; practitioners had judged those parents to be uninterested or content to 'fade into the background' as Stacey described it. Searching, honest discussions could allow practitioners to see that this situation was detrimental to a child's opportunities for learning. Biases and prejudices could also be unpacked and sensitively challenged within this safe space.

Whether these explorations take the form of group discussions (as in Elfer's Work Discussions) or in one-to-one conversations (as I was able to have with Stacey), one has to be aware that, as well as protected time and a suitable space in which to have these discussions, interpersonal factors need to be considered. If the purpose of these discussions is to provide practitioners with a safe space in which to reflect, acknowledge and understand their own responses to issues, the initiator (whether that be a researcher or a nursery manager or headteacher) must employ strategies that demonstrate care, a willingness to understand and a non-judgemental attitude. Smith and Langston (1999) point out the need for 'sensitivity' when dealing with issues that staff may raise, in the sense of seeing things from their point of view and empathising (even when not necessarily agreeing) with their viewpoint.

An understanding of the physical and practical nature of the setting/situation that is under discussion is also helpful (Sewell, 1998) in employing the conversational style of interviewing. In my discussions with Stacey, as well as actively employing active listening

techniques (Weger et al, 2014), my background in early years settings and personal experience of the issues involved, enabled us to create a shared understanding. This gave Stacey the freedom to discuss issue to do with parents with someone that, she saw, recognised and empathised with the stresses and frustrations that she described.

5.10: Limitations of the study and recommendations for further research

This was a small-scale study with practitioners from a range of education and childcare settings in one city in the North West of England. All the practitioners who took part in the study were closely involved with two-year-old children who were accessing the free early education and childcare programme; most of the practitioners in the study were designated key persons and the majority of the settings were based in areas of moderate to high 'deprivation'. As a small-scale study, it does not claim to be representative of all early years practitioners, and the views expressed by the practitioners in this study are not professed to be typical of all who work in this field. There are many practitioners and settings that are doing excellent work with parents and are indeed making a great difference in the lives of children who are disadvantaged, and I would not like this study to look like a criticism of any early years practitioner. Indeed, I hope that this honest representation of the viewpoints of the practitioners who took part will not be interpreted as a criticism but more as a light that has been shone on issues relating to parental engagement.

One limitation of the study is that parents were not interviewed so their views are not represented here. It is a situation that makes me feel a little uncomfortable, particularly as one of the main findings is that certain parents are being 'othered' by practitioners and may be excluded from 'involvement' because of it. A recommendation for further study would be to investigate parents' viewpoints on the key person-practitioner relationship, their understandings of themselves as supporters of their children's learning and the ideas that they might have to support its development. This would be of value to practitioners working with families that, traditionally, are outside the margins of educational 'achievement'.

Another recommendation would be that practitioners are given the opportunity to research their own practice (the setting recommendations sheet found in Appendix 13 may help as a

starting point). While it is not realistic to expect practitioners to take on the role of parent trainers and deliver in-depth courses, there may be some ways that practitioners could be allowed to share their expertise with parents, and vice versa. These could be delivered through informal, 'coffee-morning'-style workshops where they could share information with parents about things like dialogic book-reading or using environmental print, for example. The cost of these sessions could be funded by universities; a researcher might work in partnership with early years practitioners and parents in planning, assessing and evaluating these workshops. As many settings work on a tight budget, funding for this sort of research might make the difference to their willingness and ability to be involved.

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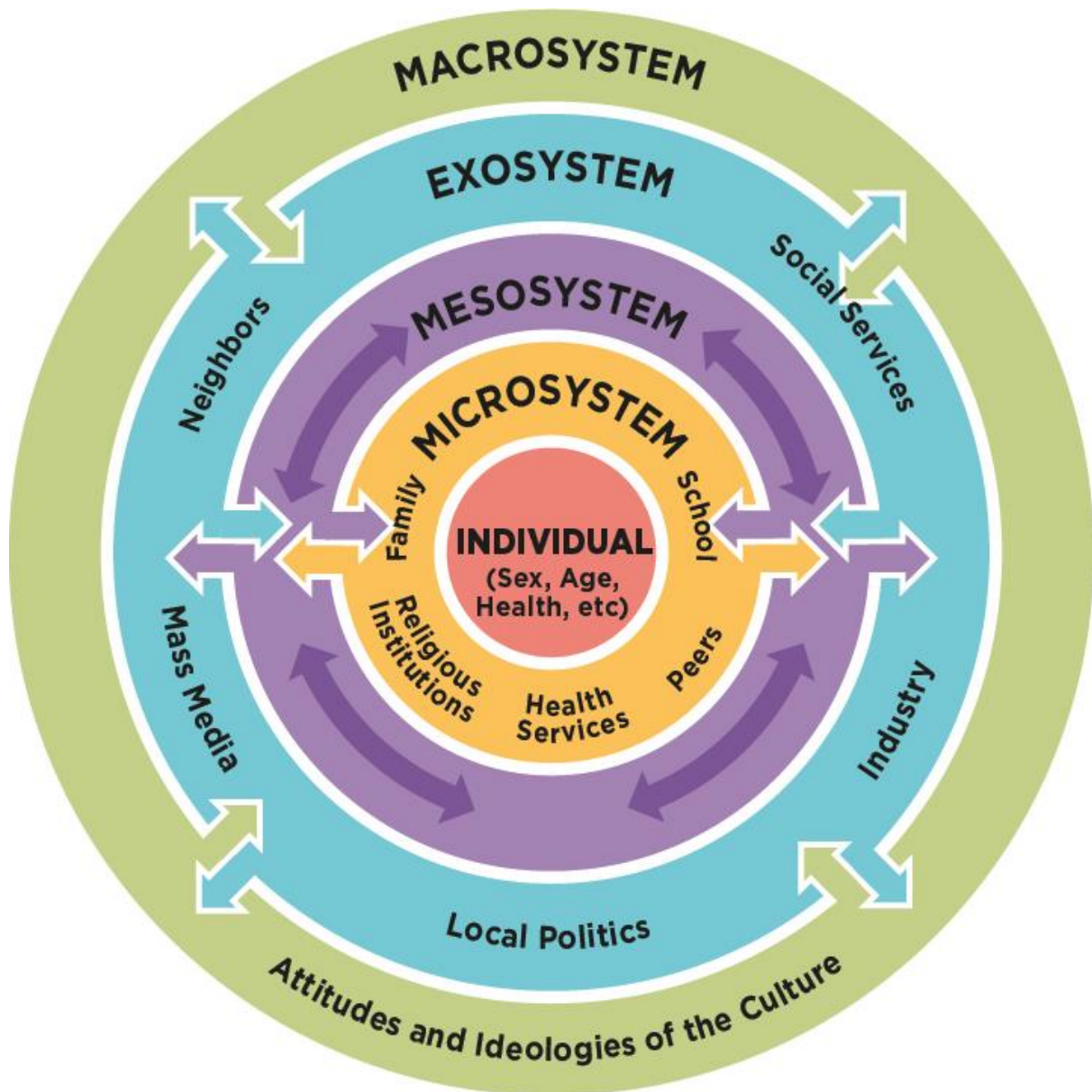
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Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Development.



<https://www.nap.edu/openbook/23482/xhtml/images/img-92-1.jpg>

In this model, the individual is at the centre of a series of systems that influence learning and development over the period of his/her lifetime*. These systems directly and indirectly affect each individual; the interactions between key figures, events, environments and activities within and between each of these systems may also provide significant effects, which can be positive or negative. Key factors that are closest to the individual are considered to be stronger influences.

*Bronfenbrenner refined this model over many years and later added the **CHRONOSYSTEM** which recognised that events/figures within the systems would change over a period of time.

Parental Engagement in Children’s Learning

Name:

Session 1

Discussion: Parental engagement/parental involvement. What does it mean? What does ‘partnership’ with parents mean?

Activity: Look at the list below of things that settings may do to involve parents. Write alongside whether these activities **A) Inform B) Give advice or C) Give suggestions** linked to children’s learning.

Activity	A) Informs B) Gives advice C) Suggestions for children’s learning
Web-site information	
Visits to nursery	
Nursery Application Pack	
Nursery Rhyme/Action Songs words	
Parents’ Notice Board	
Settling-in Sessions	
Key Person introduction and chat	
Staff Team Notice Board (details of staff)	
Newsletters	
Activity bags/boxes going home	
EYFS information leaflets	
Learning Journey tracking	
Observation, assessment and planning	
Transition meetings	
Book/toy library	
Self-registration (parent with child)	
Emailing photos of children playing to parent	
Phone calls (setting to parent)	
Verbal feedback every day	
Communication books	
Home Link books	
Storysacks going home	
Baseline Assessment discussions	
Progress Reports	
Parents’ Evenings	
Parent Questionnaires	
Parents invited in to talk about job or hobby	
Parent volunteers for trips	
Two-Year-Progress Check	
Recipes for play dough, fruit salad, soup, etc	
Emailing observations (e.g. Tapestry)	
Stay and Play sessions	

.....
Transcript of interview

Researcher (R): *How many funded two-year-olds have you currently got in your setting?*

Participant (P): Erm, the funded ones... I think there's about 8?

R: *So, are they not in this week?*

P: There's a couple of them in this week, erm, there's two in today. Some are just doing mornings, some do just afternoons.

R: *They only get 15 hours don't they?*

P: Yes, they get 15 hours so some mums choose to do mornings because they want to sleep and ...the children want to sleep... and it fits in with our ratios as well.

R: *So how many of those are your key children, in your key group?*

P: Of the new children? I've got one up to now but we are getting more children in...and I've got a lot that's ready to leave to go to school in September so I'm probably looking at ...in September, it'll be mostly two-year-olds for me. And that will be lovely (laughs), that will be lovely!

R: *(Laughs) So what do you think is the purpose of the two-year-old funded places?*

P: Erm, I think it's like, getting them socialising and...because, you know, their main teacher is Mum ...or Dad, probably mostly Mum and it's getting them socialised and getting them into, like, a routine ... erm, and developing their speech, their language.

R: *And the purpose of it is what, do you think? Why are we getting children from their homes into...*

P: To get them ready for...life skills and day-to-day routines.

R: *Mmm, yes. And, in your experience, what is the main criterion for being able to access these funded places?*

P: Erm.... (pauses for a few seconds)

R: *To do with income? Household income?*

P: Oh, sorry, yes, that side of it...it's to help...because working in the inner city...the other nursery I worked, there wasn't really so much of a problem, but in the inner city there's more demand for the funding. And that helps the parents, because if they had to pay they probably...if we didn't have funding, I think a lot of children would miss out on a lot and then that would have an impact on them when they start school. Because they... well that would be even harder for them. So, the funding does help because I don't think a lot of parents

would probably be able to afford... well they wouldn't, they wouldn't be able to afford nursery.

R: *So the children wouldn't be starting nursery until they were three?*

P: Mmm

R: *And what would be the disadvantage of that?*

P: They'd have no social skills or...life skills. They wouldn't have any communication... probably their speech, it would affect their speech as well. Erm, mixing with other children...it would have a big impact really.

R: *Would you say parental engagement or involvement whatever you want to call it, is a high priority for your setting?*

P: I would definitely say...because, again, when the child starts, when they're new, he or she might have a... comfort, whether it be a blanket or a dummy or a toy and that's what they need when they leave Mum or Dad or Granny, Granddad...they need that little comfort as well as their key person. So what we tend to do is, the key person will take the child when they first start off Mum and then we always say that we've got, well we call it the 'back up', the second key person, so if she's off sick or on a course or something...so that Mum knows that when she's dropping...Jonny off, that he's going to be safe and well looked-after.

R: *Mmm, yes. And what other things would you do, things that you might put under the umbrella of 'parental engagement'?*

P: Right, yes. We have the tablet form now where we put everything down... how they're eating, erm, we do... when they first start we ...parents can stay. They have, like, three visits and they will stay with the child for the hour and then they'll take the child away. So they get a feel of the nursery as well and they can watch how they're interacting. They might not interact straight away, because Mum is going to be there, that's quite natural, they kind of stick to her...or him. So they do three sessions of that, then they will bring the child, drop her or him off for an hour... Some parents would like to just drop off and the child might be ok but we do the same with every child. Sometimes a child could come in and be fine but then rebel, you know, two weeks down the line. All of a sudden, he or she will say, 'Where's my mum?' Something could have happened at home and we wouldn't know...

R: *Yes, they've started to feel insecure...*

P: Yeah, yeah, yeah ... And I think it's also nice that the key person takes the child from the door, and if that child's upset, we always ask, 'Has he had a bad night or...?' you know, so then we'll know... because if the child is acting out of character, this is a couple of weeks down the line now, we'd want to know why... you know, he mightn't have had enough sleep. And also what we say to the parents is... because sometimes the parents can be more anxious than the child... they'll say, 'Oooh, will she be all right?' so we say, 'Just give us a ring in about an hour's

time to put your mind at rest.’ Because we don’t want the parents going home upset, you know, thinking ‘Ohhh, will he be all right? Will she be all right?’

R: *Mmm, definitely. Anything else that you do?*

P: What we’re going to do is, try and do, is have a Stay and Play because... I think they used to do it before I started but then it sort of went by the... whatever but that’s what we’re looking at, Stay and Play but obviously not with the newer children, we’re going to wait until they settle in and then we’re going to introduce it because we don’t want them clinging and then... so we’re just ... so the parents can see ... what’s going on. And what we’re also looking at, from different nationalities or whatever, if any of the parents would like to come in, you know... One of the parents can speak French so maybe... because you know children at this age... well, their brains, they’re sponges aren’t they? So they can pick it up, you know?

R: *So there’s plans afoot to further develop your parental engagement?*

P: Yes, yeah.

R: *That’s great... So, how much do you think it’s your responsibility to engage parents in their children’s learning?*

P: Oh, very much so. We do... we did signs a few weeks ago, you know, with the letters? Say, for instance, the M for McDonalds... a lot of children like McDonalds but do they know the M for McDonalds? So we say to the parents, when you’re out and that, point out the signs so it... it comes in with the nursery and they go, ‘Yes Mummy, we did that in nursery and we know this’. You know, little things like that ... or count how many red doors or... yes, we do this a lot and it’s just... you could be going along in the car, just turn your radio off for one minute and talk about it to your child. *(Next part unclear)* Because we’ve just actually changed our plans... we do a lot on the Smartboard and I said (laughs), because of my age maybe, I don’t know, I said that I would like to do it the old-style way where you get the book and you have a small group and you have the puppet. Because we have two ages. We have the twos and we have the fours so it is difficult in the room, but there is ways and means of altering that you see. So we’ve just altered our planning, our daily routines to fit in this term. So we’re going to use our Smartboard for, like, showing say Chinese New Year coming up with all the fireworks and everything because... there is things that you can’t do but we are going to do a lot of...going back to ...basics, where the children are involved, and we’re asking them questions with the groups, rather than have them all... just making a blank expression here! ... Because that’s going back to... I’m not saying but it could go on in the homes where, you know, they come in from school and Jonny just goes on his little x-box til he’s...hypnotised and... although they are learning, hmmm, something’s got to give because they’re not talking and, you know, that speech is so important. It’s a really big concern because, as they get older, they’re not going to be very good communicators in life are they? You know, in every job you do, you’ve got to be able to talk to people haven’t you?

R: *Yes, that is one to watch, you're right. Just going back to when you mentioned talking to the parents about the 'red doors, green doors or whatever on your way to school', when do you actually tell them those sorts of things? What opportunities do you get to talk to the parents?*

P: Erm, when we do their personal files, they come in. We do a two-year check and we ask them to come in. I've got one little boy...and erm, because English isn't his first language so I've said, 'Would you like to come in?' and he said, 'Yes!' he just said, 'Yes' so I thought, 'He hasn't got it' so I'm waiting for, I'll get him again, because obviously he's not in this week, being half term so... I'm working on that one. And it just gives them a bit of time because... I notice it here more than in the other setting, that parents are in a rush. Whether they're in work or not it's like, 'Bye!' so it's finding that time. So with our files that we do, we ask the parents, invite them to come in, they can look at them, read about how they're getting on, are they up to what they should be up to, with the two-year-old check and then they come in again at the end of term, erm, to check their development over the year. We have tracker sheets and they look at them to see...

R: *You know you said that you use tablets now? Is that Tapestry?*

P: Oh, that's for our benefit...

R: *Do you send that to parents?*

P: Yes, we've got a link that we can send home. So if they give (the manager) their email... once the parents have given the manager their email, then they can just...link in and they can see what they had... everything goes down, their toilet visits, their nappy changes, what they had for lunch, what they had for snack, morning and afternoon. Erm, if they've had any accidents, if they tripped or something, it goes down in our tablets. Well we use both, we use a written one and a tablet. So they can see both.

R: *So, things to do with their learning, does that get noted down as well?*

P: Yes, yes

R: *And do you link it to the EYFS?*

P: Yes, it gets linked to the EYFS, yes.

R: *I'm just going by what I've seen of these. Do you ask parents to comment?*

P: Mmm

R: *And do you have... is there a facility for parents to do their own observations at home and send them to you?*

P: Yes. We have a 'Getting to Know Me' book. And... we tried diaries at one point. We asked the parents and they said yes, so they went into their bags and then, on the Monday morning they'd come back and they'd still be the same so that didn't really work. So when they first

start we get the 'Getting to Know Me' book and they put in all the child's likes and dislikes, how many is in the family and things like that. But I think that, by doing this two-year check and by inviting them in as well, we get more that way rather than, 'Here's a diary, write in it.' Because I think sometimes, we don't know, parents mightn't be good writers or they might feel uncomfortable, so...

R: *They might not be in the habit of writing anymore*

P: Yes... and, again, it comes back to communication, you know, sitting talking to them you can get a lot out of them...

R: *So how much do you know about the families of your key children?*

P: At the moment, I've only got one funded child...

R: *Well, just tell me generally how you get information about the families*

P: Daily, on a daily basis

R: *Just chatting at the door?*

P: Yes, yes...and when they first start and our manager says, 'This is the key person' so you introduce yourself and then I have a little chat then at the beginning. I'd say more... once you know that little bit, things can change when you talk to them on a daily basis. So, it's just being polite sometimes, saying, 'Hi, did you have a good weekend? What did you do?' Just little things like that, then you get more information. And you've got to give that little bit of time, you've got to and it's... to me, the only way it works, I think, is talking to them each time you see them. Not massive, big, long conversations because, well you're saying hello to the child... but, you know what else I think is really important, very old-fashioned of me, you get to know their names and call them on a first-name basis. Unless, unless...I've only ever had one parent that's said no, so I've respected that and called them Miss So-and-So. But I forget names and I have to say, 'I'm awfully sorry' and they go, 'Right, it's'. I just say it's an age thing! (Laughs) But I do call them by their first names.

R: *And they call you (by your first name) too? The children call you (by your first name) as well?*

P: Yes, yes... sometimes, though, what I've found here, in the inner city, they tend to call you 'Miss', 'Miss, Miss'. Now, in a way, that's a form of respect, I know that but I just found that strange, not what I was used to. But you've just got to respect that. I say, 'Call me (name)' but they just say 'Miss' so then I feel 80!

R: *That's interesting though, isn't it? It says something about how they see your role, do you think?*

P: But I didn't have that in the other setting, where I was out of the inner city. Not once ... so I just found that quite... not strange but... different. Is it because they see you as ... authority? Mmm, which I suppose is good.

R: *That is interesting. It makes you wonder why a parent in a less-advantaged area might see you differently...*

P: Yes, and it's men and women. It's not just a man saying, 'Miss, Miss' and it's all ages as well.

R: *Do you think there are some parents that it's more important to work with than others?*

P: I think, children with special needs or, again, children hard to settle... and parents with English as a second language, that's very important. So, we will...send things home for them to help them with, and take that bit extra time to say, 'This is what we've been doing today. Do you want to ...?' And our Lending Library is up and running bigger now so, we do encourage... And I've said to our manager that I've noticed this term ... that the children are more involved with books. But we changed our setting round, the room round so our book area is bigger. It's more visible and we've got our storybooks in with the books. We could have six books going at once, they're all sitting there going, 'Oooh'.

R: *And it would be great at your Stay and Play, if the parents could see this...*

P: Yes, yes..

R: *Ok, just turning now to the term 'home learning environment'. There's a lot of research about the importance of the home learning environment and the impact it has on children's learning. What, to you, would a good home learning environment look like?*

P: I would say... I mean, I know it's not an ideal world and, like, they go home at 4 o'clock and they learn... but when I was little (and I know everything has changed so much!) we used to ... Mum used to say to us...I'm talking about once they go to school but it could still happen at nursery, really... erm, just that little bit of learning you know, because if the key person had spoken to you, it would be ideal if Mum, once she'd collected all the children, that she sat down and said, 'Oooh, what have you been doing today?' Once they get home, speaking and carrying that learning on and then the parent coming back, communicating with the key person the next day, saying, 'Well actually, Jonny did this...' It's just communication once they leave. Because we can only do so much... so it's keeping that going. It's just the communication, to carry on. Even if it was just for...15 minutes, because at two years of age, they're not going to want to... Or maybe when they're sitting having their tea, they could talk about it, when they know the child's sitting there. And, because the children... if you leave it too long, the children go, 'I don't know, I don't know' ... it's catching it early and then they can do what they want to do.... I gave, a few weeks' ago, one of our three-year-olds whose speech wasn't too good, he was very interested in a bear story, where this big bear comes out of a night...It's called 'The Babysitter'... it sounds horrific doesn't it? (laughs) And the babysitter was saying to the two children, 'Go to bed now!' and the children keep constantly ... anyway this is how the book goes on, and the babysitter says, 'If you don't, I will release the bear!' (I know it sounds horrific!) but...he was so interested in this and I kept stopping the story going, 'What do you think might happen next?' and, you see, it's getting them listening and getting them involved and thinking more. I mean he was pointing and that and when the parent came

I said, 'Would you like to take this book home?' and the parent went, 'Oh, I didn't know he was interested.' And I said, 'Well I would because we've sat the last half hour with it and I think he might like it.' I said, 'Maybe not read it just before he goes to bed!' because it was...but he took it and within a few days it came back and he said he loved the book. So that worked really good...so when we've done our new plans now, especially the book area. We've put puppets down ... I mean, if we've got... we might not have a puppet that matches the book but this puppet's going to be sitting and turning the pages with me and every now and then the puppet will 'talk' to me in my ear and then 'say' something ... because that's what I used to do and I find it works really good. We're also splitting up our two-to-four-year-olds at different times of the day, because different stories wouldn't adapt to the older ones.

R: *So what things make engaging parents difficult?*

P: It could be the language barrier... or it could be that their child's got special needs and they're not...not registering or not wanting to admit that... so there could be a barrier up against that. So that's hard, so it's working with the parents that way as well. I mean, I'm not the SENCO so I pass it on, I mean, if I've got any concerns I will pass it on. So, I would say that's a big barrier. Or the parents could be quite shy, so it's engaging with them but not saying too much to them. You know if they understand, you can more or less tell, I mean they mightn't be a chatter like myself (laughs) so you say, 'Hello. Good morning. Are you ok?' and that might be it but at least

R: (refers to personal experience) *Do you think trust might be an issue?*

P: Yes, I think they're suspicious...

R: *Mmm, why do you think they are?*

P: Yeah... they're 'disadvantaged' so everything is then negative towards them... and maybe they haven't had a fair deal in life and they probably feel their child is going to go that way but, it's gaining their confidence to say, 'Every child matters' and they're all equal so...

R: *That brings me nicely onto the next question which is that there are some parents who are known as 'hard to reach'. What does that term mean to you?*

P: Erm ... a bit like what you just said, you have to chip away and ask yourself why are they hard to reach? What's gone on in their lives and...erm, there could be a problem within the family couldn't there? That, obviously, you don't want to ask them about but you know there's something amiss... but that's up to them to say but your concern is for the child so, to say, you know, 'Jonny will be really looked after here and if there's any concerns we will ring you or we will talk to you. If you need to pick the phone up and you want to talk...or make an appointment. You can come in any time you want.' There's sometimes... sometimes when parents come in and you think, 'Is there something not right?' you get like a feeling, and then you say, 'If there's any problems just give us a ring and arrange to come in.' And they're happy with that.

R: *And has anyone ever asked if they can come in and talk about their child?*

P: Yeah... it could be about... their child is having problems with, the toilet or something like that and the parent might think, 'I don't really want to talk about that because it's not really educational' and if they know their child is having, say, bowel problems and they say... Sometimes we've had parents and they've been crying over ... we'd think, they'd think we'd think it was silly but it's not, it's for the good of the child isn't it? Because that could affect the child, if the child was holding it in... you know, that's just a for-instance. So, then we'd take the parent in and let them... cry it out and then they'll feel better. You know, that's just one little thing. I mean, obviously, you can't go deep into...if it's something that's not involving the child. Well, that's their business, you know but sometimes it does come back onto the child because they're there, in the environment aren't they?

R: *Do you find that the parents generally are happier to talk to you about things like toilet training or eating problems than 'educational' things? Or do you find that there's no difference?*

P: Well in our 'Getting to Know You' books we ask if they've got allergies and everything so they will say that. Erm, educational... I think, most parents will talk about it. Sometimes parents will talk to us and they don't realise what they're saying, and they're saying, 'Oh... Jonny went, we went to KFC and he was talking about chicken...' and they're actually, those children are actually well-educated and they're talking and the parents might not even realise and you can see it and you go, 'Oh that's marvellous!' and they go, 'Do you think so?' and I'm thinking, 'Ohhh'. So sometimes you're working on that as well, you know, where they're not realising We had one parent. They'd been on holiday and 'Jonny' got up on the stage, I think it was abroad somewhere and they were doing a bit of a talent show and 'Jonny' got up on the stage and just started singing. And they were like, 'I felt ashamed' and I was like, 'Oh wow!' Imagine if your child did that! They sang in front of people that they didn't know and a different environment, different country so I said, 'Oh, wasn't that lovely!' and they said, 'Do you think?' I said, 'That's marvellous!' and they were just 'I felt ashamed!' But that's confidence that isn't it?

R: *That's interesting... How do you feel then if your attempts to engage parents are not successful? Think about your lending library for example...*

P: Well, you feel a little bit disappointed but then you just have to think, 'Well what else could we do? Could we do a fundraising day, or ... we are trying this, we are going to try a Stay and Play day. And I think maybe, they are going to see things that they didn't realise that their child could do, or they'll see how well they are mixing. Or...following routines and also, they'll get to know that other staff because when new parents start, they tend to meet the manager, the key person and they might say, 'Who else is in this setting, how is it run?' So I think that's important ... but then, if a parent's working, then I think we'd probably say, 'If you'd like to come in on your day off?' I mean, sometimes parents say, 'I've got too much to do' and that's entirely up to them. But we encourage even our students to talk to the parents, even if they're

not the key person. They might be able to give some input on what 'Jonny' has done or what he didn't like or... it could be a little thing and they would...you might think, 'Ooh well, it wasn't really that' but the parent would be, 'Oh, I didn't know they could do that.' You know even down to, like, when we're on outdoor play, you know, when they have the little bikes or the scooters. You could say, 'Oh, he's really good on the scooter' and they'd say, 'On the scooter? We haven't got a scooter at home.' And they might think, next birthday it's on the list. So, yes, they might only be little things...that's why daily contact is...it's the most important thing, I think.

R: Mmm, just a couple more questions now. What training, either initial training or CPD, have you had that specifically dealt with parental engagement?

P: We had...about two years ago we did the two-year-old boys at Toxteth Annexe and it was saying how boys develop differently to the girls because of their... I've forgotten the word. (R: *Testosterone?*) Yes, that's it (laughs). And they were just asking, you know there were all the different settings there and they were just asking if you'd had any experiences and I was right at the back and my hand was up constantly. And I wondered, I was really interested because... I did tell the room at the time because I was at my other setting, that we had a group of boys that, you know, they couldn't keep still and we used to take them out to play football but I also wanted to engage them in these exercise plans that I was doing for them all...

(interruption while caretaker leaves)

So, what I did was, I added the Superhero theme because I knew the boys at the time were all into Batman and Superman. So, I added it into the routine and, all of a sudden, these boys were joining in and they were the best and it kept them engaged and so I was telling them all that and they were, 'I never thought of that' so they were, 'Well we've got so-and-so in our setting so we'll try that.' So that was a very interesting course because everything that the lady was telling us, I was thinking, 'Well, we've got boys like that. We'll try that when we go back.' So, I learned quite a bit from there because sometimes...I mean we've got a few now, they won't sit and paint or...but they don't always have to sit. In our other setting, we taped, sellotaped paper underneath the table so the children who were going underneath the table and drawing. That worked as well, getting them to mark-make.

R: And being able to share those sorts of things with parents, how wonderful would that be?

P: Yeah, I mixed a very active boy with a quiet boy in the digging area and I had, I'd purposely picked 6 children so I had 2 four-year-olds, 2 two-year-olds and 2 three-to-four-year-olds. And I purposely picked the children that weren't necessarily friendly with each other just to see how they communicated. And these two particular boys, after this session, they actually started playing together, so one brought the other one out and the other calmed the other one down. So I told mum of the active boy and she was... I told both the mums and they both said, 'Oh that's good. Yeah, yeah.' And even to this day, they still communicate with each other. They don't play constantly but they will...if there's a new activity, they will link together.

And it was really good and I wrote an observation about that... It's thinking outside the box isn't it?

R: *Yes... and also, the next step is sharing it with the parents isn't it?*

P: Yes, yeah...

R: *What do you know about the effects of poverty on children's educational achievement?*

P: Right well... with the poverty, I would say, even down to their diet and nutrition, they're not likely to be having balanced meals which will affect their learning and their well-being. Constantly off sick...especially if their parents smoke or whatever, that's a lot... but poverty has got a lot, it does affect their education. So that's where we try to step in and speak to the parents and help them as much as we can without being too intrusive, and saying, 'Try this'.

R: *These two-year-old places are what we call an 'early intervention' programme, which is another term that we hear bandied around. So really, you are that 'early intervention' aren't you? But perhaps that's for another conversation maybe! So, ok, if I had a magic wand here and we had limitless time, money and resources to make parental engagement as great as it could be, what would you need to make that happen?*

P: Probably, to invite the parents in, to come in and see what goes on of a day. Even if it's only a morning, maybe not all day because they probably, they might have things to do but ... and come in, maybe once a month to see how their children are developing, how to keep that going and then they would see a difference in their child from how they...even if that child has only just started, they would see the child developing more in themselves. Because sometimes it's not an ideal situation when they get home. If they've got other children, they haven't got the time to spend with them so that could be their time. Because sometimes we have situations where ... you know, plays and things and you think, 'Oh I'd love to be able to ...' You know, it's hard, because when my children were growing up, I would go to their... you know, any workplace, you should be able to go ... you know to say, 'My child's teacher, 'Miss' has asked me to go in and see how my child is doing.' That would be ideal, really. I mean, it's half-term now as you can see we're not as busy but on a normal day, it's that busy sometimes, you don't get... you'll say, 'Hello' and everything but you don't get chance to say something that you want to say. And sometimes the parents are rushing and you think, 'Do they even want to speak?' because it's such a busy lifestyle...so sometimes you need that extra time so that's... yeah. Or even if they could do, like, 15 minutes...I mean, again, if parents are shy, they mightn't want to stay in a setting. But it would be nice to just do a one-to-one with them for about 15 minutes to say, 'Is there anything you want to ask me?' Because sometimes they might not want to say in a big area but they'd say it one-to-one. It's building their confidence up isn't it?

IDEAS FOR PHASE 3:

Primary objective: To build parents' confidence in themselves as co-educators

Something on talk, rather than using ipad or x-box (109-112).

Sharing books, lending library just set up (190-192)

Stay and Play demonstrating use of Storysack. Also explanation of activities and suggestions for home learning – leaflet? (195, 289-291)

Demonstrating reading stories to children (219)

Getting to Know You book updated at regular intervals

Using puppets (227-228)

Choosing books for children (230)

Matching what children do when not in nursery to 'learning' (277)

Ideas for birthday presents (302)

Passing on info from training, e.g. boys' development (308)

Ideas to get boys mark-making (325)

Ideas about nutrition and food (340)

One-to-one sessions about children's learning monthly? (367)

Parental Engagement Questionnaire

1. How long have you worked with the 0-5 age group?

- a) Less than 1 year b) Between 1 and 5 years c) Between 5 and 10 years d) Between 10 and 15 years e) More than 15 years

2. How long have you worked with two-year-olds?

- a) Less than 1 year b) Between 1 and 5 years c) Between 5 and 10 years d) Between 10 and 15 years e) More than 15 years

3. What is your highest qualification?

- a) GCSE or equivalent b) NNEB or equivalent c) NVQ (please state level) d) Bachelor degree e) EYPS/EYTS or QTS

f) Other (Please state)

4. Do you currently work in:

- a) a school nursery b) a day nursery (PVI) c) a sessional early years' setting d) a nursery school e) a children's centre nursery

f) Other (please state)

5. Are you currently based with two-year-olds?

- a) Yes, full time b) Yes, part-time c) Yes, occasional cover d) No, but I oversee practice e) Not at all at the moment

6. What level of responsibility do you hold?

- a) Manager or Lead Teacher b) Deputy Manager c) Room Leader d) SENCO e) Key Person
f) Other (please state).....

7. How often do you talk to the parents or carers of the children in your care?

- a) Every day b) When the child has done something (either positive or negative) c) When I have concerns about the child
d) To give reminders e) Never

8. How confident are you talking to the parents or carers of the children in your care?

- a) Extremely confident b) Mostly confident c) Confident when I have 'positive' things to say d) Not confident talking about some issues
e) Not confident at all

9. How important do you think it is to involve parents in their child's education and care?

- a) Extremely important b) Important but not essential c) Important when considering issues such as special needs only
d) More important as the child gets older e) Not important at all

10. Why did you choose your particular response to question 9?

.....
.....

Highlight or circle all the things you have done for or with parents in your current setting:

- A. Talked about children's learning informally (e.g. 'She counted up to three today.')
- B. Talked about children's care informally (e.g. 'He ate all his dinner today.')
- C. Talked about a child's education and care in a formal situation (e.g. a parents' evening).
- D. Showed a written observation and linked it to areas of EYFS.
- E. Asked a parent to comment on an observation that you have provided about their child.
- F. Explained to a parent how you use the EYFS guidance documents to track their child's learning progress.
- G. Asked a parent to share observations of their child's learning at home.
- H. Used a parent's observation to plan activities for their child in the setting.
- I. Given a parent some ideas about what they can do at home to support their child's interest or needs.
- J. Given/lent a parent an activity bag (e.g. chatterbox, a game, story sack) to take home.
- K. Given/lent a parent books from the setting to read to their child.
- L. Given a parent guidance about reading to their child.
- M. Given a parent the opportunity to see you reading to their child (e.g. invitation to story time).

- N. Given a parent words to songs and rhymes that you use in your setting.
- O. Given a parent ideas about simple maths opportunities (e.g. in the home or while out shopping)
- P. Given a parent ideas about supporting mark-making and early writing.
- Q. Given a parent advice about their child's behaviour.
- R. Given/lent a parent toys or games that you use in the setting.
- S. Given a parent information about speech and language issues (e.g. dummy use)
- T. Referred a parent to useful websites (e.g. Talk to Your Baby)
- U. Invited a parent in to a stay and play session.
- V. Spoken to a parent about a child's lack of progress (e.g. initiating the support process for SEN)
- W. Attended meetings with other professionals with a parent (e.g. Speech and Language Therapy session).
- X. Invited a parent to accompany their child on a trip (e.g. to the zoo, a pantomime).

Anything else?

.....
.....

*Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Please return the completed questionnaire using the stamped addressed envelope provided. Alternatively, email it to: jellis4@sheffield.ac.uk. Please note that I will be conducting interviews to explore these issues further but you do not have to take part in these interviews unless you wish to. **All responses are confidential.***

Interview Questions (with links to the literature)

- 1. What do you think is the main purpose of the two-year-old funded places? What is the main criterion for accessing these places?**

Are practitioners aware of the rationale for the intervention? (Gibb et al, 2011; Phair and Davis, 2015)

- 2. Would you say parental engagement is a high priority for your setting?**

Do practitioners understand the importance of building relationships with parents in general? (Hughes and Read, 2012) Is it a whole-setting priority? (Callanan et al, 2017)

- 3. Do you think it is your responsibility to engage parents in their children's learning?**

Do practitioners know the importance of their role in engaging parents? (DfE, 2017; Pascal and Bertram, 2013)

- 4. Are there some parents that you feel it is more important to work with than others?**

Are practitioners aware of the impact of poverty or other risk factors that negatively impact upon children? (Simpson, 2013; Simpson et al, 2015a)

- 5. How much do you know about the families of your key children?**

Are practitioners aware of parents' individual circumstances that may impact upon their child's learning? (Elfer et al, 2012)

- 6. What things do you regularly do to involve the parents of your key children?**

How do practitioners translate 'parental involvement' into their day-to-day practice? (Goodall et al, 2010; Goodall and Montgomery, 2014)

- 7. What would a good home learning environment (HLE) look like in your opinion?**

Do practitioners understand the importance of a child's HLE and what things are recommended as effective? (Hunt et al, 2011; Sylva et al, 2004a, 2004b; www.ncb.org.uk, 2018)

8. What do you know about your key children's HLE?

Do practitioners have regular conversations about what children do at home? (Elfer et al, 2012)

9. What makes engaging parents difficult in your setting?

Where do practitioners think the problems lie if parents choose not to engage with them? (Boag-Munro and Evangelou, 2012; Dermott and Pomati, 2016; Watt, 2015)

10. Some parents are known as 'hard to reach'. What does that term mean to you?

Do some practitioners have a preconceived idea about this term? (Cottle and Alexander, 2014; Watt, 2016)

11. How do you feel if your attempts to engage parents are not successful?

Do practitioners feel personally affronted if their attempts to liaise with parents are not reciprocated? (Brooker, 2010)

12. What training (either initial or CPD) have you had that specifically dealt with parental engagement?

Have practitioners had any guidance on working with a diverse range of parents and those with particular difficulties? (Phair and Davis, 2015)

13. Have you had any training on the effects of poverty on children's educational achievement?

Are practitioners aware of the 'achievement gap' and its causes? (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Carey, 2014; Goodman and Burton, 2012)

14. Describe to me the ideal circumstances that would enable you to engage parents more successfully.

Are practitioners being given the time and resources to build relationships with parents successfully? (Brooker, 2002; Callanan, 2017; Roberts, 2017).

Appendix 5: Stage 2 of data collection

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These questions were asked in a relaxed environment, away from the noise and bustle of the nursery setting. The interviews were conducted with individual practitioners who worked with two-year-olds, at least some of whom on funded places.

Thanks again for doing the questionnaire so promptly. Just wondered what you thought of the questions?

- *Were they easy to understand? **Yes***
- *Any that you were unsure of their meaning? **No. They were straight forward.***
- *Did it take too long to do? **No.***
- *Would you have liked the opportunity to expand on any answers other than those provided?
Probably all of them. I think most settings do most of the question asked, however not all to the same standard for varying reasons as we all operate differently, with different expenses and views.*
- *Do you think the questions covered the subject well? **Yes***
- *Could you think of any questions that weren't on the questionnaire that you might have expected to be on there?*

Do you share Leuven scales with parents? (maybe alongside the settling in days)

[https://www.ncn.ie/images/Measuring Up Nursery world Handout.pdf](https://www.ncn.ie/images/Measuring_Up_Nursery_world_Handout.pdf)

Do you offer focused information groups to parents as well information leaflets?

Do you offer home visits?

Do you have a home school book for recording information about the child?

Is there any other opportunities to encourage the child to tell the parent about their day...ie ask me about cards?

Are the parents involved in decision making that directly may involve their child? (We pose questions in our setting to gain views).

Do you have a comments box? (You said so we did)

This was the response to an email I sent to an ex-colleague who had agreed to pilot the questionnaire. She, like all of the research participants, is currently working with funded two-year-olds. She is aged between 30 and 40 years of age, has an early years' degree and Early Years Teacher Status and has worked in childcare for 20 years. She is currently working in a pre-school setting which is open school hours and term-time only but is not attached to a school.

For the attention of the lead teacher/manager of your early years provision

I am sending you some information about a research project that your setting may wish to be involved in. It will be starting in the new year and I hope to be able to work with settings on finding out the range of activities going on around the city and the concerns that settings have to do with parental engagement. In this way we can celebrate and disseminate good practice, as well as supporting our most vulnerable families. This is especially important now as those front-line family services continue to be reduced.

The research project will run in three stages, starting with a simple questionnaire and then, in some cases, going on to interviews and then involvement in a one-to-one mentoring programme.

At the moment I am simply trying to get a list of settings that are interested in taking part at the questionnaire stage. If you would like to take part, please respond to this email stating your interest and then I will send you more information in a few weeks' time. I have attached an information sheet telling you a little more about myself, and the research project.

Best wishes
Jan

Title of Project: Parental Engagement and the Early Education Entitlement

Name of researcher: Janice Ellis, Ed D programme, University of Sheffield

Participant Identification Number for this Project:

.....

Please read and initial each statement:

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| 1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above research project. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions of the researcher. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. I understand that my participation is voluntary. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. I understand that I can withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. I understand that my responses will NOT be anonymised before analysis by the researcher. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. I understand that my participation will be anonymised in the final report. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. I give permission for my anonymised comments (from interviews or support sessions) to be used in future training sessions. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. I agree to take part in this research project. | <input type="checkbox"/> |

.....

Name of Practitioner:

Setting:

Signed:

Date:

Name of Researcher:

Signed:

Date:

Individual Responses to Questions 7-10

No	Question 7 Talking to parents	Question 8 Confidence with parents	Question 9 Importance of involving parents	Question 10 Why did you give that answer to Q 9? (<i>Responses in full</i>)
1	Every day	Mostly confident	Extremely important	<i>'I feel that we can only build on what parents do with their child at home, so it is important to encourage and support parents.'</i>
2	Every day	Extremely confident	Extremely important	<i>'Through studying and research I have previously carried out myself I am aware of the evidence showing that children's learning and development is greatly enhanced when the level of parental involvement is high. In my experience when parental engagement is high it is evident in not only their development but their attitude to learning and their enjoyment of attending the setting. To enable a child to learn and develop to their full potential we need to consider the child as a whole and that includes their life away from school.'</i>
3	Every day	Extremely confident	Extremely important	<i>'Parents' are a child's initial and primary educator and carer; therefore, we need to get information from them so that we know each child's likes, dislikes and their interests so that we can plan their education and care in a way that suits each child. It's important to keep the parents updated on a daily basis so that parents know what their child has been doing, what they've achieved and what they need to work on. So that we are working together in partnership for the child.'</i>
4	Every day	Mostly confident	Extremely important	<i>'Positive relationships with parents are imperative for the success of the children; without these relationships being nurtured the children may not reach their full potential.'</i>
5	Every day	Extremely confident	Extremely important	<i>'Because it is beneficial to the child if parents and care givers are working together to help the child achieve their full potential and both parties are teaching the same way so not to cause confusion for the child.'</i>
6	When the child has done something	Mostly confident	Extremely important	<i>'I chose this response as based on experience I have seen how children with parental involvement in their education tend to flourish when compared to those who do not have the involvement at home.'</i>
7	Every day	Extremely confident	Extremely important	<i>'I feel it is extremely important to work with parents and carers so we can share information about the child's learning and development, also to work on different areas together e.g. toilet-training, speech and language. Plus early intervention.'</i>

Appendix 9: Responses to questions 7-10

10	When the child has done something	Extremely confident	Extremely important	<p><i>'I feel that it is important for many reasons. Some are as followed.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>• Children will settle much quicker when they see good relationships between parents as staff boosting confidence in the child involved.</i> <i>• Parents may feel they are more able to confide or ask for help if needed.</i> <i>• Parents will find it easier to understand and support any particular approaches about their child if necessary.</i> <i>• Involving parents with their child's education allows them to see what learning we are working towards and what has been achieved so far.'</i>
11	Every day	Not confident talking about some issues	Extremely important	<p><i>'I believe it is vital for parents/carers to be involved in their child's education as children are constantly learning whatever they are doing and wherever they are. Partnership with parents helps give parents support at home outside of the nursery environment, it is my belief that parents, children and practitioners all benefit from discussing their child's education.'</i></p>
12	Every day	Extremely confident	Extremely important	<p><i>'First place child can learn the most is from home. Once parent is giving a lot education, child is smart too.'</i></p>
13	Every day	Extremely confident	Extremely important	<p><i>'It is important to get the parents involved in their children's education from an early age. It lets the parents see that we don't just play with children.'</i></p>
14	When the child has done something	Mostly confident	Extremely important	<p><i>'It is important to work together as a team'</i></p>
15	Every day	Extremely confident	Extremely important	<p><i>'A parent is the child's first educator. It is important that the nursery team and parents/Carers work together to achieve the best possible outcomes for each child.'</i></p>
16	Every day	Extremely confident	Extremely important	<p><i>'Partnerships with parents are very important to us to share ideas, thoughts, concerns and most importantly celebrating achievements. Together giving the children the best care and education we can.'</i></p>
18	Every day	Extremely confident	Extremely important	<p><i>'Important to work closely with parents to get their input into what their child is doing at home so we can continue to support children in nursery. This is also the case with letting parents know what their child is up to at nursery so parents can explore this learning at home.'</i></p>
20	Every day	Extremely confident	Extremely important	<p><i>'I think it is important as the parents are the children's main care giver are their thoughts and opinions should be considered when planning for the child's education and care. It provides more consistency for the children's learning and strengthens communications between parents and the settings. Practitioners may be able to offer lots of support and guidance from</i></p>

Appendix 9: Responses to questions 7-10

				<i>previous experience, knowledge and training and parents will be able to offer ideas supporting personal interests, culture and diversity.'</i>
21	Every day	Mostly confident	Extremely important	<i>'To share information on the child's learning in the setting and at home so both parents and staff can work together to help the child's development.'</i>
22	Every day	Extremely confident	Extremely important	<i>'It is important to have a great relationship on parent partnership as it aids in the development and growth.'</i>
23	Every day	Extremely confident	Extremely important	<i>'It is important for child's development.'</i>
24	Every day	Extremely confident	Extremely important	<i>'Needs consistency at home and in childcare setting. Work together.'</i>
25	Every day	Extremely confident	Extremely important	<i>'It is important to have continuity of care and work together.'</i>
26	Every day	Extremely confident	Extremely important	<i>'As communication is important towards the children's development. Also it is important that parents are aware of any failings or milestones not being met.'</i>

Individual responses to parental engagement questionnaire; questions 1- 6

No #	Gender	Age	Experience	Experience with 2s	Highest Qualification	Current setting	Based with 2s?	Level of Responsibility
1	F	51-60	More than 15 years	Less than 1 year	NNEB	PVI (full, year-round day care 0-4 years)	Yes, PT	Key Person
2	F	31-40	10-15 years	1-5 years	Degree	Nursery class in school (TT only, 2-4 years)	Yes, FT	Room Leader
3	F	61+	10-15 years	10-15 years	NVQ 3	Other- 'Charity-run pre-school' ‡ (full, year-round day care, 2-4 years)	Yes, PT	Key Person
4	F	21-30	5-10 years	5-10 years	NVQ 3 (plus Level 6 award)‡	Nursery class in school (TT only, 2-4 years)	Yes, FT	Room Leader
5	F	31-40	More than 15 years	1-5 years	NVQ 4 (plus diploma from OU)‡	Nursery class in school (TT only, 2-4 years)	Yes, FT	Key Person
6	M	31-40	1-5 years	Less than 1 year	Degree	PVI (full, year-round day care, 0-4 years)	Yes, Occ	Other: Third-in-charge
7	F	51-60	10-15 years	10-15 years	NVQ 3	PVI (full, year-round day care, 0-4 years)	Yes, FT	Other: Third-in-charge
10	F	21-30	5-10 years	1-5 years	'NNEB or equivalent'*	Sessional day care (TT only, 2-4 years)	Yes, FT	Key Person
11	F	Up to 20	1-5 years	1-5 years	NVQ 3	Nursery class in school (TT only, 2-4 years)	Yes, FT	Key Person
12	F	31-40	1-5 years	Less than 1 year	Degree (plus level 4 Montessori)‡	Sessional day care (TT only, 2-4 years)	Yes, FT	Key Person
13	F	51-60	More than 15 years	1-5 years	NVQ 3 (plus SENCO award)‡	Sessional day care (TT	Yes, FT	Deputy Manager/SENCO

Appendix 10: Responses to questions 1 to 6

						only, 2-4 years)		
14	F	Up to 20	1-5 years	1-5 years	NVQ 3	Other: 'Private nursery within school' ‡	Yes, PT	Key Person
15	F	31-40	More than 15 years	More than 15 years	NVQ 3	PVI (full, year-round day care, 0-4 years)	Yes, PT	Manager
16	F	51-60	More than 15 years	More than 15 years	NNEB	PVI (full, year-round day care, 0-4 years)	No, but oversees practice	Deputy Manager/Room Leader/SENCO/Key Person ‡
18	F	21-30	5-10 years	5-10 years	NVQ 3	PVI (full, year-round day care, 0-4 years)	Yes, FT	Room Leader
20	F	21-30	5-10 years	5-10 years	Degree	PVI (full, year-round day care, 0-4 years)	No, but oversees practice	Deputy Manager/SENCO
21	F	41-50	More than 15 years	More than 15 years	NVQ 3	PVI (full, year-round day care, 0-4 years)	Yes, FT	Room Leader
22	M	31-40	1-5 years	1-5 years	NVQ 3	Other: Childminder	Yes, FT	Other: Childminder ‡
23	F	51-60	1-5 years	1-5 years	GCSE or equivalent	Other: Childminder	Yes, FT	Other: Childminder ‡
24	F	41-50	10-15 years	10-15 years	NVQ 3	Other: Childminder	Yes, PT	Other: Childminder ‡
25	F	41-50	5-10 years	5-10 years	GCSE or equivalent	Other: Childminder	Yes, PT	Other: Childminder ‡
26	M	41-50	5-10 years	5-10 years	NVQ 3	Other: Childminder	Yes, FT	Other: Owner/Manager ‡

Participant identification number is not the same as number taking part as some participants did not continue after permission slips signed, when numbers were assigned to protect anonymity. *As stated by participant; NNEB as a qualification ceased in 1994. ‡ As stated by participant

1 Respondent number: 11

2

3

4 R: We've already said that the focus of the research is the two-year funded children. How
5 many children in your room are funded?

6 P: All of them. We've got...18 at the minute.

7 R: What do you know is the main purpose of offering these places to these children?

8 P: It's to get them learning earlier, it's the foundation isn't it of their learning? We're in a
9 ...deprived area and so, it's about getting them in and getting the help they need as early as
10 possible.

11 R: Do you what the idea behind that is? You've mentioned being in a deprived area, so do you
12 know what the assumption is behind bringing them into nursery instead of leaving them at
13 home?

14 P: That there's not...learning going on at home....Obviously we see more children coming in
15 with ...less language and things and I've noticed that myself in the ...two years I've only been
16 doing it, I've noticed it myself that...the further I've gone on, there's more kids coming in with
17 less language so, I feel like ...things that...we're doing...obviously we do more with them but
18 it's not happening in the home.

19 R: And you're fairly confident that it isn't happening in the homes because of what you see?

20 P: Well, obviously I don't know what happens in the home but, even when they get ...the kids
21 get dropped off, I've seen kids...they're just sort of 'thrown in' and not even spoken to. Not
22 even a 'Bye' ...and even when they come out, it's not like, 'Have you had a good day?' or things
23 like that, it's...I see a lot of parents on phones as well, when they drop them off and pick them
24 up.

25 R: Would you say parental engagement, trying to get the parents involved, is a high priority
26 for here?

27 P: It is important and we do...try, it's just a lot of the time it's ...getting them in and, obviously
28 we do speak to them every day, inform them and we have our parents' evenings which are

29 more formal and we will discuss... if we've got a concern or if, even if they've done something
30 really good that day, we will let them know and talk to them but it's ... I think it's engaging
31 them, the parents into their children's learning because... I do see a lot of...lack of interest in.
32 Sometimes when I'm talking to parents, I've noticed that they've just been...just eager to go
33 really.

34 R: And why do you think that is?

35 P: I don't know...we just...we live in such a fast-paced society now everything's just ...going,
36 going, going so...I will say, a lot of our parents are quite young as well. Some of them are my
37 age (20) and ...

38 R: But you're young as well, and you 'get it'

39 P: Yeah I get it but I think that's because I've done the learning and I know when I was younger,
40 that my mum did all sorts with me so...

41 R: Do you think that, maybe these parents, it didn't happen for them?

42 P: Yeah, I think it does...it's repeated isn't it? It's history repeated really.

43 R: So, do you think, as an early years' practitioner working with these children on an early
44 intervention programme, which is what this is, isn't it...do you think it's your responsibility to
45 try and get them involved in their children's learning?

46 P: It is a lot of our responsibility. I feel awful if I feel like a parent's not...willing to come...I
47 mean, I've actually cried before because I've thought a parent...it was only over a pantomime
48 and a parent said she was going then, all of a sudden, she had an appointment. And I just lost
49 it, I was a bit upset about it and I ended up taking him over even though we'd said we couldn't
50 take the children over, parents had to take them so... but it is really our responsibility, a lot of
51 our responsibility but, at the end of the day, if a parent's not...willing or...I do see a lot of
52 parents not trying so, it does put you down a bit, I do feel a bit...definitely.

53 R: Why do you think they're not interested?

54 P: I don't know, I think it's just...because you do see a difference in parents who...are, I don't
55 want to sound... but the parents who I know...work, and who I know are probably not as
56 deprived as other parents, you can see a difference in the children.

57 R: So you can see that clear link?

58 P: I can, yeah. Because I feel like...I'm not saying every single child whose parents work, they're
59 all perfect, they speak perfectly at two, do you know what I mean...but, I can see differences
60 in the children who are probably a bit more deprived than those who are a bit better off.

61 R: So you can see how that then continues? Because they're going to be starting school behind
62 behind?

63 P: Yeah...

64 R: So, do you feel that there are some parents who it's more important to work with than
65 others?

66 P: I don't feel it's more important, but we do try to...think of different ways to engage
67 with...those parents who, maybe, aren't more willing to...Because obviously, we've had
68 parents who aren't willing to come to courses and things and **we don't know the reasons for**
69 **that**, because obviously we're not with them 24/7. So we do try to engage them more...it's
70 just...trying to get them to ...because obviously we can't force anybody, any parent to come
71 to things or...

72 R: You'd like to know why, wouldn't you? Why don't you come? You mentioned the courses.
73 Tell me a bit about the courses that are on offer.

74 P: We do a course, we do it every...I don't know how often it is because I'm not... we don't
75 really run it, it's (name) who'll run it and it's for... We did a reading one and it was, it was
76 basically just teaching parents how to read to their kids, like, how it was...how it impacts them
77 and things like that. And we do, we do actually have a 'Come read with me' session as well
78 that is on every Thursday. And it's only 15 minutes, the parents can come in and read to the
79 kids, and so far no-one, no-one comes, not one parent has been.

80 R: And how does that make you feel?

81 P: I just feel...I like like they don't care. Because we have so many kids with delayed speech
82 and ...you can see that they need support and they're getting it, we try our best here, we try
83 our best to engage the parents but when they're not... they're not coming to things, you feel
84 a bit defeated... But you have to do it, don't you?

85 R: You've mentioned the courses, you've mentioned 'Come read with me', what else do you
86 do to try and engage the parents?

87 P: Well, we have our Home Link books as well and they're just ...they get sent out every week
88 and ...we write in them to say what they've been doing that week and we'll put, if we have
89 pictures left over and things, we'll put them in and we hope that the parents will write back.

90 R: And do they?

91 P: A few of them do, quite a lot of them don't and quite a lot of them haven't even brought
92 them back after the first time they got them. And we do remind them. We actually had one
93 parent who lost it, wanted another one back and didn't bring it back again. So... but we do
94 offer them chances to get another one but obviously... we put books and things in, so it's
95 like...we keep losing books and things, no-one's bringing them back and we do remind them,
96 we have little slips to remind them to bring them back. So...yeah, we do that as well. I mean,
97 I do talk to the parents a lot, I go out a lot, you know, I'll take the kids, get their bags and take
98 them out to the parents. I'll say if they've done ...if they've had a good day or if they've done
99 anything like a picture or something, or if they've done... We have PE on a Wednesday and
100 we also have...we have Stay and Play sessions as well. We usually do that after half-term, the
101 first day back and that's to help settle new starters, and let the parents come in and get to
102 know us as well. And the parents who are already there, they come as well. They're quite
103 successful, but you do get quite a few parents trying to say, 'Oh, I've got somewhere to be,
104 can I not just leave them and go?' and obviously, it's a Stay and Play... we're making all the
105 other parents come in and stay and they're leaving their child. I know in this room, in the 3-
106 year-old room, they've had a parent just sort of push them in and go, without even saying
107 anything and they had to ring them up and say, 'You've left them here!'

108 R: Was that the child's first day?

109 P: No, it was a little boy who's been here a term before... He wasn't upset or anything but
110 obviously it was Stay and Play and parents had to stay with them so...

111 R: So it's a settling in after each break?

112 P: Yeah... but they are quite good. Quite a few come but there's no ... you have to stay for this
113 set time, you can come and go as you please, that kind of thing, between the set times. We

114 do get parents who stay for the full 2 hours, and some will come for 5-10 minutes and then
115 go, and some won't come at all. But they generally do come, I'll give them that! (laughs)

116 R: Why do you think some of them, the ones who get off after about 10 minutes, why do you
117 think they do that?

118 P: Well, I feel like ... some of them may not... I do feel like some of the parents may not feel
119 comfortable, being around ... us, you know? Because... maybe they've had ... experiences in
120 school and things like that, you don't know. But ...or maybe they just need to be somewhere
121 or can't be bothered, I don't know.

122 R: How many of them have got other children?

123 P: A lot of them have got siblings, one or two...I know one parent who stayed for 10 minutes
124 of Stay and Play, she has two other boys in school, so it could have been that but...

125 R: They're in school though? So... we don't know actually. And the ones who do stay, why do
126 you think they stay?

127 P: Probably because they're more interested in what we do, they want to know.

128 R: And are they the ones who fill in the Home Link books as well?

129 P: Yeah, quite a lot, yeah.

130 R: So they feel quite confident around staying and communicating with you?

131 P: Yeah, and I think that's where it's history repeating itself. They probably had good
132 experiences at school. They probably want to see what their child is doing in school. Because
133 it can be scary.

134 R: I would say though, that the practitioners with the two-year-olds, you're not as scary as...

135 P: Yeah, yeah, a teacher, yeah.

136 R: Well, even in our room we're not 'Miss', we're called by our first names so ... it's more
137 personal and ...we get a lot of parents coming in crying to us, saying if they've had a bad day
138 and...it is... we do have good relationships with our parents who...they feel comfortable with
139 us and, obviously, each parent...if their child has me as their key person, they feel more
140 comfortable talking to me and they might not want... because I've even answered the phone

141 and they've gone, 'Is (name) there?' and I'll go, 'No' and they'll say, 'Well, all right. I'll ring
142 back when (name) is there.'

143 R: you can understand that though can't you? If trust is an issue, and it may be, generally...?

144 P: Yeah, at least they've got someone they can speak to...

145 R: Yeah, I can understand that. So that key person role is really important isn't it?

146 P: Yes, mmm.

147 R: Ok, thinking back to what you said about things going on at home or not going on at home,
148 what sort of things do you think should be going on at home?

149 P: Well, every time we have parents' evening we give out leaflets...for my college course, I
150 had to do a leaflet where I put activities for things, like cheap easy activities parents can do
151 at home. And a lot of the time, especially when it's a last day here, we'll have something on
152 the Smartboard and you can see the ones who are glued to it, they can't come away from it
153 and you think, 'How much are they actually getting at home?' And you always see babies and
154 children with smartphones on the bus... you always see them, so I assume it's the same at
155 home as well. We do a lot of... we do get frustrated about dummies as well (laughs) because...
156 well obviously they are a comfort but... we once had a little girl who was under speech and
157 language and she left her dummy, because, after they've settled and they're fine, they just
158 hand them to us so we put them up on the shelf. So, she was fine without it and she was
159 under speech and language and her mum came back and said, 'She's forgotten her dummy. I
160 can tell because she hasn't shut up!' and (laughs)...and it's so heart-breaking because you
161 have to hand over the dummy and it was straight in her mouth and it was like, 'Ohhh'...

162 R: So that parent actually didn't want the child to talk?

163 P: Yeah... it's things like that, because obviously we don't know what goes on in the home but
164 I always just imagine them sat there with their dummy in their mouth, on the i-pad or i-phone,
165 telly on... I mean, obviously they'll have toys and things but do parents actually sit and play
166 with them? And you know, it's a lot of... because when we play, we sit with them and we talk
167 to them, we comment, commentate about what they're doing or we'll ask them simple
168 questions. But are they getting that at home? So, it's things like that...

169 R: Do you notice the children who are getting that at home? Is there a difference?

170 P: Yes, I feel like there is because you see the children who...write in the Home Link book every
171 week and they come back and they've been to the zoo or they're actually experiencing things.
172 Or their mums have got them a paddling pool for the weekend and things like that, they talk
173 more, they do. And that's another thing...maybe parents don't write in the Home Link books
174 because, maybe they feel ashamed that they haven't got the money to go out every weekend
175 and do something or go out over the half term? You just don't know, do you?

176 R: No, you don't... So, what do you know about the importance of the learning that goes on
177 in the home? The impact it has on the child?

178 P: Well, it's the first ever experience and you know, going home...it's where they are most of
179 the day and their parents are who they're with most of the day. So, it's so important that they
180 are... because I believe that, whatever a child is doing, they're learning. It doesn't matter if
181 they're just...sat there picking their nose, they're learning! (laughs) So, I think, yeah, because
182 they're there a lot of the day...because they're only here three hours a day. So, if they're at
183 home and they're not getting stimulated...their brains are always working I think, they're
184 always looking for something to do and so, I think if they're not getting...and the parents, they
185 look up to them as well, they're the first people that are in their lives so...they're learning off
186 them... It's what they see.

187 R: Mmmm. I think you've possibly already answered this but I'll ask it again. What things make
188 engaging parents difficult in your setting?

189 P: It's things like, asking them physically to come to something. It's...they've 'got an
190 appointment' or they just, they can't because they've been sick for how many weeks, they
191 can't. And things like the Home Link books...and parents' evening as well, sometimes they
192 don't turn up and they never have a reason why and then...if...don't get me wrong, sometimes
193 they do come in and they say, 'Oh, I've missed parents' evening' and 'Would you be all right
194 to speak to me?' So it's like...we'll go the extra mile to... like, I finish at half past three every
195 day but if a parent comes at 20 past and says, 'Oh I've missed parents' evening. Can I speak
196 to you for a bit?' And then they've got you there for 20 minutes, that's my time so... I mean, I
197 do give it up but, it's frustrating because you think, 'I gave up the time in the first place and
198 you couldn't...' I understand that everyone's got things going on and to not even give me a

199 reason why they've missed it. And it's so important, especially if it's the first parents' evening
200 because that's when we do the Two-Year Check and obviously that's where we'll ask them if
201 they've got any concerns of their own and a lot of the time, if they're not there to do it...

202 R: Do you think that some of the parents just don't even realise what you're trying to do with
203 their children?

204 P: Yeah, I don't think they realise... I think they just think it's somewhere where they can...play.
205 I think we're glorified babysitters really to some parents.

206 R: So when they do see the Two-Year check and the links to the EYFS, what is their response?

207 P: well, when they first start, we do the highlighting sheet and, what we used to do, we used
208 to go from 8-20 months up to 22-36 months. And we've stopped going to 22-36 months now
209 because, everything was 'Yep, yep, yep. They can do that.'

210 R: So the parents overestimate what their children can do?

211 P: Yes. So, when we speak to them at parents' evening, which is about 12 weeks later, some
212 can be...if you say, 'Oh we're a bit concerned about their speech' they'll go, 'Oh yes, I've
213 noticed that' or they'll be like, 'No' they're completely in denial. So... I don't think they
214 understand. And sometimes when I go through the EYFS when I'm doing the highlighting with
215 them, they'll go 'What's that?' They don't know what it is ... so I think there's a lot of...there's
216 barriers with the language we use, about what we're talking about.

217 R: Mmm, because we do slip into jargon don't we? If we said, for instance, PSED...

218 P: Yes, they have no idea what we're talking about! (laughs)

219 R: But even if we said, Personal, Social and Emotional Development, they'd still say, 'What's
220 that?' So maybe we do have to really simplify it for them.

221 P: Yeah...

222 R: Or do they need to know?

223 P: I think we do need to...get it on a level where they understand as well...I think it is
224 important. I know when I have children and I'm taking them to nursery, I'll be like, 'Are they
225 doing this?' Because I know about it so...

226 R: You 'speak the language' as you said, which I think is a really good way of putting it.... (R
227 *talks about what we might do as part of next phase, which setting manager has already asked*
228 *for*). It's simple to us but not to them...

229 P: Yeah, it's like they're giving up something. They're giving up...

230 R: They're giving up their time, that's what we're asking for. Give your time to your child...

231 P: Yeah...

232 R: Especially with speech. Children don't learn it from the i-pad or the telly. But perhaps
233 parents don't know that. Do you think if they did, they'd care more?

234 P: They might. I mean, I don't know because I'm not a parent but... a lot of times when I'm
235 like, 'Grrrr', I'm so frustrated, I've got to take a step back and think, 'Well, I'm not a parent, I
236 don't know myself' so...

237 R:(*talks about why some parents might give in to a child*)

238 P: Yeah...

239 R: It's really interesting isn't it, that some parents just naturally want to spend time with their
240 children and some parents don't? And it's not just about poverty is it?

241 P: No...

242 So, you know the term 'hard to reach'? I think you've described some parents already. What
243 does it mean to you?

244 P: A parent that's always got an excuse for not coming to things... who's always... the Home
245 Link book's been missing for about three months, they don't know where it is...if I'm giving
246 them advice, which I try to do if they're struggling or if I notice something myself so I might
247 say, 'I'm a bit worried about their speaking. Do they have a dummy at home?' And they've
248 repeatedly, just ...doing it, continuing it. I think a parent who's hard to reach is a parent who
249 has just got a ...block. They're not taking anything in, they're not putting anything out, they're
250 just...there really! They're coming and going and taking their child home and that's it. You
251 don't hear about nothing they've done at home. They come back, drop them off and it's the
252 same cycle again.

253 R: And do you find, in your experience, that that is linked to the less well-off parents?

254 P: Yeah, I do because... I don't know...I don't want to sound ... I do, I feel like the parents who
255 are less well-off are the ones who are like that, they are like the coming in, dropping them
256 off, taking them back. I do have conversations with a lot of parents and a lot of it is not about
257 their own child. It's always about if they're going out at the weekend or if something's going
258 on and they're... moving, it's things like that. So...

259 R: So, you'd say interest in their child is quite low down on their list of priorities?

260 P: Yeah because, obviously, when you've got no money, you've got lots of things to worry
261 about haven't you?

262 R: Mmm, well maybe that's it really. If you're worrying whether you've got enough money to
263 buy the tea...?

264 R: So, what training have you had specifically on working with parents?

265 P: I've don't think I've had any training on specifically working with parents...I've had a lot
266 of...I've had SEN training and I've had...on Monday we had training about attachment and ...

267 R: Did you see any links to the attachment and ...

268 P: Yeah, yeah. So that was about parents as well but it wasn't specifically partnership with
269 parents... it was all about the first sixteen weeks of a baby's life is so important for parents
270 to...She was saying as well that if... you all know when someone's got a baby and they talk to
271 them and say, 'Oh I know you're hungry', things like that, if they're not getting that...it was all
272 about the brain. It was all about the scientific approach to ... repairing a child's brain who's
273 had the trauma. And things like alcohol, when you're pregnant and things like that.

274 R: That's really interesting, isn't it? Because if that attachment isn't strong, that might be a
275 reason why they're happy just to ...

276 P: Yeah... so that was interesting. I can't really remember it all off the top of my head, there
277 was so much.

278 R: You can see that it's not as clear cut as perhaps we think...

279 P: Yeah, there's a lot of science behind it.

280 R: *(talks about baby's brain development)*

281 R: Have you had any training on the effects of poverty on children's learning?

282 P: No.

283 R: But it is something that you're aware of because of the area that you work in?

284 P: Yes, and I think as well because...I grew up in quite a deprived area but my parents both
285 worked and we were quite well-off. You know, we were a bit spoilt to be honest! We were
286 going to town every weekend getting money spent on us. But then, obviously, the recession
287 happened so that all stopped (laughs).

288 R: ... but you were fortunate enough to have parents who believed in the value of education?

289 P: Yes. And I grew up in...a different time as well. I was just on the...technology sort of taking
290 over but I was... I was playing outside and you don't see that anymore.

291 R: Mmm, it's all i-pads isn't it? Do you think that's a really big thing?

292 P: Yeah I do.

293 R: So, if we wanted to make parental engagement top-notch, what would have to happen?

294 P: Mmm, I don't know...

295 R: You've mentioned that you have difficulty getting parents in, perhaps it might work if you
296 went out?

297 P: Yeah, that might work... maybe that's something we don't...because we're not in the home
298 environment, we don't know... we can't see what their homes are like and parents might feel
299 more comfortable talking to us...

300 R: Then again, some people don't like people coming to their homes...

301 P: Yeah... it's you home isn't it, it's your private place...

302 R: *talks about past experiences working in areas similar to this setting and how we need to*
303 *get the message across to parents that it is they who makes the difference, 'not us with our*
304 *15 hours a week'*

305 P: Yes, it's nothing really, is it? When you think about the holidays we have as well...

306 R: I know... it's less than 10% of their week...

307 P: But they expect miracles from us and it's... we have had to tell them that, it's at home as
308 well. Things like toilet training, if they're still having accidents, they're saying, 'Well why aren't
309 they?' Well, it's like, 'Are you keeping a nappy on them the minute they get in?' and they're
310 like, 'Yeah' so that's what's happening.

311 R: And there is always that because there's a massive element of care that has to go on with
312 two-year-olds....

313 P: Yes... We do get a lot of parents asking when they're going to start learning to write
314 and...use the alphabet and things. And we're like, 'Our room is just about getting the Primes
315 down with the physical and the speaking and the...personal, social and emotional
316 development.

317 R: So, when they first come in, do you explain to the parents what you'll be doing?

318 P: We do explain that...when we do the highlighting sheet as I said earlier, we only go through
319 the Primes, we don't go through anything ...we don't go through the Specifics, so it's... maybe,
320 actually thinking about it, it should be made more clear that this is for their.... Because,
321 obviously, if I said to a parent, 'How are they in the Prime Areas?' they're not going to know
322 what I'm talking about, are they? So, maybe it should be made clear to them that we need to
323 get this...down before we're doing anything else with them.

324 R: So, we could do a 'Parent-Friendly Guide' to what we're doing with the two-year-olds?

325 P: Yeah...

326 R: So, you've said you talk to parents. How do you go about making those relationships with
327 parents? So, from when they first come in, when you first get your key child, what do you do
328 with the parents?

329 P: For when they first come in for the Stay and Play, I'll introduce myself and I'll play with the
330 child and we go through the highlighting, the baseline assessment with them as their key
331 person. But sometimes a child might change their mind and they want to go to someone else
332 so then...

333 R: So you do that in the very first session?

334 P: Yes

335 R: and how do you think that works in the very first session?

336 P: I think it...obviously because I was an apprentice I was sort of guided with my parents, so I
337 only had two key kids before...now I've got six. So it's...I've sort of started doing it myself so I
338 know from when I made those first introductions, I've got quite good relationships with my
339 parents now. But the ones that didn't really...they were very withdrawn, I did try but they
340 were very withdrawn, one actually ended up leaving after ten minutes, I do find that I find it
341 more difficult to feed back to her about what...her child's been doing so

342 R: She's one that you didn't have that initial conversation with?

343 P: Yeah, because she left very early.

344 R: And, no reason?

345 P: No, she just left. She just said, 'Can I go now?'

346 R: She must have felt uncomfortable, do you think?

347 P: That's what I thought. I think she felt uncomfortable so...I do notice with those parents who
348 I didn't initially get that chance to introduce myself and ...I still talk to them obviously but... I
349 think sometimes as well, that they don't actually know who's who. I mean, key person? They
350 probably think, 'Who's that?' 'What does that mean?'

351 R: So, do you think maybe you just need to speak a little bit more about the key person role,

352 P: yeah, yeah...who you are and what you do, yeah.

353 R: So, less of the EYFS highlighting and more of the...a little chat and I'm (Name) and I've been
354 here a few years...?

355 P: Yeah, because even though we have a display outside about who the Key Person is and
356 who their child's is...I don't think they read them. I mean, I've done a big one about dummies
357 and bottles and links to language and things, and I don't think one person has looked at it!
358 (laughs)

359 R: Because they're all in a hurry- or on their phones?

360 P: Yeah, yeah

361 *R then talked about some of the things that might bring the parents in, more fun activities...*

362 P: Mmm, but we do Stay and Play and it's just playing and a lot of them as well, with the
363 'Come Read with Me', we know a lot of our parents can't actually read so...and when we send
364 books home, they don't come back to us, it's almost like they probably don't want to admit
365 that they can't read. I think there's an issue with that as well because, as I say, it's history
366 repeating itself because if that's the experience they've had in school, they're probably not
367 comfortable being in a school environment.

368

'The New Poverty' by Stephen Armstrong, 2017.

Public opinion about poverty

In 1994, 15% of the public thought that people lived in need because of laziness or lack of willpower. By 2010, this figure had risen to 23%.

Over a third of people surveyed thought that most people claiming benefits were fiddling or did not deserve them.

A survey by Full Fact found that these words were among the most used in association with the word 'benefit' in the media: fraud, claimant, scrounger, cheat and scam.

Fraud

More than 85% of benefit fraud allegations made over the past 5 years have been false.

Benefits fraud accounts for roughly £1.3 billion a year.

Tax avoidance in 2013-14 accounted for £34 billion.

The 'new poor'

Since 2008, only one in every forty new jobs has been for full-time employment (TUC). 2/3rds of people living 'below the poverty line' are employed.

In 2016, 910 000 (almost 3% of people in work) were on zero-hours contracts.

The cost of living increases as average earnings decrease. A study by the GMB found that many occupations have suffered a downfall in the 'real value' of their earnings, some by up to 50%.

Who is to blame?

It has been suggested that child poverty should include other measures such as unstable family practices, unskilled or unqualified parents, or parents using drugs or alcohol rather than simply lack of money (DWP, 2012).

Poor or 'disinterested' parenting is often associated with low income in people's minds.

A study of newspaper articles reporting on low pay, poverty and benefits between 2004 to 2009 found that the 59% of the articles depicted the poor in a negative light.

The cost of being poor

To pay for fuel, poorer families may have to rely on meters which are much more expensive than paying by direct debit.

Insurance premiums are dearer for those who live in less well-off areas.

Poorer families, often with no access to a car, are forced to buy food from local shops which are usually much more expensive than larger supermarkets.

Debt and credit

Poorer families may resort to high-cost forms of credit to pay for essential items or unexpected bills. A study by Save the Children found that interest rates ranged from 50% to over 1,000% in some cases.

Rent-to-own companies such as BrightHouse offer furniture, white goods and electrical items paid for weekly or monthly instalments. For example, a TV was on offer for 156 weekly payments of £6.50 (£1,014 in total). The same TV cost £419 in Argos.

The Citizens Advice Bureau have estimated that 20% of rent-to-own customers are paying over one-fifth of their entire income to cover these debts.

Austerity will have cast an extra 1.5m children into poverty by 2021

Lone-parents, disabled children and ethnic minorities will be among worst-hit, says EHRC

Patrick Butler *Social policy editor*

Wed 14 Mar 2018

Austerity tax and benefits changes will result in the fifth poorest families losing 10% of income by 2021, says the the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

An extra 1.5 million children will have been pitched into poverty by 2021 as a consequence of the government's austerity programme, according to a study of the impact of tax and benefit policy by the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

The EHRC study forecasts dramatic increases in poverty rates among children in lone parent and minority ethnic households, families with disabled children and households with three or more children.

There are clear winners and losers from austerity tax and benefits changes since 2010, the study says. The regressive nature of the policies means that low-income families have been hit hardest: the poorest fifth will lose 10% of income by 2021, while the wealthiest fifth will see little or no change.

Most children in UK's poorest areas now growing up in poverty

David Isaac, chair of the EHRC, said: "It's disappointing to discover that the reforms we have examined negatively affect the most disadvantaged in our society. It's even more shocking that children - the future generation - will be the hardest hit and that so many will be condemned to start life in poverty."

The commission called on the government to reconsider existing policies that hit the most disadvantaged groups hardest, and to review social security benefit levels to ensure they provide an adequate standard of living.

The study says the negative financial impacts are largely driven by the four-year freeze on working-age benefits from April 2016, cuts to disability benefits and reductions to work allowances in universal credit.

The findings include:

- Children in 62% of lone parent households will be in poverty in 2021, compared to 37% in 2010. Lone parent households will lose an average of £5,250 - a fifth of their income.
- The largest increases in child poverty measured by ethnic group will be in Pakistani families (up almost a fifth), while Bangladeshi households will lose £4,400 on average.
- Households with a disabled adult and a disabled child will shoulder annual cash losses of just over £6,500, equivalent to 13% of their net income. Disabled lone parents with a disabled child stand to lose £10,000 a year.

The study, which was carried out by the economists Jonathan Portes and Howard Reed, examined the cumulative impact on different groups of changes to income tax, VAT, national insurance, social security benefits, tax credits, universal credit and the national living wage.

It concludes that although changes to taxes and benefits were a clear consequence of the government's commitment since 2010 to reduce the deficit, it was not inevitable that the most vulnerable groups would bear the heaviest burden, and that the precise mix of changes was a political choice.

A government spokesperson said the report did not take into account many changes made since 2010. "Automatic enrolment pension saving and near record employment are just two issues which contribute enormously to people's lives but are not reflected in the analysis," they said.

Taken From 'Poverty and Inclusion in Early Years Education'

by Mark Cronin, Karen Argent and Chris Collett (2017)

These authors see poverty as an issue of inclusion. What does that mean for our practice, particularly if we work with poor families?

Relative Poverty is defined as:

Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved in the societies to which they belong. Their resources are so seriously below those commanded by the average individual or family that they are, in effect, excluded from ordinary living patterns and activities.' (Townsend, 1979: 31)

The facts:

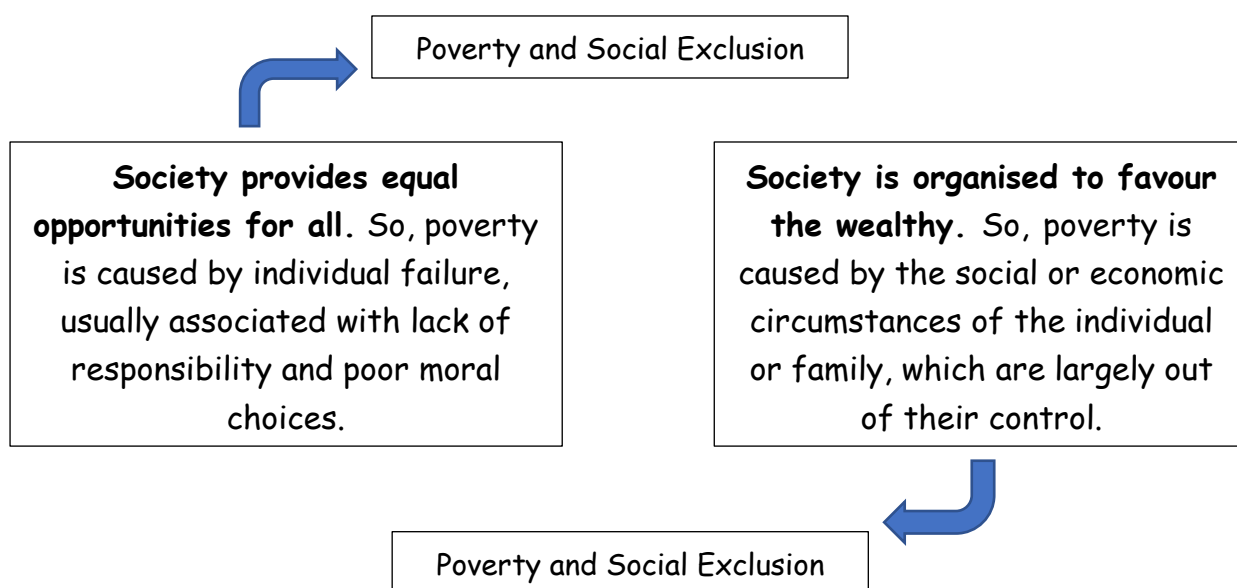
- More than 1 in 5 people in the UK are currently living in *relative poverty* with nearly 1 in 3 children affected. In some areas of the country it is higher. <http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/poverty-in-your-area-2018/> showed it was more like 1 in 2 children in the Liverpool area.
- In 1979, 1 in 10 children were living in relative poverty. This has increased steadily over the last 40 years.
- The Trussell Trust reported in 2016 that they gave over a million emergency three-day food parcels to people in crisis. Over 400,000 of these recipients were children.
- Despite the Child Poverty Act of 2010, when commitment was made to 'eradicate child poverty by 2020', this situation is getting worse- see Guardian article.
- 66% of poor children now live in working families, suggesting that work alone is no longer protection against poverty.

The UK is the world's fifth biggest economy.

Poverty, social exclusion and education

- High levels of social inequality impact upon physical health, mental well-being, **educational achievement**, social mobility and equal opportunities.
- Poor children lag behind their better-off peers **at all stages of education** (Child Poverty Action Group, 2016)
- Poorer children are more likely to suffer from physical illness and mental health problems, which impact upon their learning and development.
- While education has been linked to social mobility, there appears to be evidence that this is reducing in the UK today. Why might that be?

The two arguments that inform our opinions about poverty are:



Discussion

Which argument do you think is more widespread? What has caused this to happen? Look back at the statement at the top of page 1. How do you feel about your work with poorer children and families now?

The UK is the world's fifth biggest economy.

Recommendations for settings

It is with all the above in mind that the following recommendations could be made for settings that have two-year-olds on free early education and childcare places. Some of these suggestions may be useful to setting managers, head teachers or local authority advisors, depending on who has the responsibility for each area, such as training or setting timetables. These recommendations may be useful to improve parental engagement across the board but have been drawn up particularly for parents of two-year-olds on funded early education and childcare places, based on the findings of this research project.

Invest in training

This would be especially useful on the following topics:

- Parental engagement in children’s learning in the home
- Strengthening Key Person relationships with parents
- Poverty awareness (and Poverty-Proofing the Setting see www.povertyproofing.co.uk for ideas that can be adapted)

Give practitioners time to build up relationships by making them available to parents at drop-off and pick-up times.

This may mean deploying staff more strategically at these times or delaying certain activities so that other staff can supervise children if a practitioner and parent are talking. See these conversations as essential to relationship-building and, ultimately, to a child’s learning. Consider covering key persons on a rota basis to ensure that they each have a time when they are available to talk to parents of children in their key group. This could be done on the phone if that is more convenient to the parents.

Appoint a parent-partner co-ordinator

This should be a member of the senior management team, but all key persons must be involved in discussions about parents and know clearly what the setting guidelines and policies are. This co-ordinator may be responsible for parent displays, newsletters, etc. but all key persons should be encouraged to contribute to these activities.

Do a whole-staff audit of current 'engagement' provision.

Look especially at provision that is supposed to be supporting a child's learning in the home. Be objective about it by looking at it from a parent's viewpoint. Ask yourselves these questions:

Do you have enough of these activities? Is it part of your regular practice or is it just an occasional occurrence? Has it been explained well? Have you talked about it to parents or just given them a letter about it? Is it full of EYFS jargon? Is it too long? Does it make it clear why it is beneficial to a child's learning? Does it take up too much time? Is it fun? Does it give the parent confidence and a sense of success in their role as an educator? Have you asked parents what they like or dislike about it? Have you asked parents for their ideas?

Check all information that is going to parents

Make sure that the information you are sending home is accessible to all. Check 'readability' and the visual appearance of newsletters so that parents want to read them. Remove all jargon and write in the same language that the parents use. Do not overload parents with masses of information at once and consider doing things like newsletters more frequently to avoid the temptation to do this. Talk to the parents about what is in the newsletters and ask their opinion about setting events or activities.

Make parental engagement in the home a setting priority

Ideally parental engagement would be talked about at all staff meetings, e.g. parents to be followed up on and examples of parental input celebrated. At least one activity a day that is planned for children should have a 'link to home'. This can be as simple as a slip of paper that goes home with the child, for example '*We have made food balls in nursery today for the birds. Please talk to me about what birds we see on our way to school.*' Or '*We have been learning the song Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes in nursery today. Here are the words, please sing it with me later.*'

Make parents aware on their first visit that you are a setting that works closely with parents, and keep demonstrating that you are

At every initial meeting with parents of new children, the key person should make it clear that the setting will be sending home a little activity (such as that above) every day that will only take a few minutes to do each evening. The key person should explain that the setting believes that the key to a child's successful learning is parental input in the home. Keep it simple, no EYFS documentation.

Build time into day to talk to parents about children's learning

Demonstrate to parents that 'learning talk' is important to your setting and that learning in the home is just as important as the activities that go on in the setting. Instead of just telling parents what the children have done in the setting, ask them what the children are doing at home- and keep asking them. Value whatever the parents tell you, whether they are activities that you have suggested or not. Try to use these activities from home when you plan for children in the setting and bring this to parents' attention to let them see that you value their contributions.

Shift the focus of practitioner input from EYFS-based paperwork to developing parental relationships

In the room where the two-year-olds are based, ease off the mass of documentation about learning that you may be used to. Be prepared to justify the importance of relationship-building with their parents to inspectors or advisors. Building a foundation for home learning that will hopefully become a habit will be of more benefit to a child than a huge file full of observations and assessment documents. Cut paperwork down to an absolute minimum so that practitioner stress is reduced.

Use technology to supplement, not replace, face-to-face interactions

Use facilities such as 'parent links' on *iconnect* or *Tapestry*, Facebook pages or Twitter but be careful to use these as an addition to, not instead of, face-to-face interactions. Technology, if harnessed correctly, can augment learning and communication in powerful ways but can also replace important conversations which may provide opportunities to go beyond mere information-transmission.

Focus on activities such as conversation, reading, number work and play

As the intention is to build parental confidence in themselves as co-educators, keep the activities simple and easy to do. Parents often have many demands on their time so do not give them long, complicated or expensive activities to do with their children. Ask how the activities are going and accept verbal feedback, it does not have to be written.

Share resources with parents

Trust parents with setting resources and set up book and toy libraries, make simple activity bags that have ideas for talking, simple number activities, nursery rhyme and action rhymes song-sheets. Ask for feedback (a simple 'emoji' response would do) but do not expect lengthy written reports. Expect that some resources may get damaged or lost but do not penalise families if this happens.

