

In pursuit of quality: early childhood qualifications and training policy

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This paper aims to critique policy discourses around the pursuit of quality in early years education. Taking England as a focal point, it problematizes the use of the term ‘quality’ and attempts to standardise its meaning; highlighting the disconnect that exists between policy and practice. The paper combines discourse analysis of a small number of key government documents with a series of interviews with early years stakeholders in order to identify issues that will have resonance and can inform a much needed continuation of debates about what quality might mean. Over the course of the research it became apparent that there was considerable disquiet amongst early years practitioners with regards the current qualifications and training landscape, particularly with regards to what many viewed as ideologically-driven policy-making, not informed by proper dialogue with the sector.

Keywords: Quality, early years, professionalisation, standards, qualifications

1. Introduction

‘Quality’ is an important and prevalent concept in early childhood education policy globally (see Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2012). This paper considers the impact of this focus, specifically on the professional qualifications and training of early years practitioners in England. By adopting theories of discourse it explores the policy-making process itself – with reference to a series of key developments and policy documents. Although located in England, instrumental approaches towards the pursuit of quality can be seen internationally (OECD 2017) and an exploration of such discourses has relevance and applicability to a wide range of contexts.

The pursuit of quality is one of the foremost drivers of government policy, cutting across departments and ministries. A search of the UK Government’s website (www.gov.uk) returns over 18 thousand results for the term ‘quality’, including policy documents relating to environmental quality; quality assurance within the National Health Service; quality of

education in schools; and regional quality of Information and Communications Technology, amongst many others. Unsurprisingly, given the widespread nature of this fixation, policy in early childhood education is similarly driven. A major eight-year long research study currently being undertaken by the Department for Education (DfE) into early education and development cites an evaluation of the 'quality of provision' as one of its three central aims (DfE 2017a) and the Ofsted Early Years Inspection Handbook provides guidance on judging the 'quality and standards' of early years settings, using the word 'quality' 55 times within its 45 pages (Ofsted 2015).

This paper considers what effect the pursuit of quality in early childhood education has had on policy, with a specific focus on the professional qualifications and training of early years practitioners. It is based upon a study of the early years system in England, but has implications for an understanding of policymaking in this area more widely.

As Dahlberg et al. have noted, the concept of quality 'now plays a dominant role' across the sector (2007, 4), and the term has come to refer to 'a generic, "common-sense" status and as such is promoted through national goals, standards, targets and various quality assurance procedures' (Cottle & Alexander 2012, 637). The standardised nature of the concept represents a positivistic approach, and the pursuit of quality can be thought of as a pursuit of a 'universal, knowable and objective standard' (Dahlberg et al. 2007, 104). And yet, research with practitioners working in early years settings has shown that static definitions, comparable from one setting to another, are actually rare and are instead more likely to be context-specific (Cottle & Alexander 2012, 651). As such, it is not surprising that a number of commentators have sought to challenge the dominant, often government-led, discourse of quality (see Dahlberg et al. 2007, Tanner et al. 2006, Jones et al. 2016), framing it as only one way to understand this 'multidimensional, value-laden concept' (Cottle & Alexander 2012, 651).

Nonetheless, as can be seen from the numerous references to the term in UK Government literature, too often quality is not fully problematized or questioned. Such an approach is characterised by articles such as that of Ishimine and Tayler who, despite the acknowledgement that quality is a ‘value-laden construct’, still make the bold assertion that recent research has led to the ‘development of measures that can assess the quality ECEC [early childhood education and care] service effectively’ (2014, 272). This type of effective assessment of quality has been criticised by Moss, who argues that such terminology attempts to de-politicise what is inherently political (2016, 12) and ultimately such attempts to ‘pin “quality” down so as to give it meaning’ result in it becoming ‘meaningless’ (Jones et al. 2016, 3). Similarly, Sammons et al. (2017) heavily criticised a London School of Economics (LSE) paper on quality in early years settings (Blanden et al. 2017) for taking too simplistic and limited an approach in defining quality as a ‘children’s access to a graduate’ combined with ‘global Ofsted inspection grades’ (Sammons et al. 2017, 2).

This paper begins by providing some background and context to the early years sector in England – particularly the policy changes that have taken place over the last 20 years. It then considers how ‘quality’ is defined and expands upon some of the arguments outlined above. The paper then focuses on a small number of more recent policy documents and the ways that these have impacted upon the sector, drawing upon the experiences and views of key stakeholders currently working in early childhood education. It concludes with a discussion around the pursuit of quality that has formed such a key part of the doctrine around early years in this country, and expand this to consider implications for early childhood education in other contexts.

2. Methodology

This paper is based upon a wider research project (Osgood et al. 2017), funded by TACTYC (the Association for Professional Development in Early Years) and draws upon two key data

sources. Firstly it is based on a comprehensive review of literature relating to early childhood policy in England over the last 5-10 years. As well as including relevant academic literature, this review incorporated grey literature (that is, research and documentation produced by government/academics/industry outside of commercial publishers) and policy documentation with a focus on: the Nutbrown Review (an independent review of early education and childcare qualifications in 2011, carried out by Professor Cathy Nutbrown and published by the DfE in 2012); the Government's response (a paper entitled 'More Great Childcare', published by the DfE in 2013); and the 2016 white paper produced by the DfE relating to education more broadly – 'Educational Excellence Everywhere.'

To complement the review of literature a series of semi-structured interviews with a small sample of key stakeholders in early childhood education were conducted. A list of 30 potential stakeholders was compiled based upon the profile of organisations and individuals and their involvement with the development of training and qualifications in the early years sector. Several key stakeholders were pursued over a prolonged period but ultimately declined to participate in the research. Securing the participation of senior, strategic personnel is challenging and therefore the participation of the four stakeholders included in this study is especially notable: each of the organisations provided a breadth of opinion on the key issues under investigation. The four organisations from which the stakeholders were drawn were:

1. London Early Years Foundation (LEYF); which is the largest charitable childcare social enterprise in the UK with 38 nurseries comprised of 670 staff and 60 apprentices.
2. Early Childhood Studies Degree Network (ECSDN); which is an influential network of providers of early childhood degree programmes.
3. The Harmonisation Group; a recently established (2015) consortium of higher education institutions involved in the delivery of early childhood programmes.

4. Bright Horizons; which is one of the biggest chain providers of private day nursery provision in the UK and Ireland with over 200 nurseries (and hundreds more globally).

The stakeholders were asked about their involvement in, and experiences of, early years training and qualifications over time and were specifically invited to reflect upon the Nutbrown Review. As individuals with strategic insights, the stakeholders were asked to outline the key strengths with differing training options available to the early years workforce, at different career stages, and to identify what they considered to be the major issues currently facing the sector and to identify examples of effective practice (see Osgood et al. 2017 for interview schedule). This enabled the project to draw on the opinions and views of those directly involved in the sector and directly affected by the policy changes that have taken place. Each of the four participants held long careers in early childhood, spanning more than 25 years as practitioners, trainers/educators, assessors and leaders, but currently occupy roles with strategic remits. All had been directly involved, to varying extents, with the Nutbrown Review and related consultation exercises. The interviews lasted for between 90 and 120 minutes and took place in 2016.

The wider research project from which this paper draws employed a mixed methods approach built upon co-construction; working with stakeholders at key points and in a variety of ways in order to develop a shared understanding of the issues and how they related to the early years sector. The stakeholder interviews, combined with the literature review, enabled the researchers to interrogate the development of early years policy in England and how this has directly affected early years workers and institutions. This social constructionist approach (Schwandt 2003) echoes the response of Dahlberg et al. to the problems inherent in the term 'quality': presenting an alternative focal point – 'meaning making' – 'built upon an understanding of learning ... as a process of co-construction' (2007, 106).

This paper employs theories of discourse in order to focus on the relationship between 'discursive practices, events and texts' and 'wider social and cultural structures, relationships and processes' (Fairclough 1993, 135) – deconstructing a small number of key policy reports and documents in order to provide alternative understandings around the role of quality in early years education; viewpoints directly informed by interviews with key stakeholders. The intention of this approach is to map out changes in policy over time, exploring the effects that discourse around quality has had on the sector and, crucially, on those working in early years. As Hyatt notes, the focus on discourse allows one to 'move away from the notion of policy as a product (merely enshrined in a policy text) to one which focuses on policy as process' (2013, 836), thus policy changes can be taken to be indicative of this process. While language and meaning are central (Taylor 1997) the approach is not a 'narrowly formalistic look at the "linguistics" of policy statements' (McHoul 1984, 1) – instead theories of discourse are drawn on in order to 'explore policy-making processes within the broad discursive field within which policies are developed and implemented' (Taylor 1997, 26).

3. Background

Since the late 1990s early childhood education has experienced relentless change and policy attention within England (Lightfoot and Frost 2015, 404). Based upon shifts in policy over the last twenty years, there has been a gradual but sustained move towards professionalising the early years workforce – 'professionalisation is associated here with moves towards creating a graduate early years workforce' (Lloyd and Hallet 2010, 2), broadly intended to improve the quality of provision. As well as policies which have increased access to childcare and early years schooling this shift has been based upon the underlying aim 'to have graduate leaders in every full daycare setting' (Payler and Locker 2013, 126).

Under the Labour Government of 1997-2010 there was a sustained drive towards the professionalisation of the early years workforce, at first through the introduction of a new

employment status: the ‘Senior Practitioner’, a position available to graduates of an Early Years Foundation degree. By 2007, 360 students had qualified as Senior Practitioners, but this role was ‘reconceptualised and replaced’ by the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) in the 2006 Childcare Act (Lloyd and Hallet 2010, 7-9). Early Years Professionals (EYPs) were described as ‘the future leaders ... [and] ‘the gold standard’ for professionals working with children under five’ (Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) 2008). However, it has been argued that from the outset the EYPS was a ‘flawed attempt at professionalising the early years workforce’ (Lloyd and Hallet 2010, 19) as the EYPs were not allowed to work in government maintained schools – owing to the fact that the status did not hold equivalency to qualified teacher status (QTS) (Roberts-Holmes 2013, 341) – a qualification required to teach in the state maintained sector in England. Indeed, rather than improving the overall professionalisation of the early years workforce, the lack of parity between EYPS and QTS meant that the divide between teachers and other early years practitioners was further exacerbated (Lloyd and Hallet 2010, 19).

All the stakeholders interviewed as part of this research looked back to 1997 as a pivotal moment when the early childhood workforce attracted unprecedented and intensified policy attention:

... a paradigm conversation about the quality of qualifications back in the 1990s. And then it fed into a bigger debate around quality ... The Labour Party coming to power in 1997 ... began to help that debate to grow (interviewee).

The Labour government’s pledge to invest in early childhood provision, and the ensuing professionalisation agenda as outlined in ‘Meeting the Childcare Challenge’ (DfE, 1998), required that early years trainers, employers and staff had to engage with demands made by politicians in a way not experienced previously. The government investment in early childhood education and care services was felt to come at a price though: according to one of

the stakeholders the accelerated targets for expansion ‘left a great strain on quality, with candidates rushed through on NVQ [National Vocational Qualification] programmes with less rigorous standards’.

4. What is quality?

The contested nature of the term ‘quality’ is based upon the premise that it is ‘neither neutral nor self-evident, but saturated with values and assumptions’ (Moss 2016, 10). Moss stresses that quality is a constructed concept, often used as a proxy for ‘good’ education, which is also ill-defined:

We can only evaluate early childhood education – make meaning of it and a judgement of value – by first deciding what we think is ‘good’ education, and deciding that depends on our answers to political questions, answers that will never be unanimously agreed (Moss 2016, 12).

To conceptualise what ‘good’ or ‘quality’ early childhood education might be necessitates asking ‘what and who should it be for?’ There is much debate about the purpose of early years provision, while the school-readiness agenda captured in policy discourse stresses the need to prepare young children for primary school there are numerous counter positions, many underpinned by philosophical conceptualisations of the child, that view childhood as more than simply preparation for adulthood. These counter arguments stress the distinction between early childhood education and care. For example, Trevarthan argues that early years institutions should encourage learning, but clearly differentiates this from ‘schooling’:

Preschool nurseries should encourage children to learn from adventurous play in a rich environment ... children too young to benefit from classroom schooling are eager participants in peer communities with their own meanings, arts and techniques (Trevarthan 2011, 175).

Yet it is evident that ‘school readiness’ is a key priority for Ofsted, as stressed in a report published in 2014. Ofsted’s conceptualisation of ‘school readiness’ is framed by ideas that young children must be ready to conform to the specific demands of a defined school routine and curriculum, rather than as a process of co-creating learning spaces and activities, and building relationships. 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 (see Jones et al. (2016) and Cannella et al. (2016) for further elaboration). These broader debates about ‘quality’ have a direct bearing upon the expectations of the early years workforce, the ways in which their performance will be assessed, and therefore the emphasis that is placed on certain qualifications and training over others (i.e. those that promote technical competence and delivery of prescribed outcomes over developing criticality and reflexivity).

The stakeholder interviews allowed for wide-ranging discussion about the correlation between staff qualifications and quality in early childhood education. Given the breadth of qualifications and statuses that have characterised the early years field for many years, there was a general view expressed by the interviewees that it was important to achieve greater clarity about the qualification pathways on offer and to establish the degree of parity between alternative routes; a new qualification route was described as having ‘created even more problems because there is no increase in status in the “graduate-ness” of it’ – in other words, it will result in holders of the qualification being employed ‘at a very different level of professionalism’. All of those interviewed suggested that the current early years training and qualification landscape was perhaps the most cluttered and confusing it had ever been. One interviewee related a story of encountering an applicant who ‘ended up with a degree that was on the DfE website, but that did not satisfy criteria for her to be a key person’

(interviewee) and so had to be offered a lower level position. The constant rate and pace of change to the range of qualifications available to the workforce was a cause of great concern and frustration. The diversity of qualifications, from many different providers, was described by one interviewee as a prompt for a debate around quality within the sector, in particular asking ‘how do some of the qualifications begin to align with quality?’

All of the stakeholders discussed one particular qualification: the NNEB Diploma in Nursery Nursing (Level 3), and how this has become widely revered in recent debates about what constitutes a ‘good quality’ early childhood qualification. Although there was not universal consensus on whether the NNEB should be hailed as ‘the gold standard’ of qualifications, aspects of the programme were felt to constitute rigour and to reflect a certain level of quality:

The NNEB was the option for people wanting to work in childcare as an alternative to teaching. It was a full-time course delivered over two years (with the Norland NNEB being the platinum route). NNEB required trainees to engage deeply with the practical application of theory, to experience a range of placements, undertake extensive observations and prepare detailed child case studies. It provided a thorough grounding for people wanting to work with young children (interviewee).

Despite this regard for the qualification, all the stakeholders acknowledged that the NNEB Diploma existed during a very different political and economic era when aspiring nursery nurses were able to pursue full-time programmes of study with full funding. With policy intensification came demands for greater efficiency in the delivery, assessment and award of qualifications.

The importance of staff qualifications in early years settings has been explored across the literature, however there is still a pre-occupation with forging a link between qualifications and the pursuit of a standardised ideal of ‘quality’: Hillman and Williams

argued that there was ‘a strong relationship between the level of staff qualifications and the quality of early years education and childcare’ (2015: 8); while the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al. 2004) and the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) project (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002) both found that ‘there was higher overall quality provision where there was evidence of strong leadership and a trained teacher acting and where a good proportion of staff were graduate and teacher qualified’ – making ‘a clear connection between highly qualified staff and high quality service for children and families’ (Roberts-Holmes 2013, 340-1). This presents a problem, as explored by Dahlberg et al. (2007) among others, in that the term quality, and the conception of a high quality service, has no universally defined or accepted meaning. In the face of such difficulties, approaches such as those previously employed by the OECD should be considered: their review of early childhood education and care suggested that better educated teachers with specialised training ‘are more effective in providing stimulating staff-child interactions’ and ‘qualified teachers are better able to engage children, elicit their ideas and monitor their progress’ (OECD 2011, 4). Rather than rely solely on ill-defined terminology the more specific focus on outcomes (e.g. eliciting ideas from children) clarifies the effect that better trained and qualified staff can have in practical terms. It should be noted that the OECD’s latest research proposition – the International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (OECD 2017) appears to have forgone such approaches in favour of a more prosaic attempt to ‘measure’ quality. In response to the DfE’s suggestion that England should participate in this study, a number of organisations from within the sector have expressed concerns, for example the ECSDN argued that ‘it is unclear how the proposed methods involved in the IELS study will achieve the overarching aims ... OECD should reconsider the methods selected for assessing the quality and impact of ECEC in different settings’ (2017).

The non-standardised definition of quality has led to something of a disconnect between government policy and the early years workforce, as will be further explored over the next sections. However, as can be seen in the discussion around the NNEB qualification above, there is some sense, from those involved directly in early childhood education, that perhaps there is a standard that qualifications can at least aspire to. This does not answer the question of what exactly quality is, arguably because such a question cannot be adequately answered – instead the concept must be critiqued, dismantled and problematized (see Dahlberg et al. 2007 and Moss 2016 amongst others), while recognising that its prevalence demands it be acknowledged as a deeply political and ethical issue.

5. The Nutbrown Review

Perhaps encouraged to act by the inherent problems of EYPS, the Coalition Government of 2010-2015 commissioned an independent review of early education and childcare qualifications in 2011, carried out by Professor Cathy Nutbrown and published by the DfE in 2012. The review was uncompromising in its recommendations and conclusions:

I am concerned that the current early years qualifications system is not systematically equipping practitioners with the knowledge, skills and understanding they need to give babies and young children high quality experiences ... A new long-term vision is needed for the early years workforce, with a reformed system of qualifications to help achieve this. In working towards this vision, a balance must be struck between supporting existing good practice and challenging the sector to ensure provision is high quality in all settings (Nutbrown 2012, 5).

Nutbrown recommended a sweeping series of reforms to the qualifications, training, and career development of the early years workforce, including increasing the number of qualified teachers with specialist knowledge of early years (particularly in leadership roles); making a Level 3 qualification the minimum for all practitioners working in early years;

ensuring that qualifications (at both Level 3 and Level 6) were rigorous and challenging; and instigating a renewed focus on professional development for all staff, supported by employers (Nutbrown 2012, 11-12). Perhaps of most interest to many early years professionals was the formal identification of disparities between primary teachers (i.e. those with QTS) and EYPs despite both being graduate positions, as Wild et al. summarise:

Staff with QTS, the highest qualification for those working with children aged 3–7 years, had a career structure and a regulated pay scale. However, those with Early Years Professional Status (EYPS), who had been trained to work with children aged 0–5 years, did not. They did not have similar status recognition to those with QTS because EYPS was not considered to be a qualification, nor – despite sometimes being suggested as equivalent – did EYPS entitle the holder to the same benefits of career and pay provided by QTS (Wild et al. 2015, 231).

The Nutbrown Review, along with an earlier independent review of the early years foundation stage (EYFS) – the Tickell Review (2011) – were embraced optimistically by the stakeholders, who actively engaged in the consultation exercises and sought to ensure that their concerns and suggestions were made known.

Following lengthy and thorough exchanges of opinion about how best to determine the ways in which ‘quality’ could be improved and the workforce supported to further professionalise, it became apparent that the view of stakeholders was that the government was primarily concerned with the most cost effective ways to expand provision; but as one interviewee bluntly stated ‘quality is not possible if it’s done on the cheap’. This view was shared by others who stressed that to raise the qualifications of the entire workforce would require sustained and thoughtful investment; quality by its very definition cannot be ‘affordable’; it takes dedicated commitment and investment from the state (Scandinavian countries were often cited as an example of such an approach) and a recognition of the depth

of knowledge and expertise required to work with young children and their families effectively.

The intention of the Nutbrown Review was good; we need to understand what drives good quality, but there is the expansion policy to contend with, and that forces people (childcare employers) to retreat to what they know but without a clue what all the different qualifications mean (interviewee).

One stakeholder who had directly contributed to the Nutbrown Review suggested that there was a strong argument to return to the NNEB National Diploma to address these issues of quality at Level 3. Subsequently, Professor Nutbrown invested considerable time and energy seeking to understand the strong attachment that many in the sector held to the NNEB National Diploma. As part of the review process the syllabus of NNEB was compared to existing Level 3 pathways on offer at the time. With its firm focus on birth to seven, grounding in theories of child development, and evidence of rigorous teaching and assessment, alongside diversity of experience (through several lengthy placements) it was deemed unrivalled by work-based Level 3 models (typically NVQs) where often assessors held the same level of qualification as the student, and the standard of provision was questionable. Therefore, the Nutbrown Review made the recommendation to introduce the Level 3, Early Years Educator (birth to seven) and to push for improvements to the quality of teaching and assessment at Level 3.

6. (In)equality?

The Government's response to the Nutbrown Review was published in a paper entitled 'More Great Childcare' (DfE 2013). However, it rejected the majority of the proposed changes which vexed many: 'equally frustrating for the early childhood sector was the Government's outright rejection of most of the proposals in a review it had itself commissioned' (Lloyd 2015, 149); one interviewee was particularly disappointed by this outcome:

Only nine recommendations even being considered, I think that that's another, that says it all doesn't it? Of all the recommendations, just for nine to be considered, not even to be actioned, but to be considered (interviewee).

Other stakeholders argued that the response had been driven by a pre-conceived 'political agenda' (without really paying heed to the independent review) and criticised the generic, overarching approach of the paper:

Again, it's that concern around the 'More Great Childcare', even the title itself is, well what's wrong with the childcare now? So it's not an issue, I don't think there was an issue with childcare, there's an issue with pay terms and conditions and qualifications (interviewee).

The DfE's response introduced two new qualification statuses: Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) to replace EYPS; and the Early Years Educator (EYE) role (a new Level 3 qualification). The DfE stated that 'it is our aspiration that over time, group childcare will increasingly be delivered by Early Years Teachers and Early Years Educators ... we hope parents will come to recognise these titles as benchmarks of quality' (DfE 2013, 7). The sector's response to the 'More Great Childcare' paper was lukewarm at best, indeed Professor Nutbrown herself criticised the outcome: 'most of my recommendations had, in effect, been rejected' (Nutbrown 2013, 3). Chief amongst the concerns was the disparity between the early years qualifications and QTS, as Nutbrown remarked: 'because my recommendation on QTS was not accepted, the hoped for parity with primary and secondary school teachers will not be realised' (Nutbrown 2013, 7). While the new EYT role carried the same entry requirements as teachers in schools it 'carries neither Qualified Teacher Status nor the same pay as school teachers' (Hillman & Williams 2015, 19) – making it a less attractive option for prospective students: 'EYTs are not the graduate-led early childhood workforce with the

parity and status of other qualified teachers within the education sector, as envisioned by those campaigning for an EYP or pedagogue' (Wild et al. 2015, 242).

The interviewees were highly critical of the problems inherent in EYTS, particularly focusing on its lack of parity with QTS. One described the issue as a 'disaster' for those who had pursued both the EYPS and EYTS routes who are now unable 'to teach anywhere else', in contrast to educators with QTS who 'can come in to teach in their setting and be treated with a different status even if they may have less experience' (interviewee). All of those interviewed mentioned the relative unfairness of this, emphasising that the portability of QTS could lead to people with no training in early years finding work in early years settings despite having 'no idea how to work with those children' (interviewee). Ultimately, this disparity would lead to those with EYTS being 'employed at a very different level of professionalism, of professionalism and of status' (interviewee).

Despite the recent level of reform there is still considerable variation across the early years sector, specifically between school-based settings and PVI (private, voluntary, independent) settings. In particular, PVIs are much less likely to have staff with any qualifications owing to the regulations they operate under. Furthermore, 'a much higher proportion of staff in the maintained sector is qualified to Level 6 (degree level) or above' – i.e. of those that do have qualifications, staff in maintained schools are likely to be qualified to a higher level (Hillman & Williams 2015 27-8). This is at odds with the argument that the new qualifications introduced by the Government were intended 'to move decisively away from the idea that teaching young children is somehow less important or inferior to teaching school age children' (National College for Teaching & Leadership 2013, 6). Nonetheless, Early Years Teachers do work across the maintained as well as PVI sectors, 'though they still lack the pay and conditions of those with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and cannot be paid

as qualified teachers in the majority of maintained settings, which (as Nutbrown has argued) continues to affect their professional status' (Barron 2016, 327).

The House of Lords Select Committee on Affordable Childcare found that 'provision in the maintained sector is correspondingly found to be of higher quality on average than that in the PVI sector' (Select Committee on Affordable Childcare 2015, 10). Not all literature supports the view that a better qualified workforce will automatically lead to better quality provision: Sims-Schouten and Stittrich-Lyons (2014) criticised the Government's persistent emphasis on the links 'between qualifications for the early years workforce and high-quality early years care and education'; their research with trainee early years practitioners found that participants were often 'very defensive in their talk of their abilities when it comes to working with children' which they attributed to 'the Government's continued focus on their lack of skill and motivation prior to doing the course' (Sims-Schouten and Stittrich-Lyons 2014, 51). However, in general the link does seem to be supported by a weight of evidence (see OECD 2011).

Both the Nutbrown review and the 'More Great Childcare' paper drew connections between quality and qualifications; however, they proposed differing outcomes in response. The Nutbrown Review 'stresses the importance of training the early years workforce in high-quality settings ... supported by highly qualified staff' while the Government response emphasised that a 'high quality' workforce would free 'high quality' providers to offer a greater number of places in settings, thus allowing a market solution to the increased need for available early childhood provision' (Wild et al. 2015, 241). In contrast to the schools sector in England (which has seen a gradual shift towards marketization in recent years, see Ball 2013) the early years sector has been the subject of marketization for many years – a majority of two and three year-olds are educated in PVI settings (Select Committee on Affordable Childcare 2015, 42) – and as such this approach from the government should not be seen as

out of character, despite being at odds with the views of the stakeholders interviewed: ‘I was very frustrated by the competition that the situation was breeding because we know that collaboration creates greater impact and benefits for children’; ‘we shouldn’t be competing’ (interviewees).

Wild et al. go on to make the comparison that whereas Nutbrown focused on ‘quality provision being an investment in the child’s future well-being’, the ‘More Great Childcare’ report was instead concerned with ‘economic investment’ (2015, 241) and therefore the presumed returns on that investment which is measured in terms of leaner child adult ratios, school readiness and academic performance of our youngest children.

7. Educational Excellence Everywhere

Under the Conservative Government of 2015-onwards the early years policy landscape continued to change: in 2016 the DfE launched a white paper entitled ‘Educational Excellence Everywhere.’ This document (setting out the broad vision of education in England) made few references to early childhood education, however it did outline changes to QTS and the minister with responsibility for early years at the time it was published (Sam Gyimah) noted the possible impact that this might have:

The schools white paper includes proposals for the reform of QTS and this provides exciting avenues for us to explore and we will do so. But we must also not lose sight of the fact that the majority of early years teachers work in the PVI sector where QTS is not required, but where specialist graduates can support improved quality (Gyimah, 2016).

Perhaps hinting at the resolution to the ‘huge debate about what is the quality of a teaching degree and what is the quality of an early years degree ... are they equitable?’ (interviewee).

However, it should be noted that there has been a change of both Education Secretary (Justine Greening replacing Nicky Morgan) and the minister with early years responsibility

(Caroline Dinenage replacing Sam Gyimah) since the publication of this document and as such there is still a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the future direction of education policy more widely, and early years policy specifically.

The early years workforce and its advocates did not, in general, meet these recent policy changes with much enthusiasm. In April 2016 CACHE (the Council for Awards in Care, Health and Education), a body delivering qualifications across the care and education sector, launched a campaign: ‘Save our Early Years’ which was backed by, amongst others, the Preschool Learning Alliance and PACEY (the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years) (Crown 2016). The campaign was directly targeted at the Government’s requirement that all Level 3 EYEs had at least a Grade C in GCSE English and maths (and that in order for staff to count in staff-child ratios they must have at least this Level 3 qualification). CACHE claimed that this was a particularly damaging move for apprentices (evidenced with large drops in the number of apprentices starting Level 3 courses) and would lead to a workforce primarily comprised of staff trained only to Level 2 (Crown 2016). In addition, the lack of parity between EYTS and QTS has been widely criticised (including by Professor Nutbrown), and trainees were encouraged to write to their MPs in protest: a template letter distributed amongst trainee groups stating that ‘we believe that as long as the qualification does not result in achieving QTS then we will never be seen as the equal of qualified teachers’ (Unwin, 2016).

In 2016 the education trade newspaper ‘Schools Week’ reported that the implications of recent changes to the early years sector have had very real, and worrying consequences:

But Schools Week has been told some university courses offering training for Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) are facing closure due to low numbers ... Deborah Lawson, general secretary of Voice the union, told Schools Week the low numbers

mean ‘the sector is heading towards a recruitment crisis equal to that which we are experiencing in teaching’ (Scott 2016).

As one of the stakeholders remarked, ‘who would want to do EYT [qualification] rather than a PGCE [Post-Graduate Certificate in Education] which is a similar length of time, to get less recognition?’

In early 2017 a new early years workforce strategy was launched by Caroline Dineage (DfE 2017b). Perhaps signalling a shift in policy terms, the strategy removed requirements around English and maths qualifications for Level 3 educators – seen as something of a victory for the recognition of functional skills: CACHE ‘celebrated’ the impact of their campaign (CACHE 2017). It remains too soon for the full changes in this strategy to be felt or properly dissected.

8. Discussion

As this paper has shown, there has been considerable upheaval in the early years sector in recent years, prompted by a range of reviews, reports and policy papers which have altered the qualifications and training pathways within England. These changes have often been ideologically driven by the pursuit of ‘quality’: aspiring to deliver a high quality provision across the sector; to ensure that, once qualified, staff meet a certain threshold of quality; and to quality assure education and care services.

However, the response from those working in the sector to these changes – providers, trainers and early years staff – has not been entirely welcoming (Osgood et al. 2017). Consistently changing the qualifications necessary or desirable to work within early childhood education has resulted in a complex system for settings, employers, staff and prospective trainees to negotiate. Furthermore, key weaknesses in this system, such as the lack of parity for early years qualifications with QTS means that the needs and expectations of stakeholders are not always being met. The key concerns of these stakeholders – although

at times represented through independent reviews such as the Nutbrown Review – do not seem to have been translated into effective policy action. Despite welcoming key tenets of the Government’s approach, such as a greater drive towards the professionalisation of the workforce, the overarching feeling amongst stakeholders is one of missed opportunities and a political agenda which is largely removed from their concerns. This disconnect between the sector and policymakers has led to issues such as the recruitment difficulties which some providers have begun to identify. Notably there has been a drop in the number of Level 3 qualified staff from 83 percent to 75 percent since 2015; while staff turnover is also higher than in previous years (NDNA 2016). Ironically, the Government’s blinkered focus on a pursuit of quality, at times to the detriment of its relationship with stakeholders, might actually harm the standards that they are trying to drive up.

Outside of England similar issues can be identified. The pursuit of quality in early childhood education is prevalent across many jurisdictions: governments, such as those of the United States and New Zealand, use the term in their policy literature (see US Department of Education 2016; and Education Review Office 2010); as do international bodies or forums such as UNESCO (2004) and the OECD (2012). A report by Cambridge University for WISE suggested that ‘what is understood by high quality is often not well defined’ in an international context (Whitebread et al. 2015, 6). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, future research might take as a starting point the role that stakeholders play internationally in terms of influencing early years policy and whether there are similar gaps between the ideological pursuits of policymakers and the concerns of these stakeholders.

This study of early childhood education in England has shown that policy which pursues an ill-defined concept such as quality should not be used as a distraction or an excuse to pursue specific ideological ambitions (such as the continued marketization of the sector) without challenge. The ambition for policymakers globally should be to maintain and

encourage open dialogue about both outcomes and provision in the early years; by rigidly pursuing notions of quality they are in danger of instrumentalist policy which, paradoxically, can actually be detrimental.

9. Conclusions

By focusing on the early years sector in England, this paper has explicated how policymakers and other stakeholders can often clash over the seemingly universal pursuit of quality. It has concentrated chiefly on the qualifications pathways that can be pursued by early years workers and, by documenting and deconstructing the policy discourse that has led to changes over the last 10-20 years in this area, explored how the landscape has altered and the impact of these policy changes has been felt by practitioners and settings.

The research on which this paper has been based was a relatively small-scale project, in particular featuring in-depth interviews with a sample of stakeholders. These stakeholders represented a wealth of experience and knowledge, and were drawn from differing backgrounds and institutions. The aim of the paper was to identify issues that will have resonance and can inform a much needed continuation of debates about what quality might mean, how it is framed and with what effects. By combining the views of these stakeholders with academic, grey literature, and media sources, it has been possible to present a broad overview of the sector which should act as a stepping-off point for future research and discussion.

Ultimately, ideological policymaking, led by the pursuit of an idealised and ill-defined notion of quality, disregards the views and opinions of those actually working in the sector at its peril.

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