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‘We believe in every child as an individual’: Nursery School head teachers’ understandings of ‘quality’ in early years education

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Abstract

This article addresses the issue of ‘quality’ in early years education, with the aim of highlighting the voices of nursery school head teachers. Government early years achievement statistics display a reductive and de-contextualised focus on young children’s developmental outcomes, with measures of the percentage of five-year-olds achieving a ‘good level of development’ at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Early years practitioner understandings of ‘quality’ are more sophisticated and multi-dimensional, and yet are marginalised in debates around what constitutes ‘quality’ early years provision and around what are desired outcomes for young children and how these can be achieved. Using qualitative data from interviews with nursery school head teachers and classroom teachers from across England, the article analyses these participants’ understandings of ‘quality’ early years provision. The study finds a consensus amongst these teachers that quality provision emanates from the professional skills of staff providing education for the whole child and their wellbeing: they conceive of ‘quality’ as relating to a depth of understanding of each child as an individual, enabling the child to progress in their learning.

Keywords: quality, early years, education, nursery schools

Introduction

The definition of educational ‘quality’ and how to measure this quality is a complex and contested issue throughout the English education system. Education at all levels is increasingly subject to metrics and to constantly changing forms of accountability and emphasis on different outcome measures, with performance data central to the governance of all forms of education (Ozga, 2013). The datafication of early years and primary education is well documented (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2018), and the increasing use of progress and ‘value-added’ measures at all stages of education is particularly contentious in the early years, given the complexity of the assessment of very young children (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017).

The use of metrics - assigning numbers to qualitative features - in education controls teacher behaviour and definition of work, to the extent that ‘Questions about quality and truth are replaced by discussions of the metrics’ (Baird and Elliott, 2018: 536). Educators are in many respects forced to put aside any other markers of quality, in pursuit of ‘excellence’ laid down by government metric. As Ball (2017: 163) notes:

The question that is avoided in the heat and noise of performance management is whether these indicators actually ‘stand for’ and thus ‘represent’ valid, worthwhile or meaningful outputs. Does increased emphasis on preparation for the tests and the adaptation of pedagogy and curriculum to the requirements of test performance constitute worthwhile effects of ‘improvement’?

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is the quality and regulatory framework covering birth to 5 years old that aims to establish consistency of provision across the early years sector (Bradbury, 2013), allowing the Department for Education (DfE) to collect data on the percentage of 5-year-olds achieving a ‘good level of development’ at the end of the Reception year. This is measured by the

DfE as children achieving at least the expected level within the areas of communication and language, physical development, personal, social and emotional development, and literacy and mathematics. The early years levels (emerging/expected/exceeding) are applied by practitioners who must use their professional knowledge and the EYFS framework to judge children's learning. The provision of data to the DfE on children's EYFS performance also includes a total point score as a supporting measure (to the percentage achieving a 'good level of development'), based on how they have performed in relation to each EYFS early learning goal. In 2018, the DfE reported that 'at national level the percentage of children achieving a good level of development has improved in each year since 2013. 71.5% of children achieved a good level of development in 2018, an increase of 0.8 percentage points on 2017' (DfE, 2018: 1). The focus of this study is on nursery schools, which educate children aged 2-4, and which must work to the EYFS framework in the same way as any other early years provider. The data reported at the end of Reception year is increasingly important for primary schools as it provides a starting point for children's progress and thus forms a key part of the government focus on 'value-added' scores (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017).

As evidence of the government's drive to test very young children and then measure their progress, it plans a re-introduction of the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) in 2020, which will provide a formalised measure of progress between Reception and Year 6. Unlike the observation-based EYFS, the RBA is not intended to provide information for practitioners, but to hold schools accountable for children's progress at primary school (Bradbury, 2019). As Basford (2019) points out, the government's decision to re-introduce RBA is an example of the marginalisation of the voice of the sector: head teachers' views on RBA are largely negative (Bradbury, 2019).

Providing an additional quality framework, Ofsted, as detailed in its most recent Early Years Inspection Handbook (Ofsted, 2019), states that inspectors of early years provision will judge: overall effectiveness, the quality of education (this includes several criteria, including how well 'practitioners ensure that the content, sequencing and progression in the areas of learning are secured and whether they demand enough of children' (32)), children's behaviour and attitudes, children's personal development, and leadership and management. Common to all quality frameworks, as Delaney (2018) notes, is that the choice of measure comes to define the meaning of quality. What becomes erased through the use of 'official' measures, Delaney argues, are the local values (held by the teachers and students within any setting) that inform what constitutes quality. These local values as articulated by teachers are marginalised across all educational settings, as notions of 'quality' become hegemonic and increasingly reduced to numbers and scores that imply an authoritative judgement that is laden with consequences for teachers and children. Early years practitioner perspectives in relation to 'quality' are under-researched, and yet are crucial in relation to the wider debate on quality early years provision and how it can be achieved, as well as to informing policy-making.

Nursery Schools and quality in the early years

This article's focus on nursery school head teachers' understandings of quality early years provision draws on a wider study that sought to examine 'quality' in the face of threat to the existence of nursery schools in England. Nursery schools are stand-alone local authority-funded schools, employing qualified teachers, providing education for three and four-year-olds, and some two-year-olds. The majority of them are situated in disadvantaged areas and are rated Ofsted 'Outstanding'; 62% of nursery schools are rated Outstanding, as opposed to 19% of All Providers on the Early Years Register (Ofsted, 2018). However, the nursery school sector has been severely impacted by local authority budget cuts and by central government changes to early years funding formulae, causing a steady erosion and, without supplementary funding, threat of closure to all remaining. While there has been a significant decline in the number of maintained nursery schools in England over the past forty years (and they now only educate 3% of three- and four-year-olds), recent cuts have forced lobbying by the sector to ask government to act to preserve their future viability (see Early

Education, 2015; Powell, 2017). The current Conservative government promised £55 million per year to support them until 2019-20, with an additional £24 million announced in 2019, though future funding remains uncertain.

A number of large-scale studies (Mathers and Smees, 2014; Gambaro *et al*, 2015; Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018) have linked staff qualification (graduate presence and leadership) in early years to high quality. There is evidence that the qualification level of the early years workforce is modestly rising, although low pay is persistent in the sector (Simon *et al*, 2016). In 2018 the government dropped its commitment, as set out in its 2017 Early Years Workforce Strategy, to grow the graduate early years workforce, in spite of a shortage of early years teachers and the research demonstrating the link between graduate presence and leadership and higher quality. As maintained school settings, nursery schools employ qualified teachers, in addition to staff with vocational qualifications, and thus are costly to run. However, as I will demonstrate, research has consistently pointed to the higher quality of nursery schools' provision compared to other types of early years provider.

As outlined by Mathers *et al* (2014), researchers commonly understand and measure quality (usually referred to in relation to children's outcomes) in early years education by examining two aspects: process quality (children's experiences in a setting, and interactions with staff) and structural quality (stable aspects of the environment such as ratios and staff qualifications). What is important to note is that, while structural characteristics are easier to assess and are thus popular with policy-makers, and process quality is most strongly predictive of children's outcomes, the two aspects are highly correlated (Mathers *et al*, 2014). Structural characteristics (for example, higher levels of staff qualification) influence process quality, which in turn influence children's outcomes. An attention to both structural and process aspects provides a basis for an understanding of practitioner experiences and definitions of 'quality' in early years settings.

While acknowledging that quality in early childhood education is a contested matter, Mathers *et al* (2014) note that many aspects of quality can be agreed on by stakeholders across contexts. However, they also stress that while both structural and process factors can provide a strong underpinning, no single characteristic guarantees high quality. 'Many of the factors that lead to high quality, such as good leadership, a positive ethos, a committed staff team, high quality staff support and professional development, are both harder to measure and harder to regulate for' (Mathers *et al*, 2014: 64).

Most large-scale studies examining process quality in the early years use environmental rating scales (a set of indicators including use of space, language and communication, activities, and programme structure), with data gathered for the scales through observation. These data are usually combined with an analysis of structural quality, to produce quality ratings, as well as factors which correlate with children's outcomes. The widely-cited Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project (Sylva *et al*, 2004), using environmental rating scales to measure process quality of 141 settings, found that disadvantaged children benefit significantly from higher quality pre-school, and staff with higher qualifications had a beneficial effect on children's progress. Quality was rated higher in 'combined/integrated' settings (Children's Centres – hubs providing early years services with the aim of reducing inequalities) and in nursery schools than in other maintained/private/voluntary settings. As part of the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) project, updating the evidence from the EPPE project, Melhuish and Gardiner (2018) found that process quality across all settings they studied was sufficient, with an improvement of quality in deprived areas. Again, nursery classes and schools and Children's Centres tended to score higher on process quality. They also found that a number of structural characteristics, such as staff qualifications, staff training and turnover, and staff to child ratios, related to process quality. Earlier large-scale studies have also found a link between staff qualifications and quality: Gambaro *et al*

(2015), analysing three administrative data sets, found that graduate presence in early years settings significantly increased the likelihood of an 'Outstanding' Ofsted judgement (though having a higher proportion of disadvantaged children in the setting brought this likelihood down). Mathers and Smees (2014), examining quality in early years providers measured by Ofsted and environmental rating scales, found that graduate leadership was associated with higher quality. Blanden *et al* (2017), while not finding a strong link between children's outcomes and teacher qualifications, reported that teacher quality matters for children's outcomes. Stewart and Waldfogel (2017) suggest that it is important to consider wider aspects of the quality of provision such as qualifications of non-graduate staff.

Getting beyond quality?

While examining conventional ways of understanding quality in early years, this article also seeks to take a critical approach to notions of 'quality'. Educational 'quality' has, in neoliberal modernity, become a mechanism for normalisation and regulation, a constructed concept that 'is neither neutral nor self-evident, but saturated with values and assumptions', and blind to the importance of context and diversity (Moss, 2016: 10). The powerful influence of developmental psychology in the early years in relation to 'quality' can mean 'checking if Johnny or Jemima have met our goals according to our measures, if they are normal, rather than seeing and documenting what Johnny and Jemima can actually do' (Moss, 2014: 42). The narrative of achieving 'quality' in early years education, Moss points out, is used as a governmental solution to reducing social disadvantage and succeeding in the 'global race', rather than seeking to tackle inequality through redistributive policies and a strong welfare state (2014). Moss (2016) proposes going beyond the evaluative language of 'quality', ending in a statement of fact, to embrace a language of 'meaning-making', allowing practice to be subject to debate and reflection and thus to a provisional judgement of value.

Osgood (2009) likewise argues, in relation to government early years policy, that 'Normalising discourses around the notion of quality are cultivated...so that it is possible to identify neo-liberal values...whereby good quality (via professional standards) is deemed "attainable" ...[through]...constructs of regulation, accountability, measurability, excellent/best practice, standardisation...Alternative constructions of quality become silenced' (739). The early years workforce 'is judged against government defined measures of "quality", which in turn are determined by a narrow definition of "school readiness" and specific measures of child outcomes at developmental stages. For these reasons debates about "quality" in early childhood persist and remain heavily politicised' (Osgood et al, 2017: 32).

Previous research in England examining early years practitioners' perspectives on quality (Cottle and Alexander, 2013) found that definitions of 'quality' were elusive and context-driven, ranging from external indicators such as Ofsted, to more varied individual 'professional' values. Cottle and Alexander (2014) found that parent partnership was viewed by early years practitioners as fundamental to 'quality', but that these practitioner-parent relationships were sometimes complex and there could be difficulty in arriving at shared understandings. Conflicts between accountability and progress measures, and more 'child-centred' approaches, they argue, mean that 'confusions about the priority afforded to different aspects of children's learning are likely to continue to feature in the dialogue between practitioners and parents' (654). Research from the DfE (2015) also found that parents and providers define quality differently, with parents choosing providers on the basis of convenience, reputation and 'quality of care' (though survey data did not allow for a definition of this), while providers defined quality as high staff to child ratios and high staff qualifications.

Methods

The research is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with twenty participants¹: sixteen nursery school head teachers and four nursery school classroom teachers. The interviews were conducted by the researcher in 2016 at sixteen different nursery schools in England: six in London, and the remainder in the North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, the East, the South West, and the South East. This was a small, purposive sample; while this is not representative, the different types and locations of the settings provide a good cross-section of nursery schools across England. The participants were recruited in various ways and selected on the basis of securing a geographically and structurally diverse sample of provision. Approximately one third of participants were recruited at an All Party Parliamentary Group on Nursery Schools and Nursery Classes meeting in London in 2016, one third were recruited from a list of nursery schools with Teaching School² status, and the remaining third by snowball sampling. All nursery schools in the sample have an Ofsted rating of Good or Outstanding. Thirteen of the nursery schools have a Children's Centre on site, and in some cases the nursery school head has responsibility for the Children's Centre in addition to the nursery school(s). Three of the head teachers are executive heads for a federation of either two or three nursery schools. Six of the schools have Teaching School status. The head teachers had varying levels of experience as nursery school heads, with an average of 10 years' experience, and several had multiple postgraduate qualifications in early years education. Ethical approval for the study was gained from the researcher's university faculty Research Ethics Committee, and the study was conducted in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's Ethical Guidelines, 2018. A report of the study was provided to all participants at the end of the research, and they were invited to comment on it (none did, other than to express thanks for the utility of the research conducted).

In each case, following a brief tour of the setting from the head teacher, interviews were conducted on the school premises. Interviews with head teachers lasted on average ninety minutes, while those with classroom teachers were approximately half that length. The interviews used a semi-structured interview guide, and teachers were asked about their understandings of the purpose and value of nursery school education, how they understood their quality of provision in that context, and questions relating to policy and funding around early years provision, with particular reference to nursery schools. The interview data were transcribed verbatim, and coding undertaken by hand by the researcher. The data were subjected to an inductive thematic analysis involving focus on repeated patterns of meaning within the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A discursive approach was taken to highlight situated meanings and established language for talking about a topic (Taylor, 2014). Themes relating to 'quality' were identified within the data set through a process of coding, searching for, reviewing and defining themes; in this inductive process, the active role of the researcher in constructing themes is acknowledged (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The following analysis examines the shared meanings of participants in relation to their understandings of 'quality' provision. The following themes relating to quality, discussed in the next section, were the most common across the data set: children's individualised progress (which involved knowing each child as an individual), professional skills of staff (these process and structural aspects were interlinked, in that professional training involved the space for reflection on pedagogy and the ability to see 'the whole child'), and children's well-being. The final section of the analysis focuses on head teachers' critical reflections on the notion of 'quality'.

What 'quality' means to teachers: individualised progress

Almost all participants described their understanding of quality of provision in terms of a process of interaction by well-trained practitioners with each child as an individual, enabling that child to progress with their learning. Nicola [head teacher, North West] explained:

¹ All participants have been given pseudonyms

² Teaching Schools are centres of excellence that provide training and support to other schools

What quality provision looks like for me, is skilled, experienced, knowledgeable practitioners, who totally understand their [...] key children. That they know what their needs are, they know how to meet those needs, and to move them forward in their learning. And that is done in a way that is meaningful, that's fun, that the children enjoy, and that is shared with parents. And that everybody knows what they're doing and why they're doing it. [...] For me it's all about how engaged are children in their learning?

Nicola further described this process:

It's all about supporting children's individual ways of learning, developing, interests, through high quality play opportunities that are a balance of challenged adult focus sometimes, adult-led in terms of adults knowing next steps for children, and knowing how to take children on in their learning and their thinking and their development, to open-ended opportunities where children have stimuluses there that they can take that in whatever direction they want. So they're able to develop their own lines of enquiry. They're able to develop their own questions, thoughts, and it's about the process. [...] it's about processes for children [...] and if that process is high quality then the outcome is always there. Whatever that looks like. And then it's very unique to that child.

This was very much a 'child-centred' approach, with an emphasis on process, and with practitioners making sure that they understood each individual child's interests and responding to the uniqueness of each child:

My philosophy absolutely is about the child's voice being heard. The way we plan is very responsive to the children's needs; very young children are not fixed, so therefore we would not want them to have a fixed curriculum. We want to be flexible to make sure that we are meeting the needs of every single one of those children, and every single one of those children is an individual, so we would not do the same approach for all children. There's tremendous differentiation with the staff and how they interact with the children, because they know those children so well, so every child gets their own tailor made approach. [Judith, head teacher, London]

Helping children to develop and grow based on an understanding of their particular interests and needs was key to participants' understandings of quality. Rebecca [head teacher, London] described one child whose interest in octopuses had led to one of the teachers buying an octopus for the children to examine, and then cooking it, followed by a visit to the aquarium to look at a live octopus. Practitioners also wanted the children to leave the nursery school being 'capable', 'independent' (these two attributes were commonly cited), confident and able to work with other children. Practitioner-parent relationships, as found in previous research (Cottle and Alexander, 2014), were described as 'crucial': 'a lot of what we do is about supporting parents and involving parents in their children's learning' [Susan, head teacher, South East].

The notion of the child 'as an individual' was key, as illustrated in the quotation from Judith above. Almost every single participant, in a discussion about quality, referred to meeting individual children's needs. When asked what quality provision meant to her, Anna [teacher, London] answered:

I would say first of all it's about getting to know each child as an individual.

Key to these practitioners' professional practice, then, was the concept of 'knowing' the children and their families and their context and enabling them to progress in their learning (rather than an abstract or standardised focus on developmental outcomes). Participants frequently referred to 'progress' in relation to the EYFS age bands, which they used for tracking children's progress in relation to the early learning goals that they should have attained by the end of Reception year (aged 5), but it was always in relation to the child's starting point as an individual. This concept of knowing and responding to the individual child can be considered, as Delaney (2018) notes, a set of local values that inform what constitutes 'quality'. This is consistent with other early years practitioners who propose employing 'an understanding of quality that ha[s] congruence with our

understanding of the importance of a unique childhood' (The Red House Children's Centre, 2016: 135).

Staff skills and the 'reflective practitioner'

As is evident from the previous section, participants also described the professional skills of the highly trained and qualified practitioner as crucial to 'quality'; these skills included qualifications, experience and leadership:

The qualifications and experience of the staff that you have are what's important in terms of interpreting that Early Years framework and obviously a lot of it is about the leadership and having those qualified teachers and I think a dedicated head, so providing that sort of structure which the staff then work within. [...] It's about the skill of the staff actually scaffolding and supporting that learning, working alongside them, being engaged in that critical thinking, that shared, sustained thinking. [Susan]

Sometimes you can go and visit settings that are superficially outstanding, but you just can see children not being emotionally contained, children not being cognitively challenged, provision not being appropriately differentiated. And those sort of things require much deeper thinking, and that tends to come with people, be it graduates, people doing MAs, people doing their own research projects. [Claire, head teacher, South West]

Participants' talk about skilled practitioners frequently invoked the notion of the *cost* of quality. As Christine [head teacher, London] put it:

Quality does come at a cost, and quality is your staff.

This links back to the research discussed earlier demonstrating the relationship between staff qualifications and higher quality in early years settings, and is indicative of the investment required to ensure that staff are suitably qualified.

As alluded to above by Claire, the concept of the 'reflective practitioner' arose in several interviews:

What makes a setting completely great is the level of reflective thinking. [Claire]

The teachers need to be learning all the time. There's no end to learning, so they need to realise that they are reflective in their work that they do with the children and they question themselves and they question each other in a professional context, and that to me is quality. [Mary, head teacher, North West]

A really good teacher is always looking at how to improve. [Diana, head teacher, Yorkshire and the Humber]

As Perryman et al (2017) point out, 'the phrase "reflective practitioner" is now normalised within the discourse of "good teacher"... encouraging teachers to "own" that which the school defines as good practice' (4). This discourse of reflective practice is prevalent in relation to all stages of teaching, and self-regulating teachers become central to delivering 'quality' through certain 'outcomes' by virtue of dual accountability – to the self and also to 'society' (Osgood, 2010). However, in this study, a deep level of reflection, as well as practitioners' experience, was seen by head teachers as particularly important when it came to working with the framework of the EYFS. Head teachers generally described the EYFS as a useful 'tool' or 'springboard', with the characteristics of effective learning seen as particularly helpful, and approved of its focus on play. Many pointed out that they did not allow their practice to be limited by the EYFS, and in this respect it was possible to identify some tension between external agendas and personal philosophy (Osgood, 2010). Heather [head teacher, East] commented: 'we use that tool as a benchmarking and as an assessment tool. But there's so much more to the whole child'. Similarly, Amanda [head teacher, North West]

commented: 'We don't get constrained by the EYFS. We emphasise the bits we like.' Being an experienced and highly skilled early years practitioner, then, entails a level of critical judgement around standardisation and measurement. Practitioners' ability to see 'the whole child' was considered to be related to their experience and reflective practice.

Children's wellbeing and involvement

Children's personal, social and emotional development was placed at the heart of practice by staff interviewed for the SEED project, in a qualitative study investigating case studies of good practice (Callanan et al, 2017). In the current study, participants placed great emphasis on children's wellbeing and involvement, and this was particularly linked to a philosophy of learning through play. Participants expressed a wish to ensure that this always extended to the Reception year (ages 4-5) and, in many cases, beyond the EYFS:

Children shouldn't be going to secondary school not being able to read, they shouldn't be going to secondary school not being secure in aspects of mathematical content. But they should also be secure in their own wellbeing. They should also feel confident, they should also have very good self-esteem. And sometimes we're hammering that down and we're losing that [...] And I think my concern is that, once they start to go to Reception, Year 1, Year 2, all the opportunities of outdoor education seem to have diminished. It's all very much classroom based, [...] it's all very much pencils and worksheets. I see so many templates of worksheets, children completing worksheets. And what for? Why are we doing that? [Mary]

The work of the Belgian academic Ferre Laevers in relation to wellbeing and the early years arose as a key theme in participants' talk about quality. Laevers argues that the best way to assess quality in *any* educational setting is to focus on two dimensions: the pupils' degree of 'emotional well-being' (the degree to which children 'feel at ease, act spontaneously, show vitality and self-confidence' (2015: 2)), and their level of 'involvement', which 'is linked to the developmental process and urges the adult to set up a challenging environment favouring concentrated, intrinsically motivated activity' (2). Young children find involvement most of the time in play, and the more choice children have in their activities, the higher the level of involvement, he argues. Several head teachers described using Laevers' Leuven Involvement Scale (as well as the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing [SSTEW] scale) as a way to measure children's wellbeing and involvement:

We do look at the Early Years Foundation Stage and we do produce data which does include whether they have got a knowledge of shapes so we do measure those things, but we are more concerned about their wellbeing and involvement because we feel that that, like I say, is a much better indicator of their ability to be effective learners. [Susan]

The [EYFS] age bands are pretty wide, and you have to use your own knowledge and experience of how children learn and bring in other theories, and knowledge and experience, particularly in terms of the well-being scale, the involvement scales, Laevers. [Nicola]

The other assessments we do [aside from EYFS] are based on wellbeing and involvement, and they're just as important: if a child's wellbeing is low or their involvement's low and their academic achievement is high, then we've still got an issue. [Heather]

Head teachers described providing support for children's wellbeing in terms of modelling play and interactions, reading individually to children, and working with boundaries, again all on a one-to-one or small group basis. Participants saw children's wellbeing as paramount to, perhaps inseparable from, educational achievement, and in many ways as a basis for learning. Nicola reiterates the importance of having a critical overview beyond that of the official developmental framework, to incorporate children's wellbeing.

The subjectivity and limits of 'quality'

To return to Moss's (2014) description of 'high quality' as the effective delivery of desired outcomes: from examination of the data, a 'desired outcome' for these practitioners might be characterised as the development of the whole child, with an understanding of the child as unique and as an individual. Head teachers did recognise the constructed and subjective nature of the concept of 'quality', as well as its distortions and limits:

I quite like the word quality, because I do sort of think there needs to be a benchmark. And I think people need to know this is the bottom line, this is what all children should have as an entitlement, really. [...] But it does, it can sort of inhibit that deeper pedagogical learning and understanding sometimes, because people hide behind the quality benchmarks and not go any further [...] And so I can see that it could be inhibiting in that way. [Claire]

I agree that quality is a very subjective measure [...] and it's also used for marketing purposes, isn't it? [Heather]

Quality has become meaningless but it's like school readiness isn't it? So you either throw your dummy out of the pram and say, no we're having nothing to do with that, we don't believe in that, we're not about school readiness, we're about the beauty of what we do with the children here and now, but you can't escape that you're part of a system, can you? [Amanda]

Heather here notes the promotional character of 'quality' in terms of competitive institutional marketing, while Amanda draws out the rhetorical demands of having to work within the parameters of the wider system. Head teachers generally did not express feelings of disagreement with or constraint by externally-imposed outcomes or targets, though; as Nicola commented: 'For me it's about everything that we do is in the spirit of the open-ended outcome'. As discussed previously, head teachers were not, in the main, critical of the EYFS, but 'quality' was very much about going beyond this, and beyond the rigidity of certain particular outcomes, to look at the development of the whole child. It is therefore possible to identify a set of discourses used by the head teachers to talk about 'quality' that reference its multiple and complex dimensions, and which encompass greater sophistication and a lens wider than viewing the child in terms of an EYFS level.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings in this study of the importance of professional practitioner skills reinforce the connection between structural characteristics, such as the qualifications of staff, and process quality (Mathers *et al*, 2014): early years practitioners require an ability to identify the needs of the individual child and meet those needs in interaction with them. This study also echoes the findings of the SEED good practice study (Callanan *et al*, 2017), in which interviews were carried out with staff and parents in a range of maintained, private and voluntary settings identified as having 'good' or 'excellent' quality provision. The SEED study identified three broad themes with respect to features of good practice: tailoring practice to the needs of the children; skilled and experienced staff (including strong leadership); and an open and reflective culture (working in partnership with other settings and professionals, valuing the expertise of their own staff, and embedding a culture of self-evaluation as a means of improvement).

The multi-faceted understanding of 'quality' demonstrated by the participants in this study, with its emphasis on the 'whole child' and on meeting the needs of the individual child, is in some respects at odds with a governmental focus on developmental outcomes, although it can be argued that high quality provision will produce the best possible desired outcomes (however these are defined). One way to think about the tension here is between a 'child first' and an 'outcome first' approach.

Government lack of commitment to investment in practitioner realisation of ‘quality’ early years education – which include tenets of inclusion, wellbeing, child-centred provision, learning through play, and the facilitation of this through reflective practice and professional development – is of concern. An understanding of the resources needed to achieve this practitioner concept of quality is crucial. Returning to Moss’s call to embrace a language of meaning-making in early years: perhaps the meaning-making in these nursery school classrooms resides in the thrill for the young child of practitioner recognition and nurture of their interests and their developing identity. This process relies on the time and resources being made available for the practitioner to reflect on and develop their professional practice; as Claire puts it, this requires ‘deeper thinking’, and it requires deeper, critical thinking about ‘quality’.

In grappling with the question of what constitutes educational ‘quality’, there is of course a need to avoid reinforcing ‘the tendency in the public sphere to treat value-judgements as if they were factual matters, thereby neglecting the need for specific forms of argument concerned with the implications of different value principles, what judgements follow from them, the relative priority of different principles in particular circumstances, and so on’ (Hammersley, 2018: 25). However, this article argues for the importance of bringing practitioner voices into the debate, and for policy-makers to listen harder and more carefully to those voices. Early years policy might seek to concern itself to a greater extent with young children’s engagement, involvement and wellbeing. An understanding of this engagement needs to be approached in qualitative, contextual and structurally-informed, rather than metricised and individualised, ways. Early years policy might then move away from early testing regimes and a narrow focus on limited outcome measures.

Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

Ethical Guidelines

Ethical approval for the study was gained from the University of Westminster Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Committee. The study was conducted in accordance with the British Educational Research Association’s Ethical Guidelines, 2018.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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