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Listening to children's perspectives: improving the quality of provision in early years settings

**Part of the Longitudinal Study of Early Years
Professional Status**

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Executive summary

This strand of the Longitudinal Study of Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) set out to ascertain how Early Years Professionals (EYPs) use and respond to children's perspectives to inform their practice and improve the quality of their provision. The Early Years Professionals involved in this research were also part of the case studies strand of the study.

Aims

The overall aims of the children's perspective research strand were to provide insights in three key areas:

- the issues faced by Early Years Professionals in helping children to articulate: listening to their perspectives, re-articulating their perspectives to others and responding to them in the context of improving the quality of provision
- how Early Years Professionals react to the tensions and barriers inherent in responding to children's voice(s)
- the disparities between children's and Early Years Professionals' perspectives about the nature of the provision and how these were addressed.

The children's perspectives research also informs the Longitudinal Study's exploration of the impact of Early Years Professionals, particularly in relation to improving the quality of practice and interactions in the settings in which they work.

Methodology

Six settings already participating in the case study strand of the Longitudinal Study of Early Years Professional Status were selected to be involved in the research. The methodology was designed to allow the Early Years Professionals to be active participants. After an initial period of familiarization, 2-3 children, selected to participate by the Early Years Professional, took the researcher on a tour of the nursery with the children taking photographs of things that were significant to them. The children were then invited to talk about their photographs with the Early Years Professional and researcher. This was followed by a summative, reflective discussion with the Early Years Professional.

Findings

The Early Years Professionals and settings involved in the research were regarded as being at one of three stages of development in their use of children's perspectives to inform practice and increase the quality of provision.

Stage 1 Facilitating children's choice

- Early Years Professionals constructed children's perspectives primarily in terms of supporting children to make choices, mainly about access to resources and activities.
- Early Years Professionals' views of how to develop children's perspectives were relatively naïve. They employed a limited range of techniques to encourage, facilitate and respond to children's perspectives in practice.

- They were constrained in their use of children’s perspectives to promote quality in their settings. Their focus on enabling child choice limited them to improving aspects of their current provision rather than making significant enhancements.

Stage 2 Consultation with children

- Early Year Professionals constructed children’s perspectives as a form of consultation during which they were trying to ascertain children’s views of current provision and ideas about how it could be improved.
- Early Year Professionals focused their work on encouraging children to participate in the consultations and had begun to encourage children’s criticality in terms of expressing negative views of provision.
- Their approach was still limited in that they did not set their work in a longer-term developmental programme for children.
- Early Year Professionals recognised the need to balance both quality assurance and improvement but were still unsure as to how to integrate children’s perspectives within the demands of other quality initiatives and policies and consider them alongside the views of setting managers and parents.

Stage 3 Co-construction with children

- Early Year Professionals at this level had integrated children’s perspectives into their overall way of working with children and this was seen as part of their approach to co-constructing the learning environment and activities.
- Early Years Professionals had constructed an overall programme so that, throughout their time in the setting, children developed an understanding of their ownership of their learning and of their environment, as well as of their entitlement to be involved in designing and developing it.
- These Early Years Professionals regarded developing children’s ability to be critical as essential and recognised the need to develop this over time by giving them the confidence, opportunity and language to do so.
- These settings had embedded an inclusive ethos that treated children’s perspectives as both a key quality assurance process *and* a key outcome for children of high quality provision.

Implications for practice

Effectively integrating children’s perspectives work into a setting’s approach to improving quality requires Early Years Professionals who have:

- the depth of understanding of children’s perspectives to develop it as part of a setting’s overall pedagogical approach
- the leadership skills to develop a common understanding of children’s perspectives among staff in order to ensure that it does not become tokenistic
- the ability to link children’s perspectives with the learning and developmental stages in the Early Years Foundation Stage in order to create a phased programme that can support children in acquiring the required skills,

understandings and attitudes, including the ability to be critical of provision, throughout their time in a setting

- the capacity to deal with conflicts and tensions between children's, colleagues' and parents' views of quality provision.

1. Rationale

Drawing on studies that have emphasised the complex and problematic nature of assessing quality in early years provision (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Fenech 2011), EYPs were encouraged to become active participants in the research process and to co-construct, with the researcher, an understanding of the ways in which exploring children's perspectives contributes to assessing and improving the quality of provision.

The co-constructive element was facilitated by the relationship the CeDARE research team had developed with the EYPs during the Longitudinal Study and the fact that the EYPs involved were already aware of the study's objectives. This approach is also coherent with the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001; 2005) which uses multiple, child-friendly methods of enquiry to enable children to explore how they perceive the world and to communicate their ideas in a meaningful way. Furthermore, it involves developing a culture of listening between all those involved with the child, which was reflected in the emphasis in the original EYPS Standards (CWDC, 2010) on listening to children and valuing and respecting their views. We also drew on Clark's (2005b: 491) notion of listening as an active process of communication, consisting of hearing, interpreting and constructing meaning which is not limited to the spoken word and took as a starting point the fact that children and adults in early years settings are exposed to multiple voices, multiple perspectives and multiple notions of quality.

2. Methodology

The methodology was designed to provide opportunities for the EYPs to be active participants. They were encouraged to observe the researchers' work with the children and then reflect on their own engagement with children's perspectives activities, the issues they face in supporting children to articulate their views and respond to them personally and also how they engage other staff. The activities with the children were not the focus of the research but a practical stimulus for the discussion with the EYP of the more abstract concept of children's perspective. The data collection activities, which are outlined more fully in Appendix 1, consisted of the following:

- orientation discussion with the EYP
- researcher interaction with whole group
- introduction and explanation for the children
- child-guided tour (with children taking photographs)
- conversation with children
- exploratory interview with EYP
- subsequent reflective discussion with EYP.

The use of digital cameras placed the data collection in the hands of the children and therefore allowed them a degree of power in the process. The photographs directed conversations with the children, thus enabling them to remain active in the re-construction of knowledge (Einarsdottir, 2007). Group interviews were chosen as an

appropriate format for conversation with the children since the children’s familiarity with each other was likely to boost the confidence of those who needed it and their interaction enhanced the data-gathering process, although in one setting the researcher followed the EYP’s advice to conduct a single interview with one child since, in her view, the other participants could potentially dominate his voice. Using diverse methods enabled the researcher to seek the children’s perspective on what it means to them to be in this place at this time; drawing on the Mosaic method also created the opportunity for ‘multiple listening’ between child, researcher and EYP (see Clark, 2005a).

Piloting

The methodology was piloted in two settings, after which aspects of the visits were refined. An initial familiarisation period was introduced, during which the researcher sat with the children while they played. The original child assent form was changed to a certificate on the advice of one EYP. Furthermore, drawing on the work of Penny Lancaster (2010), a discussion guide was developed to address with the EYP issues around giving children feedback from their decision-making, responsibility for the outcomes of child decision-making and how the child’s perspective is necessarily bounded by the weighting of adult responsibility. Finally, a brief summative discussion with the EYP (conducted by phone or email) a few days after the visit was introduced to allow the EYP to offer additional reflective thoughts on the process.

2.1 Sample

The purposive sample for this research was made up of six settings taken from the Longitudinal Study’s case study settings (see Table 1 and Appendix 3). As the research was intended to explore a range of good practice in working with children’s perspectives, the selection criteria focused on settings that were rated ‘outstanding’ or ‘good’ by Ofsted, already engaged in children’s perspectives work to some extent, willing to participate in the research and representative of a range of settings and EYPs (for example, setting type and EYPS pathway). The sample included one childminder for whom the data collection protocol was adapted to reflect working circumstances.

Table 1 *Sample details: EYPs*

Setting	Setting type	EYP’s pseudonym	EYP’s role	EYP’s experience¹	EYPS Pathway
LS01	Children’s centre	Barbara	Children’s Centre Teacher	8 years	Short
LS03	Childminder	Eve	Childminder	11 years	Long
LS19	Private nursery	Tom	Nursery Practitioner	22 years	Validation
LS28	Private nursery	Isobel	Quality Coordinator	19 years	Long
LS35	Private nursery	Jenny	Manager	31 years	Validation
LS49	Voluntary nursery	Anne	Lead Practitioner	20 years	Short

With the exception of one two year-old, the children involved in this research were between 3 to 4 years old (see Appendix 3) and were selected in consultation with EYPs before the visits. The purposive sample involved children identified by the EYP as socially and verbally confident and the children selected were in friendship groups

¹ Experience relates to years working with children under 5.

and included both girls and boys where possible. Parental consent was sought for all children involved (see Appendix 2). Although the research focused on the older children, discussions with EYPs also explored the issues involved in gaining the perspectives of children under 3.

Visits and visit preparation

Prior to each visit, the researcher telephoned each setting to inform EYPs of what to expect and allow them to make the necessary preparations. This was followed up by written information giving an overview of the day, clarification of the EYP's role and informed consent forms to be distributed to parent/carers for collection at the time of the visit (see Appendix 2). The need to be able to access all areas of the nursery was underlined.

Each visit lasted 2-3 hours. The EYP was able to observe the children through the whole process, which allowed the child to remain in a familiar group and to be supported where needed, for example if English was not their home language. The EYPs were also able to facilitate the children's photography, which was used as a basis for discussion with the children and the EYP about how the children's experiences and perspectives were used in the settings.

Data collection and analysis

Interviews with the children and the EYPs were voice recorded, but the photographs taken by children were deleted before the researchers left the settings (see Appendix 1 for more detail). Transcripts were created from each visit by the researchers using standardised data reduction sheets, focusing primarily on the discussions with EYPs, and coded thematically using a process consistent with a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). To ensure analytical consistency, the researchers exchanged analyses and met to extend their initial analyses.

3. Ethics

In the initial design of the project careful reference was made to the National Children's Bureau's (2003) ethical guidelines relating to research with children in order to consider the balance of harm and effect on the children, confidentiality and issues of informed consent (Alderson and Morrow, 2004). In addition to this, ethical approval for both the methodology and letters of consent to parents/carers and settings was granted by the School of Education's ethics committee. The Longitudinal Study's advisory board of the CWDC also ratified the research proposal and methodology.

The research team provided the setting with a parental consent form that conformed to each setting's policy and collected them at the beginning of the visit. Discussions and interviews were audio-recorded, then transcribed by the researcher. If children were named by their peers, this was edited out at the point of transcription. Where names are used in this report, they are pseudonyms and all identifying features of the settings have been removed. It was made clear that the child-led activities were not the focus of the research but a stimulus for discussion

with the EYP. All photographic data was deleted from cameras and researchers' laptops before they left the setting. On the day of the visit the researcher gained assent from the children by explaining the activity in simple terms and asking the children if they would like to join in but making it clear that they could re-join the rest of the group if they wished.

This study adopts the view that children should be active participants in the research process (Alderson and Morrow, 2004) and therefore sought to gain children's assent. This was in addition to parental consent. By engaging children in age appropriate activities it is possible to meet the requirements of the United Nations' (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which states that all activities, including research, should assume that children have the right to be informed and consulted. Where possible the assent of the child should be obtained in addition to that of their parents or carers. Alderson (2008: 287) recognises the importance of children as *'the primary source of knowledge about their own views and experiences'* and notes how often adults are surprised by children's competence, while warning of the potential for research with children to 'talk down' to young children or use language which they may find difficult to understand. The process of gaining 'informed assent' includes involving the children in making meaning; that is, the children need to understand the role of the researcher and other participating adults, how the data will be collected and analysed and with whom it will be shared (Einarsdottir 2007; Conroy and Harcourt 2009). Thus, at the beginning of each research visit, children were asked for their assent to being involved and, at the end of the child interviews, the children were given a certificate thanking them for their help with the research. All members of the research team had an enhanced disclosure CRB certificate and experience of researching with young children.

4. Overview of the literature

This brief overview explores the research literature around both promoting and using the child's perspective and notions of quality in early years provision.

4.1 The child's perspective

The term 'children's perspectives' has deliberately been used to encompass the various concepts of child consultation, participation, children's voice and listening to children, each of which resists clear definition. Consultation implies a power imbalance since the adult has the power to determine the topic of the consultation (Davies and Artaraz 2009). Participation, according to Lancaster (2010) is interchangeable with listening to young children. However, Clark (2005b) describes listening as a necessary stage in participation. Children's 'voice' is a concept which is part of a wider approach, including listening and participation, which in this study involves listening attentively to the voice of the EYP as well as to that of the child. Although the children who participated in the study were not the focus of the research, they were regarded as competent, active agents, rather than as subordinate or secondary (Clark 2005a; Conroy and Harcourt 2009; Lancaster 2010).

This perception of children is however complex. For example, Uprichard (2008) problematises the tension between polarised notions of a child as either a 'being' (social actors in their own right, actively constructing their own childhood) or a 'becoming' (adults in the making, lacking skills and experiences) to suggest that these characterisations overlap and that children should be regarded as both being and becoming, thus increasing their agency. Lancaster (2010) further addresses this binary, arguing that recent developments in the study of adult learning demonstrate how our capacities evolve throughout life; furthermore, it may be the child who is supporting the adult to develop skills and knowledge, for example in navigating modern technology (Lancaster 2010). Practitioners may, for example, not only learn technology from children, but may also develop attributes such as patience, knowledge of child development, or understanding of how a child makes meaning from a resource.

4.2 Quality

In this context, the concept of 'quality' was considered from the perspective of policy, (the EYP's) practice, and the child.

Policy

Fenech (2011) describes the emergence of three waves of research into quality and early child education and care since the 1970s. The first wave was concerned with evaluating the effects of non-maternal care on child development. The second wave began to examine the construct of quality in early childhood provision, giving rise to the emergence of rating scales such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS), both of which have subsequently been revised (Harms et al. 1998 and Harms et al. 2003). The third wave took a more ecological approach, investigating the influence of the family and of children's individual characteristics on quality and outcomes. Interrogating six 'truths' about the construction of quality, Fenech (2011: 109) also argues that most research presents quality as '*an objective construct that can be known via quantitative measures and statistical analyses*'. This, she claims, positions the researcher as expert and ignores the perspectives of stakeholders, particularly children and parents; moreover, there is a paucity of research which includes the perspectives of those who teach in early childhood settings. Fenech (2011) however praises the EPPE (Effective Pre-school and Primary Education) project (Sylva et al. 2004), a Longitudinal Study which took a broader lens, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative research.

Reflecting the Labour government's emphasis on social justice and inclusion, the EPPE research explored pre-school education and concluded that high quality pre-school education had an impact on positive developmental outcomes for children; EPPE's qualitative studies '*gave detailed information for practitioners on aspects of effective practice and highlighted areas which might provide quality experiences for young children*' (Taggart 2010: 214). Also discussing EPPE, Sylva (2010) argues that quality consists of two dimensions: structural elements (child-teacher ratios, teacher education or training) and process elements (child-adult interactions, available activities and learning opportunities).

Moss and Dahlberg (2008: 4) contest the very concept of quality, arguing that quality is *'a subjective, value-based, relative and dynamic concept'* based on universal norms and expert knowledge. As such, Moss and Dahlberg state that quality is one of many possible languages of evaluation; they prefer to use the term *'meaning-making'*, a participatory interpretation which recognises context and answers critical questions about how we envisage childhood, the purpose of early years' provision and what do we want for our children. Meaning-making is open to dialogue, listening, reflection and argument; it is a process of *'interpretation, critique and evaluation, from which understandings are deepened and judgements co-constructed'* (Moss and Dahlberg, 2008: 6).

The EYP

EYP status was introduced in 2005 to promote a strategic role for leading practice across the early years sector and improving both the quality of provision and outcomes for children. How children's perspectives are integrated into notions of provision quality is explored in much greater detail in the Longitudinal Study final report (Hadfield *et al*, 2012).

The child

Recognising the perspectives of young children is part of a culture of respect and listening to children, adults and families in the early years. However, as Clark (2005b) notes, this does not *'sit well'* with a target-driven culture; it takes time and requires training; and there may be financial implications in developing participatory training across early years' provision. Article 12 of the UNHCR gives children the right to be listened to in all matters that concern them. However, as Lancaster (2010) notes, it is expected that adults will take responsibility for decision-making while giving due weight to the child's perspective. The adult is expected to consider the child's age, maturity and competence, which means that a child's entitlement is bounded and dependent on the adult. Davies and Artaraz (2009) found that factors that influence child participation include the EYPs' assumptions about childhood and their perceptions of competence, the service setting and the policy context, although they admit that these are complex and multivariate. They also found that many EYPs felt it was sufficient to offer children limited choices to fulfil the need to consider children's perspectives. Armistead (2008) found that there are few established resources or routes to enable children's perspectives to be considered at setting level. Garrick *et al* (2010), while exploring children's experiences of the EYFS, noted that many children are not involved in planning their learning and have limited ownership of their learning journals; moreover, children are unaware of their potential to influence resources.

4.3 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this research strand drew on the literature already discussed and on notions of practice leadership developed in the Longitudinal Study as a whole. It was also informed by Shier's (2001: 110) model of children's participation, based on Hart's ladder of participation, which has five levels:

- children are listened to
- children are supported in expressing their views
- children's views are taken into account
- children are involved in decision-making processes
- children share power and responsibility for decision-making.

5. Findings and analysis

5.1 Stages of children's perspectives

The EYPs demonstrated distinct approaches to their use of children's perspectives work that could be correlated with the overall development of practice leadership in their settings which is explored in detail in the Longitudinal Study's final report. The three stages identified from the research reflect the degree to which knowledge, understanding and commitment to children's perspectives practice was embedded in a setting's approach to practice leadership. These stages overlapped to some extent. Some EYPs moved in and out of the first two stages as they developed deeper understandings of how children's perspectives could contribute to improving quality and started to use these understandings to integrate more sophisticated approaches to working with children's perspectives into their own practice and into practice in their settings.

Stage 1 Facilitating choice for children

EYPs in settings operating at this stage tended to subscribe to relatively restricted or technical notions of children's perspectives. Primarily, they regarded children's perspectives in terms of children's access to resources and activities and developing children's perspectives appeared to be synonymous with allowing children to be given more choice. However there were often 'rules' (sometimes implicit in that they were not formally stated but were recognised by the children and sometimes explicit in that they were agreed by both children and practitioners) that curtailed these choices in practice. For example, the approach to planning in some settings required some toys to be put away before a child could get something else out or practitioners might restrict children's choice by sticking too rigidly to the session plan: *'I heard it last week. The children were trying to get something out and one member of staff said to them, "Oh no, we can't use that today because on the planning it says [x]"'* (Barbara, LS01). More naïve approaches to children's perspectives generally focused on obtaining straightforward feedback from children within recognised parameters:

'[The children] all say the same sort of things really and they don't say anything I am surprised about. They love the dinners; they love the swimming; they love the outside; they love all the toys; they love certain teachers. The things they don't like are the things that happen to them like falling over: "I don't like being hurt" and "I don't like people hitting me" but they haven't yet come up with anything that you can change.' (Jenny, LS35)

This contrasted with the more open approaches adopted by EYPs with more sophisticated views of children's perspectives. EYPs at these early stages were similarly limited in their explanations of the difficulties children frequently encountered in saying what they did not like at nursery. This was clear from one EYP, Barbara (LS01), who used the research as an opportunity to reflect and develop her understanding of children's perspectives. She identified the importance of staff modelling to each other and the children to develop and extend practice in this area:

'Really, if children don't like something, they'll either leave it or walk away but it may be because we haven't made it inviting enough for them. [...] It's the more it is embedded into practice [...] but actually I don't know because we focus more on positives, don't we? When we try to explain to children why their behaviour isn't appropriate, we do it in a positive way so we are not using negative language but they do [use negative language] at home. It's a lot to do with modelling.'

This was also reflected in Barbara's growing recognition of the limitations created by the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), in this instance on how adults listen to and make sense of children's perspectives. She questioned the extent to which practitioners' observations were determined by EYFS criteria: *'We're not really asking the children: "What were you doing there?" We're just thinking, "this is what they're doing and that's evidence of development band so-and-so" because that's what's in our head'*. This suggests that the extent to which the EYFS can be used to support and promote the use of children's perspectives depends on how sophisticated settings (and EYPs) are in the ways they use them.

EYPs also varied considerably in the extent to which they used children's perspectives as a quality assurance mechanism or a means of increasing children's ability to articulate their views critically. In the early stages of development, EYPs appeared largely to regard children's perspectives as another way of framing communication with children to enable child choice, rather than as an expression of their views (Shier, 2001). This can be seen in another EYP's struggle to link children's perspectives with quality provision:

'They're in childcare all day long. If their voice isn't heard, they go through the motions of playing with things [...] I don't think they become themselves if you know what I mean. If they're not really interested in it, they're just going through the motions.' (Eve, LS03)

Reflections such as Eve's and Barbara's (above) were evidence of a developing approach to children's perspectives that was beginning to move beyond a focus on children's choice to greater emphasis on how to integrate and balance children's perspectives into provision.

Summary: Stage 1 Facilitating choice for children

- EYPs saw children's perspectives primarily in terms of children's choice and access to resources and activities. They were less aware of the need both to support children in expressing their views and to respond to those views.
- EYPs' views of children's perspectives remained relatively naïve and offered limited notions of how to encourage, facilitate and respond to children's perspectives in practice.
- EYPs were also constrained in how they used children's perspectives to promote quality in their settings. Their focus on enabling child choice restricted them to improving, rather than transforming, provision.

Stage 2 Consultation with children

EYPs in settings at this stage of children's perspectives development talked of creating a more inclusive and consultative approach to children's perspectives than their stage 1 counterparts. For example, Jenny (LS35) had a more nuanced view of the issues involved in allowing children to choose activities and how they might need greater persuasion to engage in activities that developed particular skills and a sense of accomplishment.

'I'm sure that some advisory teachers would be telling me "You shouldn't be pushing them on their puzzles" but actually we do because it encourages all the things to do with maths as well but it gives them a sense of "I have achieved". A puzzle is a sense of achievement because you start with this and end with a finished product, whereas when you're playing or doing something creatively, it's brilliant because it's theirs but they don't know how good that is.'

Jenny also discussed the challenges of meeting fee-paying parents' expectations at this private nursery. Like other EYPs, Jenny felt under pressure to produce 'evidence' in the form of children's paintings, for example, in order to satisfy parental demands for 'value for money' and their child 'actually doing something', rather than also focusing on the process of learning exemplified by doing and completing a puzzle. Thus, although Jenny began by expressing the benefit for the child in restricting choice, part of the rationale was to placate parents. Further issues arose relating to the practicalities of 'listening' to large numbers of children from diverse backgrounds where cultural factors may restrict children's perspectives. Other issues centred on 'dominant voices' preventing quieter children from being heard. The response to this issue was often to separate children to allow quieter children the opportunity to contribute and participate in decision-making, indicating the movement from the naïve reliance on choice seen in stage 1 EYPs to more consultative approaches.

EYPs in these settings also demonstrated greater knowledge and understanding of children's perspectives in relation to quality provision. They recognised the need to balance quality assurance with approaches that focused on improving outcomes for children but experienced challenges in having to meet the demands of quality initiatives, managers (LS01; LS28) or assessment and monitoring regimes (LS01; LS35). Barbara (LS01), Isobel (LS28) and Jenny (LS35) were at various stages of developing children's perspectives: they were aware of the need for further development but were wrestling with perceived difficulties in this. As Lancaster states (2010), children need to have the time and space to formulate their views (something that only EYPs in stage 3 settings recognised). EYPs in stage 1 and 2 settings focused on enabling the child to make more informed choices rather than developing the listening skills of the adults to support greater participation in decision-making for children. However, there was evidence of some EYPs beginning to recognise the need to address the power imbalance, for example in relation to assessment:

'How do we use children's voice to inform assessment? One of the things at the back of my head is how do staff feel? Do staff feel children should have more of a voice? Do they feel "actually I'm the adult, I should be making a judgment on them?"' (LS01)

While this remained largely aspirational in these settings, some EYPs were developing approaches to planning that placed the child at the centre.

'[The staff] have always worked with 'aims' before and a medium term plan but for a while, the plan came first before the aims and they were fitting the activity to the child rather than starting from the child and then planning something appropriate for that need. Whereas now I would say they're spot on with that.' (Isobel, LS28)

As Lancaster (2010: 85) asserts, *'The set of assumptions that we hold about children and childhood shapes children's experiences of decision-making'*. Thus, there was more than one example in the research of EYPs being surprised when children did not identify areas they knew they liked as favourites or when children said that they had less choice than EYPs said they had. Barbara (LS01) highlighted the danger of failing to recognise pre-conceived notions and expectations: *'We all revert back to our presumptions and so it's a case of thinking, "That child is competent, they are capable of making their own decisions"'*. Thus, although they had problematised the notion of children's choice, these EYPs' consultative approach was limited in its capacity to allow children to develop a critical approach to their experience of nursery. While children's views were taken into account (on Shier's model), there was still a danger of children's perspectives being used in a tokenistic way, approaching what, in the context of teaching cultures, Hargreaves (1994) termed *'contrived collegiality'*.

At this level of participation, the EYP's position in the setting's leadership structure had some bearing on the extent to which they could influence or change children's perspectives practice. For example, Isobel (LS28) spoke of the challenges in having to placate both management and staff: *'I'm a bit like the jam in the middle of the sandwich, I've got the staff at the bottom and management at the top and somehow or another, I have to try and meet them both ways'*. She also felt the pressure of having to make sense for colleagues of the competing demands of setting policies, Ofsted requirements, local authority initiatives and the EYFS, all of which constituted the multiple and fluctuating 'norms' of provision in a setting: *'I have to take all these guidelines, rules, legislation, kind of things, from all these people trying to tell me what to do and what's good for children and I have to translate that into something that's meaningful for them'*. This reflects Lancaster's assertion that children's experiences of early years provision can be determined by how successfully practitioners make sense of the policies being implemented (Lancaster, 2010).

For Barbara (LS01), the research study itself provoked high levels of reflection in respect of both her own practice and her work with colleagues. She reflected on her own leadership, colleagues' development in children's perspectives practice and the need to focus practitioner training on using children's perspectives. Compared with stage 1 EYPs and settings, these EYPs had a better understanding of their own

practice in relation to children's perspectives and were making progress in working with others. However, for these EYPs and settings, external policy and competing demands often constituted a threat to leading improved children's perspectives practice. There was some evidence of their beginning to affect setting norms and interactions but this was at a relatively early stage of maturity.

Summary: Stage 2 consultation with children

- EYPs adopted a more consultative approach to working with children's perspectives, although this remained limited, particularly in relation to developing criticality in children.
- EYPs set children's perspectives in the context of choice and access to resources and activities but recognised the need to restrict choice in certain contexts, for example to allow quieter children to have a voice. They also faced challenges in placating parents.
- EYPs had begun to encourage children's criticality in terms of their expressing negative views of provision, but this remained limited.
- EYPs in settings at the developing stage recognised the need to balance both quality assurance and approaches that encouraged quality as an outcome but experienced challenges in meeting the demands of quality initiatives and policy and management directives.

Stage 3 Co-construction with children

The two EYPs working in settings operating at this level of children's perspectives had a deeper understanding of how to facilitate and support children's participation and a more critical approach to using their perspectives. The child's perspective was described by EYPs in all six settings as their 'freedom to choose' but their interpretations of this varied widely. While EYPs would have been uncomfortable mirroring community-focused theories of participation (e.g. Thorburn *et al*, 1995) in speaking of 'manipulating' children's perspectives, they often hinted at elements of placation and/or contrivance in how they or colleagues balanced the choice of resources or activities, particularly in stage 2 settings. In contrast, the strategy in Anne's setting (LS49) was not to put out any resources at the beginning of the day, allowing the children completely free access to all resources and activities in all the rooms. This was perceived as an important element of enabling choice. For Tom (LS19) it was important to offer children a range of activities in order to challenge them:

'It's about getting some balance. We operate in different rooms so for [Child A], she wants to be in this room all of the time but it's sometimes about telling them, "Ok but you also need to do some painting sometimes or try that out or you might like to try [x]." Whereas in some groups you might be in one big room where they can stay in their comfort zone (for want of a better phrase), here we have to ensure that they all have the opportunity to be stretched and try new things.'

For Tom (LS19), this was also linked to an active search for the kinds of discrepancies between adults' and children's perspectives that were often downplayed in other

settings in order to encourage the developing sense of criticality needed in co-constructing improvements to their experience of the nursery.

'I think we should actively encourage children to express their dislikes. What use is a voice if you can only say half of what you need to? One of the common responses we encourage here is for children to say "No" and "I don't like it" and we support the opening up of that dialogue, sometimes by modelling it and providing words and sometimes by encouraging the other child to listen and respond accordingly. We also sometimes have activities or focus times around likes and dislikes at nursery, aiming for and supporting a thoughtful critique.'

Listening was also associated with the need to help children to become 'skillful communicators' (David *et al*, 2003), creating opportunities for them to form friendships, share experiences and empathise with others. This was encapsulated in the difference between Tom's emphasis on the need for children to be critical and Jenny's (LS35) more constrained approach: *'It's very hard, [the children] all say the same sort of things really and they don't say anything I am surprised about'*.

Children were not separated by age or confidence levels in either of the stage 3 settings. This allowed younger children to see older children modelling how to offer opinions, both positive and negative. Both EYPs saw this as a key factor.

'Some of our very able and capable four year-olds came in as two year-olds and it's that luxury of knowing that we've got them for a two year process so we can see that process through. They go from a very quiet two year-old that needs settling in, playing solitarily on their own, to actually becoming a hugely important part of the group.' (Tom, LS19).

He also described the range of resources and activities that were used to encourage children to co-construct and negotiate meaning.

'We use persona dolls. Everything's up for grabs. Everything's up for comment as long as it's done in a non-offensive and fair way so we will encourage the children to talk positively about diversity and things they do and don't like and so we would hope that [in] the environment here they've got that opportunity at any time.'

This reflects Shier's (2001) higher participatory levels of allowing children to develop ownership of provision through sharing power and responsibility, which Tom explicitly linked to improving the quality of provision:

'It's vital to improving provision and keeping provision at its best level because, unless you are listening to children, you are missing out on a whole part of the picture. We could provide what we think is perfect equipment. We could provide what we think the parents would like to see but if it's not meeting the children's needs or what they want and we're not listening to them about that, that's a third of that equation out and in fact it's a much bigger part of the equation because it's the children's nursery.' (Tom, LS19)

Both LS19 and LS49 described an embedded ethos of children's perspective in which it was both a quality assurance process *and* an outcome of quality. For example, the 'Listening to Children' policy at LS19 conveyed a deep understanding and commitment to children's perspectives, outlining the ethos and aims of the setting. Strategies used in both settings included:

- giving children the time and space to respond
- developing different methods to enable less dominant or younger children's voices to be heard
- developing adults' listening skills, for example through introducing a staff listening policy linked to sustained shared thinking and talking
- involving children in decision-making and feedback
- developing children's self-esteem.

Both Anne and Tom described how the settings had created a genuine ethos of partnership with parents and children. Where stage 2 EYPs were destabilised by pressure from parents, if similar issues arose in LS19 or LS49 the EYPs were supported by the embedded philosophy and pedagogical foundation of their approach to using children's perspectives.

Anne (LS49) and Tom (LS19) worked intensely with individuals and groups of staff to extend their knowledge and practice in supporting children's perspectives and monitoring practice across the team. Anne delegated staff members to lead and monitor practice, thereby influencing group norms and interactions in using children's perspectives:

'Some members of staff are wonderful for a short period then have to be pulled back in again as they start to slip. It's a constant battle, but supported by the senior staff who believe in it.'

The EYPs also drew on a range of research and networks to emphasise the sanctioning and institutionalising of knowledge of children's perspectives into their settings' formal structures and processes. Tom outlined how this worked:

'Through training, through reading and especially through observing some skilled individuals in action - some within the setting and some from outside the setting. It's that thing that if you see an inspirational individual working, you soak up the good practice and people here regularly access training and stuff is cascaded back and we learn from each other. We do reflect upon it and talk about it as a group. We do have a strong teamwork ethos. We're used to sharing, talking, trying, changing things.'

However, to bring this about, EYPs (and, by extension, children themselves) need to have scope to influence and change structural factors, such as funding for equipment and working conditions (Mooney *et al*, 2003) that shape aspects of provision in a setting. Both Anne and Tom regularly observed staff, modelled and reviewed to ensure that their colleagues were confident about accessing children's perspectives and that systems were in place to support their use. Thus, in this mature discourse, using children's perspectives involved much more than free choice

of resources or activities, it encompassed developing children's ability to express themselves with practitioners' support. Tom spoke about equality and diversity, challenging stereotypes and attitudes through giving children the tools, both linguistic and non-linguistic, to explore issues such as gender, stating *'if you've only got two words for that, you can only use two words for that. So it's broadening that so you are giving children a real voice'*. Anne (LS49) observed that children also need time to make choices and decisions; she encouraged practitioners to wait at least ten seconds to allow the child to think and respond. As Christensen (2004: 169) highlights, the acts of 'looking' and 'listening attentively' are crucial to building relationships with children. Waiting until a child has finished saying what it is they want to say confirms to them the value and importance of their communication.

Summary: Stage 3 consultation with children

- EYPs at this level demonstrated critical notions of children's perspectives and deep knowledge and understanding of how to facilitate and support children's participation and provide feedback to children.
- Children's perspectives involved much more than free choice of resources or activities in these settings. It encompassed ensuring that children developed the language to allow them to express their views, negotiate ownership of aspects of the nursery and co-construct improvements to provision.
- These EYPs regarded developing children's ability to be critical as essential and recognised the importance of giving them a safe space and the language to be able to do this.
- Settings did not differentiate provision by age or ability, seeing the benefits of older children modelling how to participate fully in the setting.
- These settings had an embedded an inclusive ethos of using children's perspectives into their practice. Children's perspectives were regarded as both a quality assurance process *and* an outcome of quality.
- These settings distributed leadership and had strong external links to supportive networks and research evidence.

Finally, Shier's (2001) model of child participation was brought together with Hadfield and Haw's (2001: 488) concept of 'voice' in which they argue that the child's perspective can range from being synonymous with a simple acceptance of the child's right to choose to a *'much more involved act of participation'* in which children are involved in planning, shaping, and receiving feedback on the decisions which affect their daily lives and their wider world. This is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2 *Settings' implementation stages for children's perspectives*

Children's perspectives stage	Characteristics	Compare to Shier (2001) levels	Settings
Choice	EYP's growing understanding of children's perspectives, focused on choice	Children listened to & supported to express their views	LS01, LS03, (LS35 partially)
Consultation	EYP developing balanced, consultative approach to children's perspectives	Children's views taken into account	LS28, LS35 (LS01 partially)
Co-construction	Embedded approach which encourages children to own and co-construct improvements to provision	Children involved in decision-making & share power and responsibility	LS19, LS49

5.2 Issues and barriers

In this section the contextual and cultural issues and barriers faced by EYPs in promoting the use of children's perspectives are considered.

Contextual issues

Setting type

The type of setting in which EYPs worked appeared to influence the extent to which they felt they could make the changes necessary to develop a more emancipatory approach to using children's perspectives. Simpson (2010: 276) confirms how the contexts in which EYPs operate are influential '*in regard to conditioning their ability to be creative and undertake positioning*', noting further how early years settings can become sites of conflict. Similar tensions emerged in this research. As noted earlier, Jenny (LS35) experienced pressure from parents in her private nursery who '*don't want their children to play all day*'. By allowing the children regularly to take home a painting or a sticker for finishing an activity, she reconciled the tension she felt between parents' expectations and her own perception of what constituted good practice for children. This seemed to be a bigger challenge for private settings than for community settings or children's centres.

Other structural factors

For Eve (LS03) the physical layout of the setting acted as a barrier to her perception of children's perspectives as freedom of choice for children. In this setting, which was also her home, one room was designated for the pre-school children and resources were on view in labelled boxes, but many were not accessible to the children. They had to ask for, or point to, what they wanted. As Eve explained, when a child who was 'non-verbal' wanted a specific resource, Eve sometimes had to guess a number of times what they wanted. Thus, the structural environment of the setting created a tension (between Eve's perception of children's perspectives and the reality in her home), a barrier (preventing progress) and a dilemma (in that the problem appeared insurmountable).

In contrast, Isobel (LS28) argued that restricting choice would improve quality: 'We

feel we'd rather have less areas well-resourced than everything out all the time, otherwise the quality of what's being offered gets reduced'. However, in the two stage 3 settings, children were allowed to move independently between floors, visiting siblings in the toddler or baby rooms, seeing friends on other floors, or spending time in the garden, allowing them to take ownership of their time in the nursery.

Ensuring all children have a voice

Some EYPs at the first two stages of children's perspectives development raised the issues of group size and language ability as factors that inhibited children's perspectives development. Isobel (LS28) typified the dilemma.

'I think it's difficult to get every child's point of view because some children have English as an additional language; some children aren't particularly forthcoming so that's where you have to meet them a bit further because they won't readily tell you what they've enjoyed. You've got to observe so I would say the difficulty is trying to get an equal amount from every child and to understand them fully.'

For the childminder, caring for a wide age range of children with widely different needs presented problems. At times, a baby's needs are imperative and take priority over the older children's choices. Thus, in common with many parents, Eve experienced the tension between the differing needs of children of different ages. Jenny (LS35) noted the challenges inherent in *'listening to five children with Special Needs and fourteen who have English as an additional language'*. However, as EYPs became more confident in their ability to integrate children's perspectives, they developed strategies to enable the less dominant children, or those with communication needs, to be heard.

Working with Under 3s' perspectives

Although the research focused almost exclusively on children aged 3 or older, EYPs were also asked about how they accessed younger children's perspectives. Those at the earlier stages of development tended to refer to the need to offer choices to children under three through close observation of the child and trying to interpret their needs.

'It's difficult because lots of [the children under three] haven't got language and [the staff] are doing lots of observations and [the lead practitioner] has said "I don't think we are fulfilling some of the children's needs". [...] So they now do small group work with their rising threes and try and push them on, but it's difficult when you have an age range of 18 months to three plus.'
(Jenny, LS35)

Further discussion with Jenny revealed issues with interpretation of the birth to three agenda. The framework advocates babies and young children being regarded as 'autonomous learners' who 'learn by doing rather than being 'told' and 'steers away from specific areas of experience' (DfE, 2002). However Jenny supported the under 3s' room leader's viewpoint that *'I think it's fine that the children come in and play but equally we are not teaching them any skills [...] so staff [...] encourage everybody to do a painting*

because they are not going to learn to hold a paint brush if you don't encourage them to paint'.

Cultural issues

These apply to the culture of the settings in which EYPs worked, such as setting ethos and leadership, rather than broader socio-cultural dimensions.

Ethos

The settings in which children's perspectives were valued and listened to had an embedded, shared ethos consistent with an advanced approach to working with children. This is an issue worthy of further research. More effective settings had an organisational culture which supported risk-taking with practitioners who felt confident in trying new approaches, reflecting on success and discussing as a team how to address identified difficulties. They also extended this to involving the children in exploring ways to improve practice.

'There was a member of staff in here doing an activity the other day and [a child] said, "this is boring'. The staff member fed that back to the rest of the team and she talked to [the child] about how they could make the activity better. I liked that. I've worked with people who would not feed that back as they'd see it as a reflection on themselves.'

(Tom, LS19).

Anne (LS49) felt that her setting had created an ethos of respect for the views of children of all ages. They participated in decisions about their daily life in the nursery and also in decisions about broader issues, such as the development of the outdoor environment. However, she also felt that some of the children would experience difficulties interpreting more formal rules and restrictions when they made the transition to statutory education, where they would meet a much 'weaker' model of children's perspectives. She described this as 'a *mismatch of ideals*'.

Leadership

The settings with the most advanced approaches to children's perspectives also had the least hierarchical management structures. This was closely related to the emancipatory ethos of these settings, which required effort to be sustained. Anne (LS49) identified stable senior management as a key mediating factor: room leaders constantly observed staff and children and held regular meetings and appraisals to support staff development. Moreover, new members of staff had a six-month probation period during which they had weekly, then monthly, then three-monthly appraisals during which a decision was made by both practitioner and staff member as to '*whether they can believe in our ethos*'. In contrast, Jenny (LS35) struggled to support practitioners whom she felt had changed their attitudes to children but still needed considerable support with this. Thus, while staff attitudes could act as a barrier to working with children's perspectives, where there was confident leadership and a strong emancipatory ethos embedded into the setting, alongside supportive structures, a safe place was created to try out new activities and methods to enable children to participate in the setting. In both the settings with a mature model of children's perspectives, EYPs communicated their confidence in children's perspectives to other practitioners, children and parents, so that it became a way of working rather than an intervention.

6. Conclusion

Stages of development

The EYPs and settings involved in the research were regarded as being at three stages of development in their use of children's perspectives, although it should be emphasised that these stages overlapped and settings moved in and out of the first two stages as they gained understanding of how to use children's perspectives. Moving towards embedded use of children's perspectives takes time, and the two EYPs with the most embedded use of children's perspectives had developed their approaches over several years and they had become integral to their settings' ethos.

EYPs in settings with a relatively naïve view of children's perspectives primarily focused on facilitating children's **choice** and access to resources and activities. They were less aware than other EYPs of how to support children to express their views and offered limited notions of how to encourage, facilitate and respond to children's perspectives in practice. They were also restricted in how they used children's perspectives to promote quality in their settings. Their focus on enabling child choice meant that they concentrated on improving, rather than transforming, provision.

EYPs in settings developing children's perspectives adopted a more **consultative** approach. Like the stage 1 EYPs, they set children's perspectives in the context of choice and access to resources and activities, but recognised the need to restrict choice in certain contexts, for example to allow quieter children to have a voice. They also faced challenges in placating parents. They had begun to encourage children's criticality in terms of their expressing negative views of provision, but this remained limited. They experienced challenges in meeting the demands of quality initiatives and management directives, which restricted their ability to promote the use of children's perspectives.

EYPs and settings with mature approaches to children's perspectives demonstrated a critical understanding of how to facilitate and **co-construct** their participation with the children and provide feedback to them. Their view of children's perspectives encompassed ensuring that children developed the language to allow them to express their views and negotiate ownership of aspects of the nursery and improvements to provision. They regarded as essential the development of children's ability to be critical and recognised the importance of giving them a safe space and the language to do this. Their settings distributed leadership and did not differentiate provision by age or ability, seeing the benefits of older children modelling how to participate fully in the setting. They had embedded an ethos of using children's perspectives into their practice, regarding them as both a quality assurance process *and* an outcome of quality.

Issues and barriers

There was evidence that the extent to which key contextual factors, such as setting type and lack of space and resources, acted as barriers was reduced as settings became more mature in their use of children's perspectives. Thus, while they were potentially overwhelming for Eve as a childminder working in relative isolation, the two EYPs in stage 3 settings were supported by the cultural factors of their settings' ethos and the distributed approach to leadership which enabled them to address

such structural barriers. Significantly, their ethos of inclusion also extended to not grouping children by age, which allowed older children to model active participation in the setting to younger children. This may have contributed to the fact that compared to their counterparts in settings at emerging or developing stages, they were much less likely to face difficulties in meeting individual children's needs. The EYPs with more embedded approaches also articulated high levels of reflection in discussing children's perspectives and recognising their value as a means of improving the quality of provision.

6.1 Implications for practice

Effectively integrating children's perspectives work into a setting's approach to improving quality requires EYPs who have:

- the depth of understanding of children's perspectives to develop it as part of a setting's overall pedagogical approach
- the leadership skills to develop a common understanding of children's perspectives among staff in order to ensure that it does not become tokenistic or contrived
- the ability to link children's perspectives with the learning and developmental stages in the Early Years Foundation Stage in order to create a phased programme that can support children in acquiring the required skills, understandings and attitudes, including the ability to be critical of provision, throughout their time in a setting
- the capacity to deal with conflicts and tensions between children's, colleagues' and parents' views of quality provision.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Detailed visit outline

1. Orientation discussion with the EYP

This discussion allowed for the opportunity to reiterate the processes involved and their purpose. These discussions highlighted the central role of the EYP in supporting, observing and reflecting on the process. Any timetabling issues were raised and resolved at this point and parental consent obtained. Any potential issues relating to accessing all areas the participant children usually used were identified.

2. Researcher interaction with whole group

Following the pilot study, a familiarisation period was introduced during which the researcher sat in the play environment amongst the whole group, thus enabling the children to become familiar with the researcher and more relaxed in her/his presence. This also provided opportunities for the researcher to observe the participant children in free play, which the researcher could then draw on for further support in conversations with children.

3. Introduction and explanation with the children

The researcher and the EYP then met participant children. Following comments from EYPs during the pilot study, the child consent form was replaced by a verbal assent (see Ethics) at the outset of the study and re-negotiated during the research process. The children were then encouraged to play with and use a digital camera, one per child, provided by the researcher. This process was important in ensuring that the children felt comfortable with the researcher and they were also interested in using the camera. The children were then encouraged to discuss and identify aspects of the setting that they would like to guide the researcher to during the tour and explain why they were significant. The emphasis was on play throughout the children's participation.

4. Child-guided tour

The children were invited to undertake a tour of their setting, including outdoor areas, with the researcher and observed by the EYP. Children were encouraged to take photographs of places of significance and memorable activities. If an activity identified by a child was not available at the time, the child was encouraged to make use of visual props, which represented the activity e.g. 3D models made from natural resources, or display photographs of past activities. All photographic data was used as a catalyst for discussion rather than as evidence data.

5. Conversation with children

Following the guided tour the children were invited to review and reflect on their photographs in a group discussion with the EYP and researcher. A suitable space within the setting was identified for this discussion. The interview guide to exploring the children's perspectives on the provision they have experienced is based on the work of Carr et al. 2002 (in Anning et al. 2010, pp161-166). A matrix informed the questions we asked the children (see Appendix 3). The discussion was voice-

recorded and these recordings were the only data removed from the setting (see Section 3. Ethics. These discussions formed the basis of the analysis for each setting. Any images recorded by the child were the property of the child and setting and remained in the setting and were deleted from cameras in the presence of the EYP. At the end of the process with the children, they were given a specially designed certificate to keep.

6. Interview with EYP

A further discussion took place between the EYP and the researcher, the purpose of which was to enable the researcher to explore the children's responses in more detail and to clarify any ambiguous responses. This final stage was also critical for making connections between the children's views of their experiences in the setting and with practice led by the EYP. The researcher asked the EYP to reflect on his or her involvement in the areas of significance identified by the children. In particular, the EYP was asked to discuss how pedagogy is co-constructed with the children and to reflect on the mechanisms used for listening to and acting on children's perspectives. The EYP was also asked to reflect on any correlations between children's experiences in the setting and pre-conceived notions of quality that the EYPs had internalised about the setting's learning environment. The interview with the EYP was based on identifying micro, meso and macro levels of leadership practices associated with children's perspectives activities and on establishing how practitioners listened to children and translated their views, along with key tensions and challenges in the process. Throughout the interview a series of probes explored how EYPs viewed consulting under 3 year olds and the extent to which this involved additional challenges and tensions. This discussion was also voice recorded.

7. Reflective discussion

During the pilot study, we realised that the EYPs needed and wanted time to reflect on the research process so we asked them if we could contact them at an appropriate time in a few days for their further reflections.

Appendix 2: Outline of conversation with children

1. Tell me about your photos of your favourite places.

Probes: Is that what you like doing best of all?

Do you have enough time to do/play/use...?

Are there enough (trikes or whatever) to go around?

How does your mum/carer know what you do/like doing at nursery?

Are there places where you don't feel comfortable/happy/safe?

2. Are there rules about the use of (photo image)?

Probes: Do you have different rules at home to nursery?

What happens if children break the rules/do something wrong?

What happens if the teacher tells you it's, say, lunchtime?

3. If all the children are doing something and you want to do something different, what happens?

Probes: Who do you talk to at nursery if something goes wrong/you are unhappy?

4. If child has not mentioned activities such as role play, singing/music, circle time, cooking etc. ask what activities they like doing.

Probes: How do you know when you've done something really really well?

How does your teacher help you to do....better?

Is there a time in nursery when you talk about home?

Does your mum/carer come into nursery to do things with you?

5. Are there any parts of the nursery you don't like?

Probes: What things do you wish you did not have to do?

What happens if you say you do not like doing something?

Appendix 3: Sample details (settings and children)

Setting	Region	Deprivation range²	Ofsted rating	Participating children (and their age)
LS01	West Midlands	0-20%	Good	Boy (4) Boy (3) Girl (4)
LS03	West Midlands	Over 80%	Outstanding	Boy (3)
LS19	South East	0-20%	Outstanding	Boy (2) Boy (3) Girl (3)
LS28	East Midlands	21-50%	Outstanding	Boy (3) Girl (3) Girl (4)
LS35	East Midlands	21-50%	Good	Boy (4) Girl (3) Girl (4)
LS49	London	21-50%	Good	3 x Boy (4)

² A deprivation range score of 0-20 per cent indicates that the setting is in one of the 20 per cent most deprived areas in England according to The English Indices of Multiple Deprivation (DCLG, 2010).

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