



# Mapping the Landscape: practitioners views on the Early Years Foundation Stage

Authors: Victoria Bamsey, Jan Georgeson, Amy Healy and Breandán Ó Caoimh

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**Early Education**

The British Association for Early Childhood Education

54 Clarendon Road, Watford WD17 1DU

Telephone: 01923 438995

Email: [office@early-education.org.uk](mailto:office@early-education.org.uk)

Website [www.early-education.org.uk](http://www.early-education.org.uk)

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## Foreword

### Background to the Report: Proposed Changes to the EYFS

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) sets standards for the learning, development and care of children from birth to 5 years old. All schools and Ofsted-registered early years providers must follow the EYFS, including childminders, preschools, nurseries and school reception classes. The EYFS framework gives all professionals a set of common principles and commitments to deliver quality early education and childcare experiences to all children. Following an independent review of EYFS evidence and practice for the DfE in 2011 (the Tickell Report, 2011), the statutory framework was revised in 2012 to its current format, with only minor tweaks being made in subsequent years.

In July 2018, the DfE published what they presented as a review of the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) but which re-wrote other aspects of the EYFS Statutory Framework, notably the Educational Programmes for each Area of Learning. Many in the early years sector were surprised that such an extensive process of change had been embarked upon with very little engagement with sector representatives and experts.

The DfE claimed a mandate to review the ELGs and the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile based on the Primary Assessment Consultation (PAC) launched in March 2017 – although they subsequently acknowledged this was contentious, given the understandable lack of input from the early years sector to that consultation. The PAC sought views about various aspects of primary assessment, including whether to introduce a baseline assessment measure in reception for primary school accountability<sup>1</sup> and how the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) could be improved to better assess child development and school readiness at age 5. The majority of PAC respondents supported the commitment to retain the EYFSP but wanted to see key improvements made.

Neither the scope of the PAC nor the responses to it provided a mandate to review the EYFS as a whole. The government response published on 14th September 2017 set out key proposals to refine the descriptors underpinning the ELGs. This placed a particular focus on communication and language, maths and literacy, and ensuring better alignment with the year 1 curriculum. There was also an intention to look at options for reducing workload through improving the guidance to support the EYFSP and the moderation process. This commitment led to a set of draft ELGs being published in 2018 for a pilot prior to a public consultation. The DfE subsequently also began a process of redrafting the non-statutory guidance for the EYFS.

The EYFS was last extensively revised in 2011 so a further review is timely. However, the DfE's decision to start by reviewing the end of the phase assessment before reviewing the curriculum, rather than vice versa, is in tension with normal expectations regarding the process of curriculum and assessment design. Moreover, while the

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<sup>1</sup> As a follow up to the PAC, the government is intending to make reception baseline assessment statutory for all schools beginning in 2020, with the stated aim in due course of removing the statutory tests at the end of Year 2. However, the baseline assessment at the start of reception is part of the system of primary school accountability, and not linked to the delivery of the EYFS or the statutory assessment at the end of reception. There is therefore a potential disconnect between two key aspects of policy impacting on the EYFS as a whole, and specifically on the reception year.

sector is strongly in support of the government's stated intentions to reduce workload and improve children's language and communication skills, especially among the most disadvantaged children, there was a strong sense that these aims were put at risk by the poorly re-drafted Statutory Framework. It was felt by some in the sector this showed a lack of understanding of how the framework is used by practitioners, and of the meaning and significance of how the current version was carefully constructed and written.

### **The Sector's Response: Working Together in Coalition**

In response to this situation, a group of early years sector bodies have worked together to communicate their concerns to ministers and ensure that any changes to the EYFS benefit as fully as possible from the knowledge and expertise within the sector. This will ensure the EYFS remains a world-leading and well-respected framework and fit for purpose for daily use by early years practitioners and teachers. In keeping with the spirit of co-production by which the original EYFS was developed, a coalition was formed of organisations representing all parts of the early years sector, comprising Early Education, Early Childhood Forum (ECF), Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network (ECSDN), Early Years Alliance, Keeping Early Years Unique (KEYU), Montessori St Nicholas, National Children's Bureau (NCB), National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA), Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY), Sector Endorsed Foundation Degrees in the Early Years (SEFDEY), TACTYC: the Association for Professional Development in the Early Years, the British Early Childhood Education Research Association (BECERA) and the British Association for Educational Research (BERA). Other bodies with observer status included unions representing early years interests from the teaching workforce and school leadership (NAHT, ASCL, NEU, NASUWT) and the Teaching Schools Council.

The coalition welcomed a subsequent invitation from DfE for Early Education to be included on its EYFS Advisory Panel, and for opportunities for ongoing discussions between officials and members of the coalition. The coalition is keen to support the DfE's review of the EYFS. Ongoing dialogue will ensure officials and ministers are fully aware of the issues involved in revising the EYFS and that they make best use of the sector's freely offered expertise to ensure any such revisions achieve their intended aims, and are clear, workable and in the best interests of children.

### **The Rationale for the Research**

The coalition noted that much of the success of the current EYFS rested on two factors. First, that it was firmly based on research evidence and second, that it had been drawn up, and later reviewed, through a process of co-production with the sector which ensured widespread buy-in from practitioners. Coalition members regretted that government appeared not to be following a similar model with the current review. They determined to take a lead on ensuring a review of recent evidence was available to government and the sector, and to ensure that the views of practitioners were involved wherever possible in the process of reviewing the EYFS. In order to achieve this, the coalition commissioned two pieces of research:

- **A literature review** – To ensure that any changes could be tested against currently available research evidence, the coalition established a sub-group to lead on the commissioning of a research review. This was to look at the evidence published since the Evangelou et al (2009) review which had provided the bedrock for the Tickell Review.

- **A practitioner survey** – To give practitioners a voice in the process, the coalition also commissioned a survey of practitioners' views of the current EYFS which received over 3000 responses.

The literature review has been published as *Getting it right in the Early Years Foundation Stage: a review of the evidence* by Chris Pascal, Tony Bertram, Liz Rouse of the Centre for Research in Early Childhood (available to download at [https://www.early-education.org.uk/getting\\_it\\_right\\_in\\_the\\_eyfs](https://www.early-education.org.uk/getting_it_right_in_the_eyfs)). The current document analyses the findings from the practitioner survey.

### **Research brief**

The research brief was set by a sub-group of the coalition. The aim was for the survey to focus on what practitioners thought worked well in the current EYFS and what could be improved; what helped close the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, and what barriers hindered closing the gap.

### **The survey findings and next steps**

The members of the coalition welcome the findings of this research. The success of the EYFS to date is without doubt because it was co-produced with the sector. The effectiveness of any revised version will be equally dependent on connecting with the day to day realities of all those delivering the EYFS.

We are enormously grateful to all those who took the time to respond to our survey. That over 3000 people responded to the survey shows how much the sector is invested in getting the changes right.

The results of this survey provides a much more extensive evidence basis for understanding the sector's views on the proposed changes than the government's pilot with only 52 teachers in 24 schools. While the latter provided some useful evidence, it cannot be taken as representative of the wider views of the sector.

It is vital that the government listen to all parts of the sector – not just reception teachers and school leaders – to understand the impact of the proposed changes on all early years provision in England. The government's formal consultation and this survey are the only opportunities which frontline staff have had to comment on the proposals. We hope government will listen to what they are saying.

#### **The coalition:**

*Early Education*

*Early Childhood Forum (ECF)*

*Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network (ECSDN)*

*Early Years Alliance*

*Keeping Early Years Unique (KEYU)*

*Montessori St Nicholas*

*National Children's Bureau (NCB)*

*National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA)*

*Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY)*

*Sector Endorsed Foundation Degrees in the Early Years (SEFDEY)*

*TACTYC: the Association for Professional Development in the Early Years*

*British Early Childhood Education Research Association (BECERA)*

*British Education Research Association (BERA)*

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- Jan Georgeson and Victoria Bamsey for leading on the design and analysis of the survey.
- The members of the practitioner survey sub-group:
  - Ken Jones, National Education Union
  - Susanna Kalitowski, Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years
  - Beatrice Merrick, Early Education
  - Carolyn Silberfeld, Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network
  - Jan Georgeson, TACTYC: the Association for Professional Development in the Early Years.

## Executive Summary

The Department for Education's key objectives of reducing practitioner workload and improving outcomes for children has prompted proposals for Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) reforms set against a background for improving social mobility. These reforms have focused on revising the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) to make them clearer and to strengthen language, literacy and mathematics. Further support is also planned through updating Development Matters (Early Education, 2012) into "curriculum guidance" (Department for Education, 2019, p8) in the hope of making stronger links to the national curriculum, reducing workload and improving outcomes.

The Early Years Coalition conducted a national survey of practitioners' views about the EYFS. Survey responses were received from 3,270 individuals from across the early years sector and overall there was a positive view of the current EYFS. Key messages from the survey include:

- a general satisfaction with the current EYFS to promote children's learning and development;
- the inseparability of the EYFS, Development Matters and the Early Learning Goals
- concerns that a chronic lack of resources has led to insufficient support for
  - working with parents
  - inter-professional working
  - opportunities for professional development.

Respondents' main criticisms of the EYFS are concerned with the misuse of guidance documents as "checklists", rather than any concerns about the statutory framework itself.

Areas for development within the sector relate to increased resources and professional development. Feedback from the survey suggests that improved opportunities for professional development across the sector would bring a greater depth of understanding of early years pedagogy. This in turn will foster confidence in early years practice rather than a misplaced over-reliance on paperwork used to evidence such practice.

What has become clear has been the importance of the close relationship between the EYFS Statutory Framework and the guidance documents that have been developed to support practice. This in turn means that one document cannot be changed without addressing the supporting documents which appear to be heavily used by the sector.

Early years practice relates not just to working directly with children but with families and other professionals. Feedback from those responding to this survey indicates that, to improve outcomes and support social mobility, there is a need for improved funding and resources to enable practitioners to engage with this wider community of practice. Changes to the ELGs will not drive improvement for children's outcomes or increase social mobility, as it is not the EYFS document itself that drives this but the home learning environment, adequacy of funding and the expertise of early years practitioners.

# 1. Introduction

Part of the government's 2017 manifesto commitment was to strengthen literacy and numeracy in the early years (Conservative party, 2017); in addition the 2017 Primary Assessment Consultation called for clearer Early Learning Goals (ELGs), alignment with Key Stage One, and a social mobility agenda to reduce the proportion of disadvantaged children not achieving across the ELGs in communication, language and literacy (Department for Education, 2019).

In June 2018 the Department for Education (DfE) announced that they would be working on reforms to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) with two key objectives of "reducing teacher workload and improving outcomes – particularly in language, literacy and maths" (Department for Education, 2018, p2). The reforms include revisions to the Early Learning Goals with a focus on language, literacy and mathematics, and proposals for streamlining assessment guidance in order to reduce workload.

As the Department for Education works on changes to the EYFS, a coalition of early years organisations have come together to ensure a strong and unified voice from the sector is heard during this process (see Foreword). Coalition representations have already been made to Department for Education to ensure that any future changes to the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) and the EYFS Statutory Framework are informed by up-to-date research evidence that reflects best practice from across the sector.

In addition, an online survey was devised by members of the coalition and distributed by coalition partners in Spring 2019 to early years practitioners, leaders and managers. This survey was aimed at providing those working in the sector with an opportunity to share their views on the EYFS in its current form and asking them what they would like to see changed. A total of 3,270 responses were received and our analysis of 2,998 complete responses focuses here on the government's principal aims in reforming the EYFS, notably improving outcomes and improving social mobility and decreasing workload.

This report considers survey responses with particular regard to the DfE's objectives in changing the EYFS and ELGs, where appropriate comparing respondents in different kinds of provision with different roles and different levels of experience.

## 2. Respondent Profile

A total of 3,270 responses were received representing a wide range of settings as shown below:

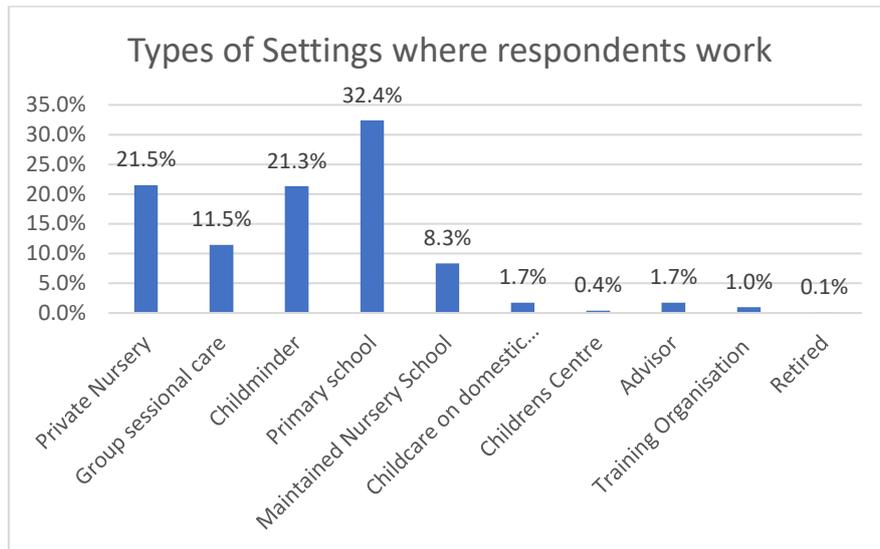


Figure 1: reported type of setting: Note: 71 respondents worked in more than one setting

The majority of respondents (97%) worked in settings with direct involvement with children; the remaining 3% of respondents worked as advisors, trainers or assessors or had retired.

Looking at the range of respondents' workplaces, 971 (32%) of the respondents were from primary school settings; the responses of this group are of particular interest when considered in light of the government's focus on improving links between the EYFS and the National Curriculum.

Within these settings respondents worked in a variety of roles as indicated below:

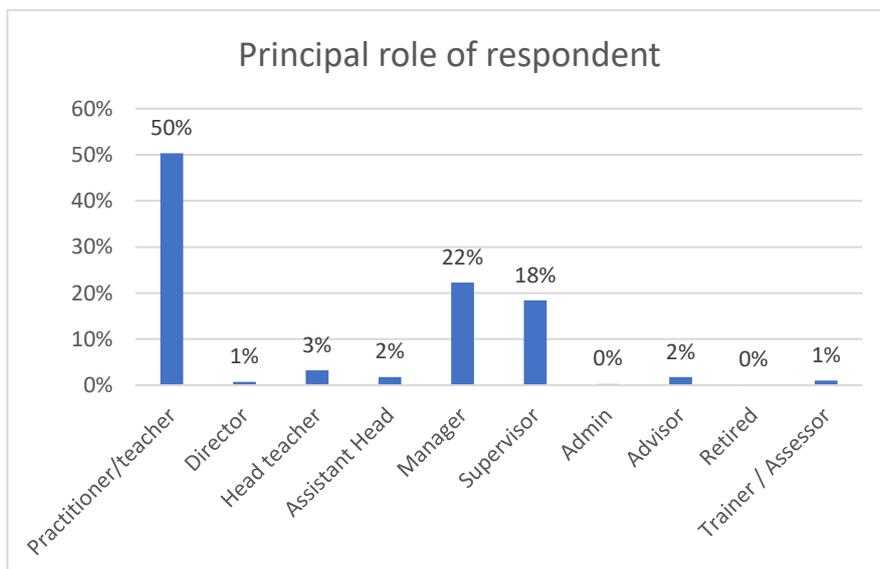


Figure 2: Role of respondent. Note 359 respondents reported more than one role in their setting(s)

From Figure 2 we see that 2,083 (69%) of the respondents worked directly with children, with 852 (28%) in a managerial role and 95 (3%) in other roles such as administration, advisor or trainer, or had retired. This is important when we consider that it will be the practitioners working directly with children that will be implementing the revised EYFS and associated curriculum and assessment guidance.

Seventy-two per cent of respondents had worked with children under five years of age for more than ten years. This probably reflects characteristics of members of the workforce who are interested in completing surveys and cannot be assumed to represent the composition of the early years workforce as a whole. This should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings.

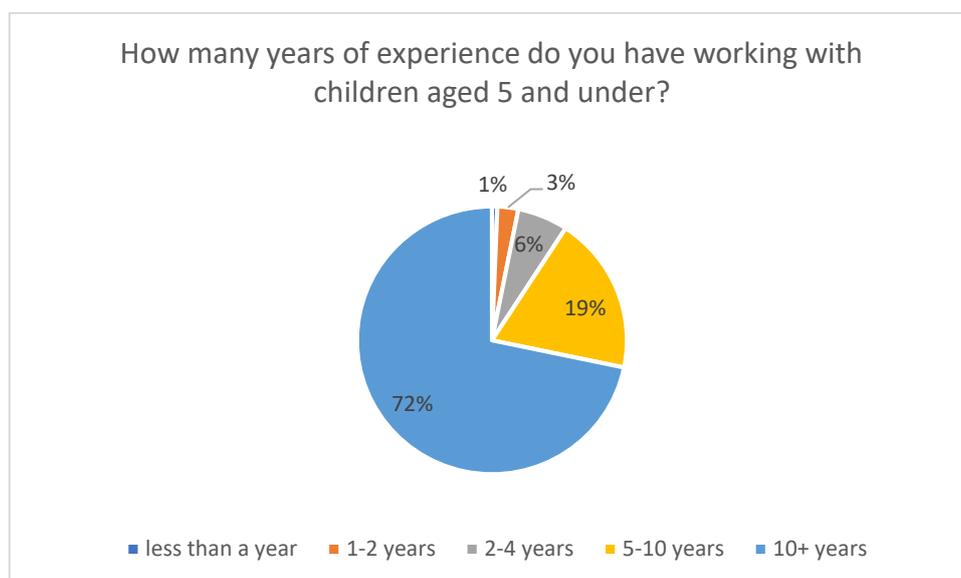


Figure 3: Years of experience of respondents

## Job Role

As already stated half of respondents (50%) describe themselves as practitioners, which means they work directly with children in a range of settings. In addition, those described as supervisors (18%) have been interpreted as supervising other staff but also working directly with children.

Respondents with a more managerial role and so seen as not working directly with children include directors, head teachers, and advisors or trainers; these represent 7% of respondents.

Other job roles cited include managers and assistant head teachers. These are seen as respondents with a managerial role who also work with children and represent 24% of respondents.

The graph below gives an indication of how job roles are spread across setting types. The majority of directors can be found in private nurseries and deputy heads are in schools. Practitioners are not surprisingly spread across a variety of setting types, as are managers and supervisors.

Half of the head teachers taking part in the survey are from Maintained Nursery Schools.

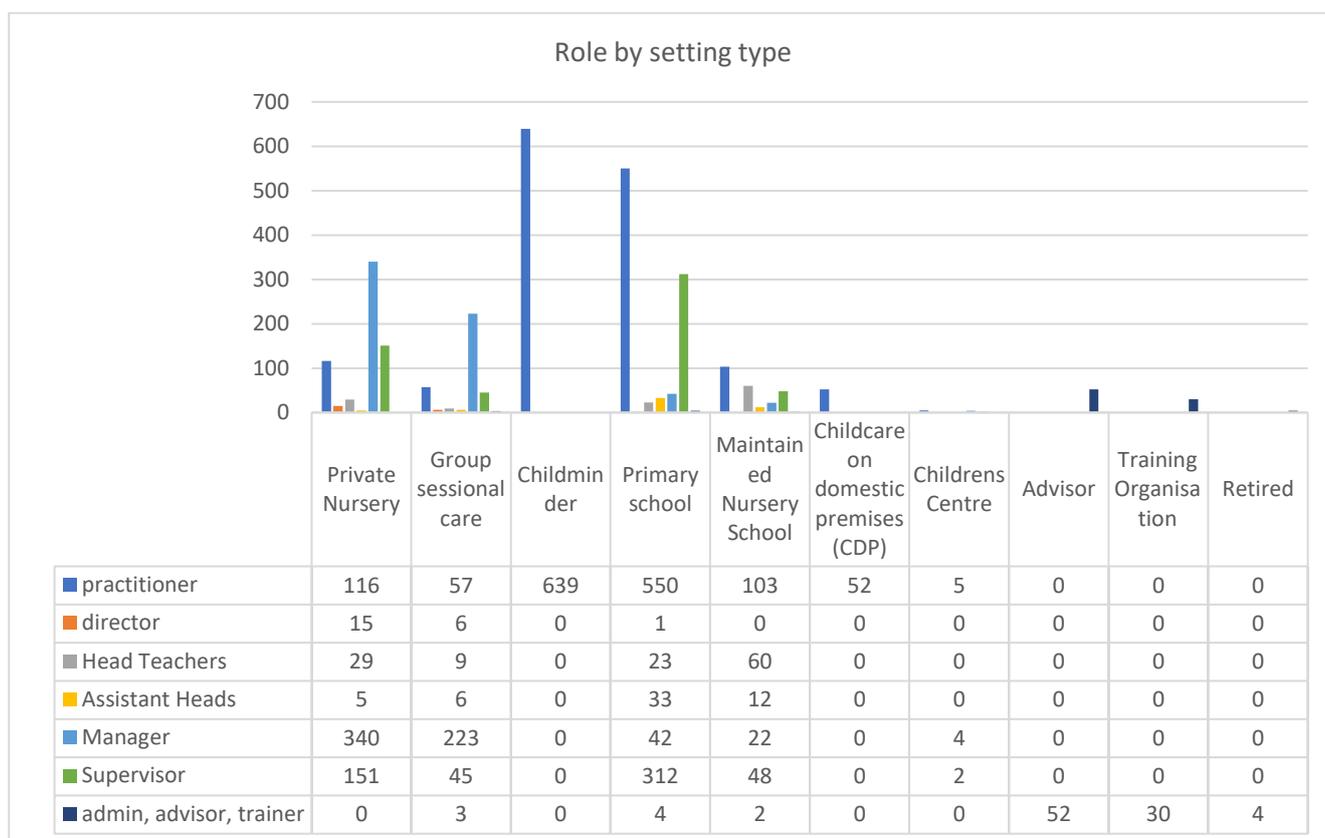


Figure 4: Role by setting type

## Experience

As already indicated, the majority of respondents (72%) have worked in the early years sector for more than ten years. This means that the responses received are weighted heavily towards those with more experience; only 19 respondents had worked in the sector for less than one year.

When respondents are grouped by experience and role, movement into more senior positions with length of service in the sector can be seen, with the more experienced respondents taking on more managerial positions.

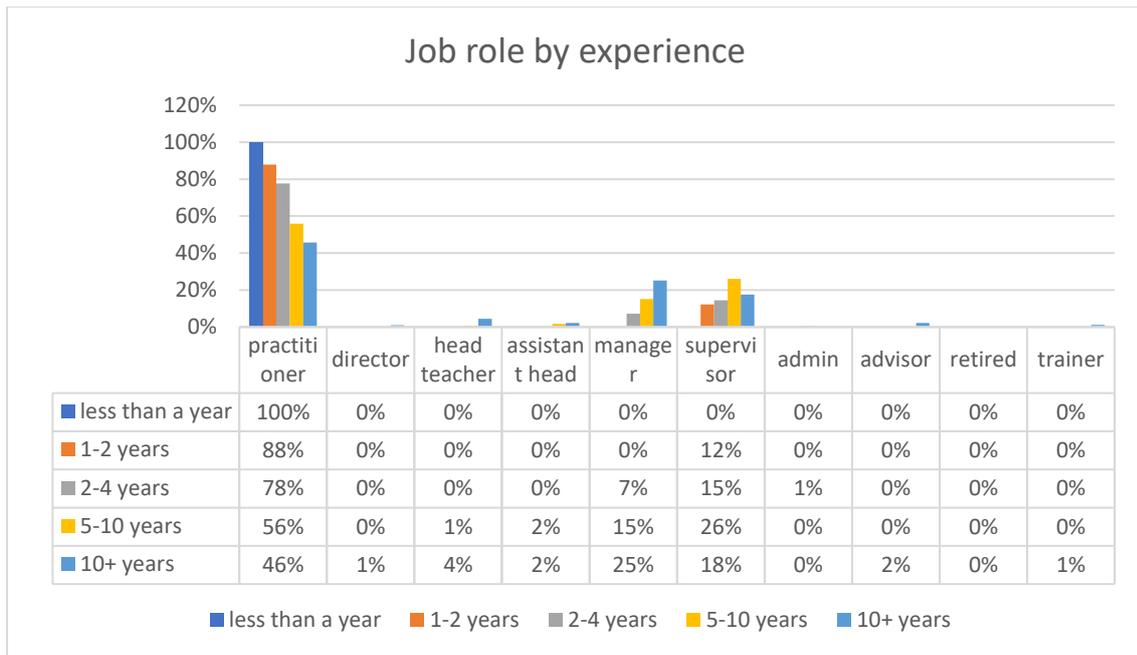


Figure 5: Job role by experience

### 3. Satisfaction with the EYFS

When asked how well the current EYFS supports children's development across the seven areas of learning, respondents were overwhelmingly positive about how well it supports the Prime Areas of Development (personal social and emotional development; communication and language; physical development); over 80% of respondents judged that children's development was well supported or very well supported in these areas by the current EYFS. Sixty per cent of respondents judged that children's development was well or very well supported within the specific areas of learning (literacy; mathematics; understanding of the world; expressive art and design). Comments reflected this satisfaction:

*It is now embedded and working really well. Teachers and early years staff know what is expected for children within each of the age bands.... (Practitioner: Maintained Nursery School: experienced)*

However, this enthusiasm for the EYFS was set amidst deep-seated concerns for the context in which the EYFS is operating:

*.... Funding in the EYFS has been rubbish over the last 5 years, particularly in deprived areas. Parents often need as much support as their children in knowing what to expect and how to help them. The closure of many children's centres had negated this. Primary schools are result driven - awful. No wonder there are so many screwed up children and teachers. Where has all the fun gone?!! (Practitioner: Maintained Nursery School: experienced)*

Respondents' comments echo the four guiding principles of the EYFS, which have survived its various iterations, namely that every child is a **unique child**; learning is promoted through **positive relationships** and **enabling environments**, and that **children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates** (DFE, 2017 p6).

*The EYFS gives a principled approach to delivering knowledge, skills and experiences that enable children to make the most of starting school. (Consultant)*

However, comments suggest that experienced members of the sector feel that currently these principles are not fully endorsed across the Early Years landscape:

*The EYFS is moving away from the Unique child (retired practitioner).*

*However the EYFS framework is not necessarily reflected in the Ofsted framework and so consequently SLT sometimes put undue pressure on YN and YR teachers to create a more structured and formal approach to teaching that is more reflective of the National Curriculum rather than the EYFS (Consultant)*

Among the respondents with 10+ years' experience, there were more individuals who were somewhat less positive about the EYFS, in comparison with practitioners who are new to the sector; 77% of the more experienced practitioners felt that the EYFS meets children's needs across all areas of development on average well or very well, whereas 86% of the 19 new practitioners felt that EYFS meets children's needs across all areas of development.

## EYFS and Development Matters

Comments from respondents throughout the survey confirm the inter-relationship between the EYFS Statutory Framework (Department for Education, 2017) and Development Matters (Early Education, 2012), to the extent that for many respondents Development Matters and the EYFS appear to be inseparable and the terms were used interchangeably. Those who have been in the profession some time are likely to have used previous versions of Early Years frameworks (Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (CGFS) 2000; Early Years Foundation Stage 2007) which combined statutory information with practice guidance; this included a breakdown of what practitioners might expect children to be doing in different areas of learning as they develop, designed to help practitioners plan provision. In a sector where many learn their profession while working rather than studying for qualifications before taking up work, this guidance can be very supportive.

Development Matters (and its predecessor, Stepping Stones, in the CGFS) were not intended as checklists to track children's progress but as sources of guidance for practitioners to identify ways to support children's development. This is recognised in respondents' comments; when specifically asked to comment about Development Matters, 747 respondents offered their opinions and the majority of these were positive with respect to the guidance it offered:

*Development Matters is an incredible tool, supporting practitioners to know 'how' and 'what' to do to support children. (Manager: private nursery: 5-10 years' experience)*

*A good developmentally appropriate guide as to what skills children are likely to develop and when - ages and stages. (Teacher: primary school: 10+ years' experience)*

*A very useful framework for assessing observations, particularly the 2012 version with examples of positive relationships and enabling environments good practice. (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

*Development Matters is essential for an in-depth understanding of early child development and really useful in working out progression. (Teacher: primary school: 5-10 years' experience)*

*I believe that development matters explains well how to get the best for children. It works. Inexperienced staff learn how to follow best practice. Please don't change it. (Supervisor: independent school: 10+ years' experience)*

However, there were frequent comments attesting to the subsequent recruitment of Development Matters into a means of evidencing progress and attainment for external regulatory gaze. Previous versions of Ofsted's Inspection Framework have been interpreted as placing emphasis on the collection and analysis of data, and areas of critique of Development Matters from our respondents focused principally on its use as an assessment tick list by some settings and some practitioners. Around ten per cent of comments across the full range of respondents referred disapprovingly to the use of tick box or check list.

*It is not a tick list but many mistakenly use it as such, limiting children's learning (Manager: Group sessional care: 10+ years' experience)*

*It is used as a tick list by most, despite the comment on every page that it should not be, and this leads to pointless and inaccurate assessments from birth to five (Advisor: Local Authority: 10+ years' experience)*

*It can easily be misused as a tick list especially with the introduction of online learning journeys. (Manager: Academy nursery: 10+ years' experience)*

*Sadly, it is used as a tick list rather than a document to support practitioners (Supervisor: Primary school: 10+ years' experience)*

It will be interesting to see how Ofsted's new Education Inspection framework with less focus on data and more on curriculum (Harford, 2019) affects the reliance on checklist/tick box approach to assessment.

Respondents commented on the usefulness or otherwise of various aspects of Development Matters. Perhaps connected with its increasing use as a checklist, some respondents would prefer more clarity favouring "objective" over "vague" statements that are easier to interpret – and easier to measure:

*I would like the way it is written to be clearer and for some recognised stages of learning i.e. colours to be included as well as more school readiness stages. (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

*It needs to be more objective and less open to interpretation. If the statements were more like those in the style of a Portage development checklist e.g. can thread 4 beads, can say 10 words, can complete a 24 piece puzzle, there would be less conjecture and parents would understand what their child is capable of too. (Teacher: Maintained Nursery School: 10+ years' experience)*

Other respondents made specific comments about the inappropriateness of the age bands:

*A lot of the development matters are not appropriate for a lot of young children and not in the correct age band. (Manager; Group sessional care: 10+ years' experience)*

*Better differentiation in the Literacy and Writing bands as statements are not applicable to most children in the age band for 40-60 (Practitioner: Group sessional care: 10+ years' experience)*

Other respondents commented on the importance of being able to use the EYFS/Development Matters flexibly to enable scope for supporting children's individual trajectories of development:

*Children are individuals, they should be allowed to develop at their own pace and not be expected to fit in a box (Practitioner: group sessional care: 10+ years' experience)*

*Need to be aware of the children's starting points rather than just a focus on outcomes (Manager; Group sessional care: 10+ years' experience)*

*I believe that EYFS creates an incredible foundation for students - it aims high and gives children space to grow at their own pace whilst still being challenged and having a next step. (Manager: International primary school: 5-10 years' experience).*

Some respondents questioned the implicit expectations embedded in the ELGs, suggesting these are developmentally inappropriate and could be linked to later failure or induce anxiety in parents about their children's progress:

*About a 1/4 of all children fail the education system because our early overly inflated expectations cause children to learn how to fail when practice is developmentally inappropriate. (Supervisor: Primary School: 10+ years' experience)*

*Take the age bands away so parents don't panic about their child's development (Practitioner: Maintained Nursery School: 2-4 years' experience)*

Finally, some respondents explicitly questioned the role and rationale of the EYFS and the relationship between pedagogy and practice in the EYFS and in Year 1 of Key Stage 1:

*A clear rationale for its use. Is it an assessment tool or a curriculum? It should align with child development rather than starting with y1 and trying to bridge the gap by working backwards. (Headteacher: Maintained Nursery School: 10+ years' experience)*

*The EYFS supports children towards the goals - priority should be given to pedagogy and practice in Yr1 to further support children who do not reach the expected level of development by the end of the EYFS. Current practice in KS1 widens any gap. (Teacher: Primary school: 10+ years' experience)*

### EYFS: Areas of Learning

Respondents were asked about how well they thought the EYFS meets children's needs across each area of learning. Their responses overall were positive. There are small differences in pattern of response comparing respondents with more or less experience, and between respondents with different roles. With the prime areas of learning, 91% of new practitioners felt that the EYFS meets children's needs and 85% of more experienced practitioners. Within the specific areas of learning, this falls to 82% of new practitioners agreeing that the EYFS met children's needs compared with 75% of the more experienced respondents agreeing. These differences are not, however, statistically significant.

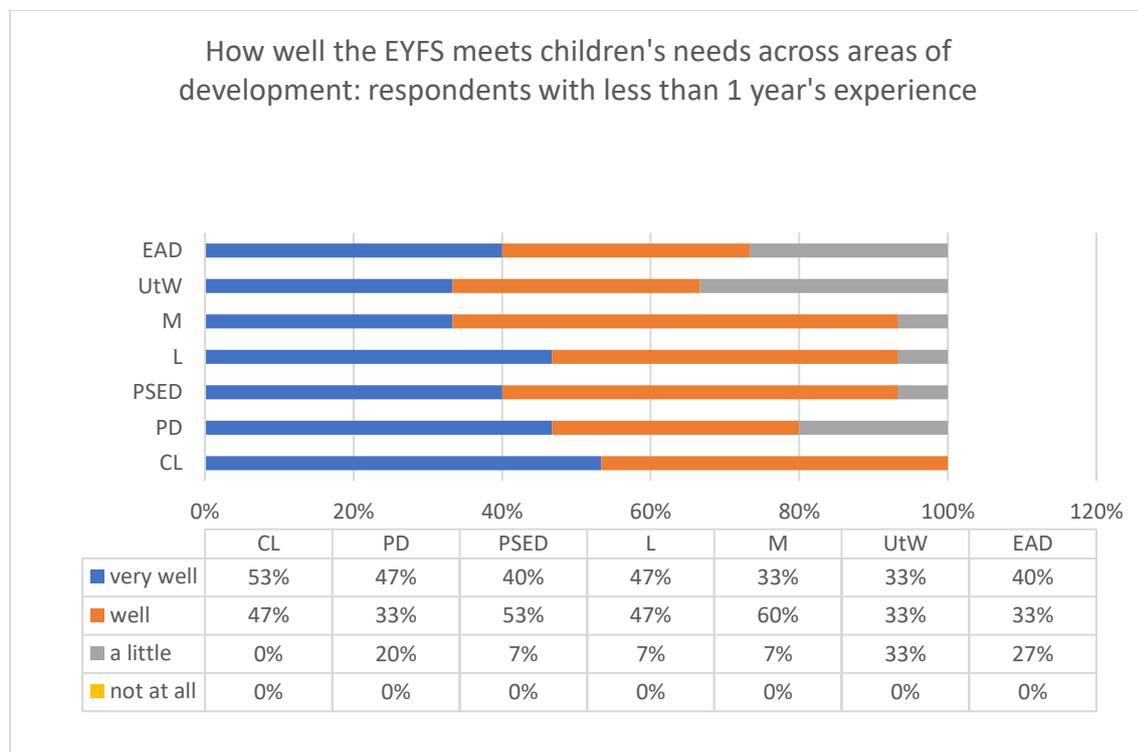


Figure 6: How well the EYFS meets children's needs: respondents with less than 1 year's experience

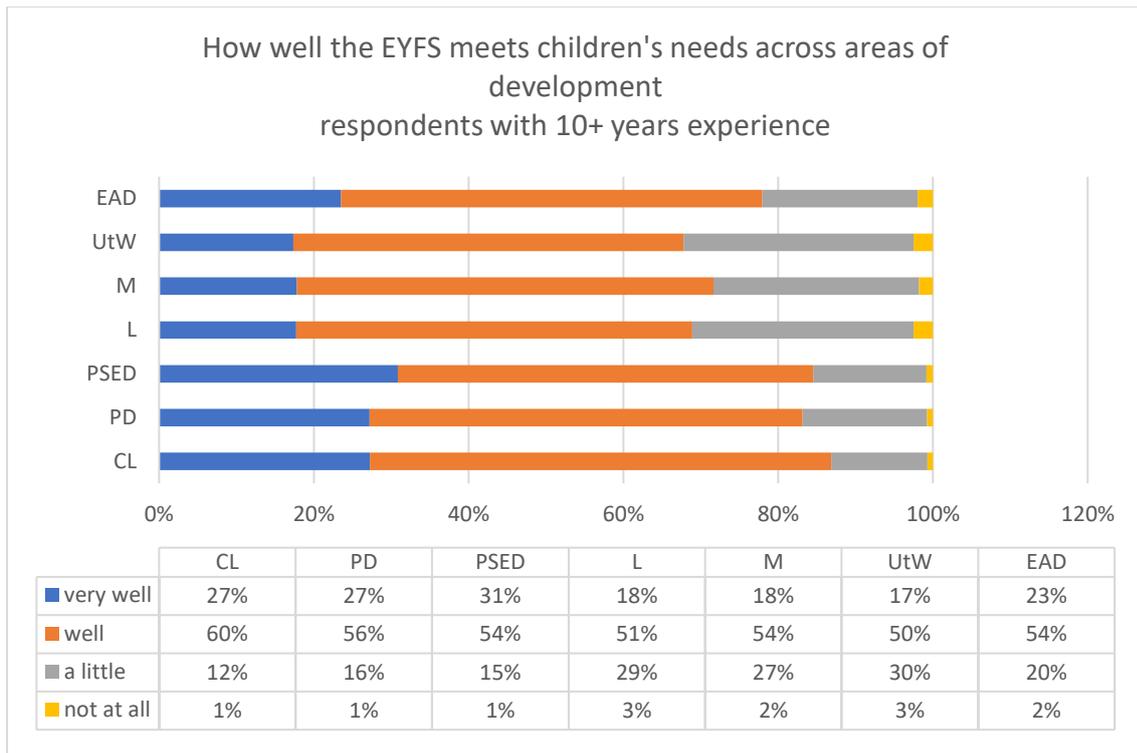


Figure 7: How well the EYFS meets children's needs: respondents with more than 10 years' experience

Similarly, when comparing response from respondents with different roles, there are small differences in patterns of responding.

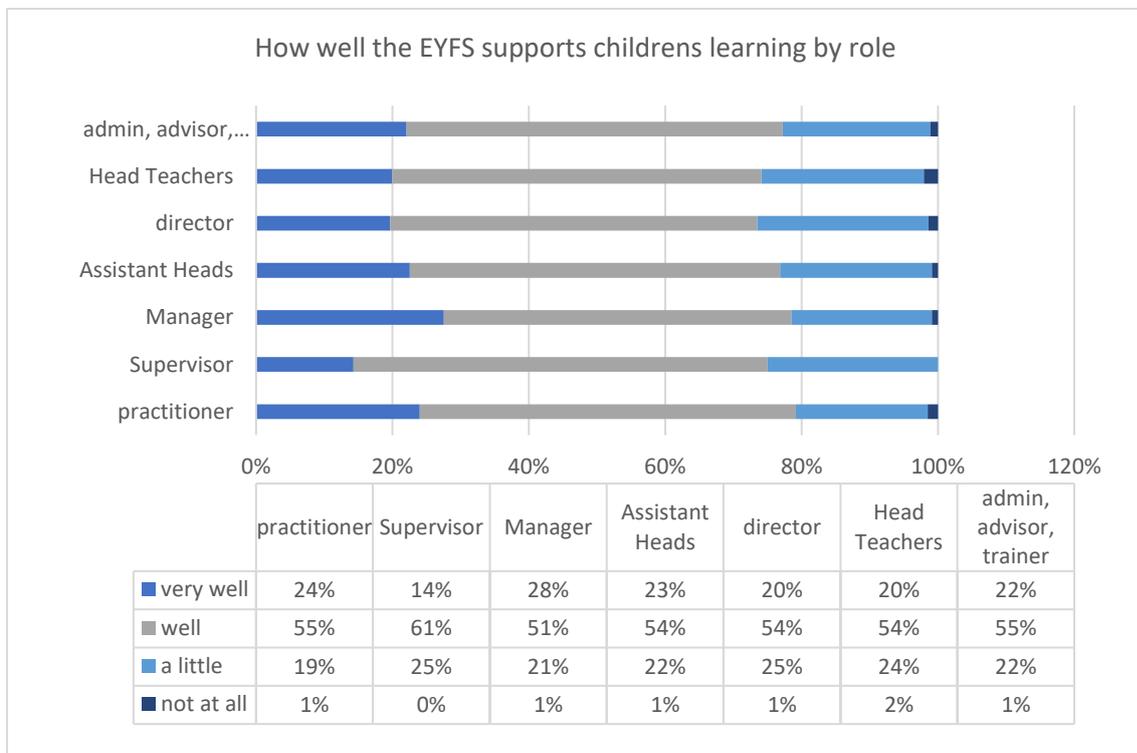


Figure 9: How well the EYFS meets children's needs: by role

Practitioners were slightly more positive with 79% stating that the EYFS supported children’s learning across the areas of development, compared with 74% for head teachers or setting directors, but these differences were not statistically significant.

When we explored the differences between respondents from different settings, we did however find significant differences between responses for each area of learning. As can be seen in figure 10 below, childminders were generally more positive about how well the EYFS supports children in each area of learning. Differences between ratings by respondents from different settings are small for the prime areas of learning (Communication and Language, Physical development and Personal and social development) and largest for Literacy and Understanding of the world and Mathematics. Practitioners from primary Schools and Maintained Nursery Schools gave the lowest ratings in Literacy and Understanding of the World.

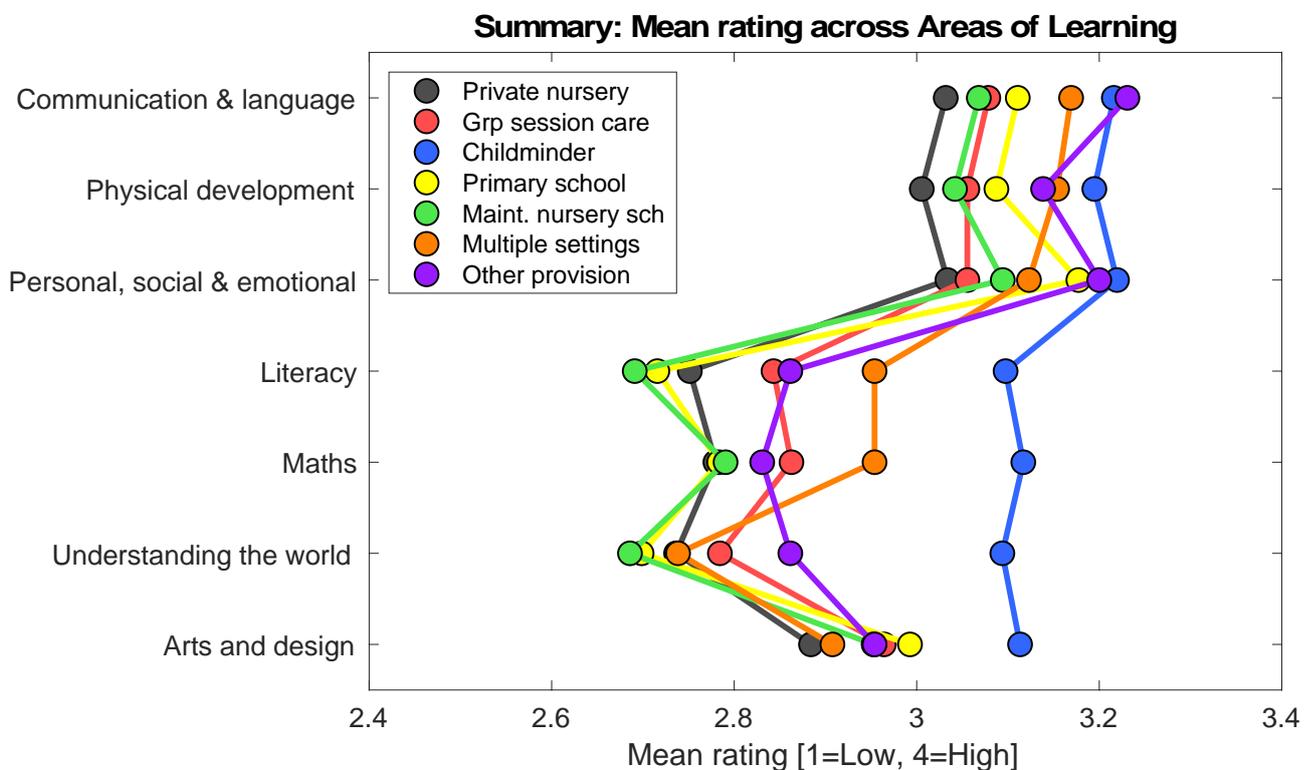


Figure 10: Mean rating across Areas of Learning

There is a possible effect here of age of child attending setting: childminders tend to work with younger children and primary schools and Maintained Nursery Schools with older children. Practitioners are encouraged to concentrate on the prime areas for children in their first three years, so this could mean that childminders are less involved with working with the specific areas of learning.

Many respondents commented on proposed changes to the Early Learning Goals; most frequently mentioned was the disapproval of changes to the Mathematics, notably the absence of shape, space and measure. The quotations below capture the views of many:

*Maths makes more sense with focus on deeper understanding but [Year 1] needs to be adjusted to match. Tech needs to be included in some form - more focus on use*

*of tech and non digital tech. Shape space and measure needs to be included but more specific than current goal. Self regulation is unreasonable. This is too subjective and children's experience of emotion varies so much. I feel it would further disadvantage children with specific needs. Co-regulation should be the aim at this age. (Foundation Stage Co-ordinator : Primary school: 10+ years' experience)*

*Reducing Mathematics to Numbers and removing Shape, Space and Measures - the focus on numbers to 10 would be a positive step given the issues some children have with the teen numbers etc. and the research that says some children's understanding of numbers beyond 12 is developmentally inappropriate for many children in the EYFS. The removal of SSM would narrow the focus on maths considerably and would also do a disservice to the contextual elements of SSM that can be observed through play - e.g in the home corner, construction area, sand and water, and outside on a large scale... Removal of Technology - doesn't appear to make sense given the current technological/digital climate and children's ever increasing abilities and encounters with technology in their daily lives. (Teacher: Primary school: 10+ years' experience)*

Taken together, the enthusiasm for the EYFS, its close links to Development Matters but concerns about its relationship to curriculum in KS1 suggests that any changes to EYFS and/or Development Matters should be supported by well-designed professional development, preferably including teachers from Year 1, to ensure that the purpose and scope of both EYFS and Development Matters are placed within the wider context.

Comments about the future development of the EYFS from practitioners focused more on a need for more resources in terms of staffing for inter-professional working and for supporting parents. This is explored in more detail later in Section 6.

Next, we will consider how respondents understood the role of the EYFS in closing the gap between children from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds, and in improving social mobility.

## **4. The wider role of the EYFS**

### **Supporting children to develop their potential**

Respondents were asked their views on how helpful the EYFS was in supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds to develop their potential. They could select a score between 0 (“no help”) and 100 (“essential”). There was a wide range of responses with scores peaking in the middle between 41 and 60. Just over half (52%) rated the EYFS as supportive with a score of 51 or more – which means that just under half were less convinced of its helpfulness.

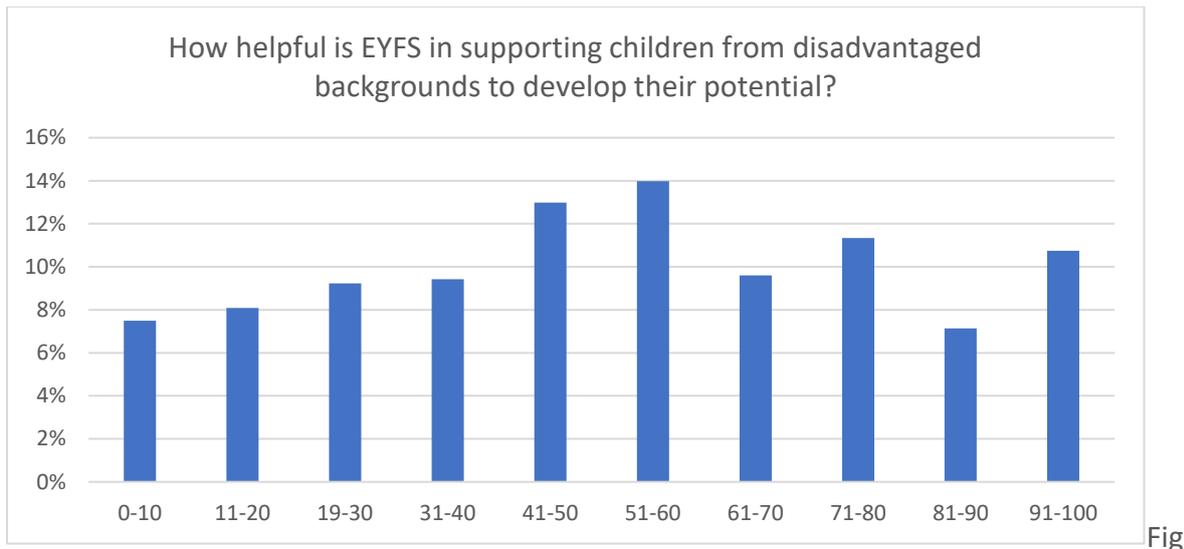


Figure 11: How helpful is EYFS in supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds to develop their potential?

This pattern is repeated in response to later questions on the role of the EYFS in addressing issues of disadvantage, and a similar set of factors are raised when respondents were asked about barriers to supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Comments relate to a lack of funding, resources and staffing. Representative quotations are provided in section on “Influencing factors” below, and focus on concerns with supporting the home learning environment, the centrality of support for communication and language skills, the need (but inadequate opportunities) for early intervention; experienced and knowledgeable staff.

### Closing the Gap

Comments and ratings in response to this question were similar to responses to the question about supporting children to realise their potential. Participants were asked to rate from 0-100 (0 being “no help”, 100 being “essential”), how helpful the EYFS is in supporting settings to close the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children. Responses clustered in the middle of the range; 56% of respondents rating the helpfulness of the EYFS in reducing the number of disadvantaged children who are not reaching their ELGs in communication and reading skills by the end of reception by selecting a score of 51 or over.

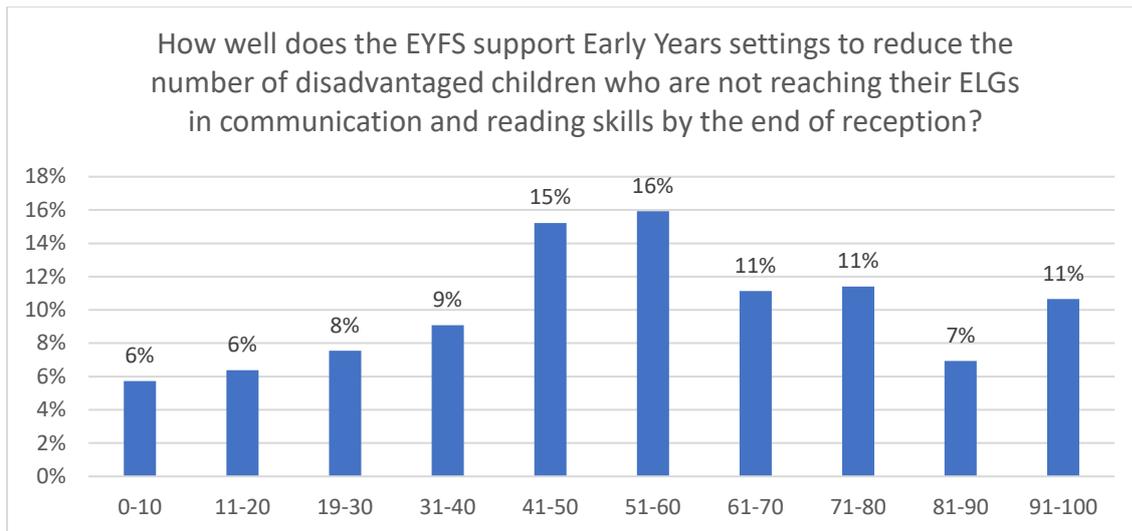


Figure 12: How well the EYFS supports practitioners to close the gap

However, 44% of respondents allocated lower scores, with 6% opting for scores within 10 of 'no help'. Reasons given for why the EYFS is not helpful in this regard mentioned the Home Learning Environment, practitioner knowledge and experience and interpretation of literacy, as illustrated below in section "Influencing factors". Other comments concerning the availability of time and resources have been collected together in Sections 5 and 6.

### Supporting the Home Learning Environment

When respondents were asked to rate (0 being "no help", 100 being "essential") how helpful they thought the EYFS was in guiding practitioners in supporting parents to improve the Home Learning Environment (52%) rated this with a score 50 or less.

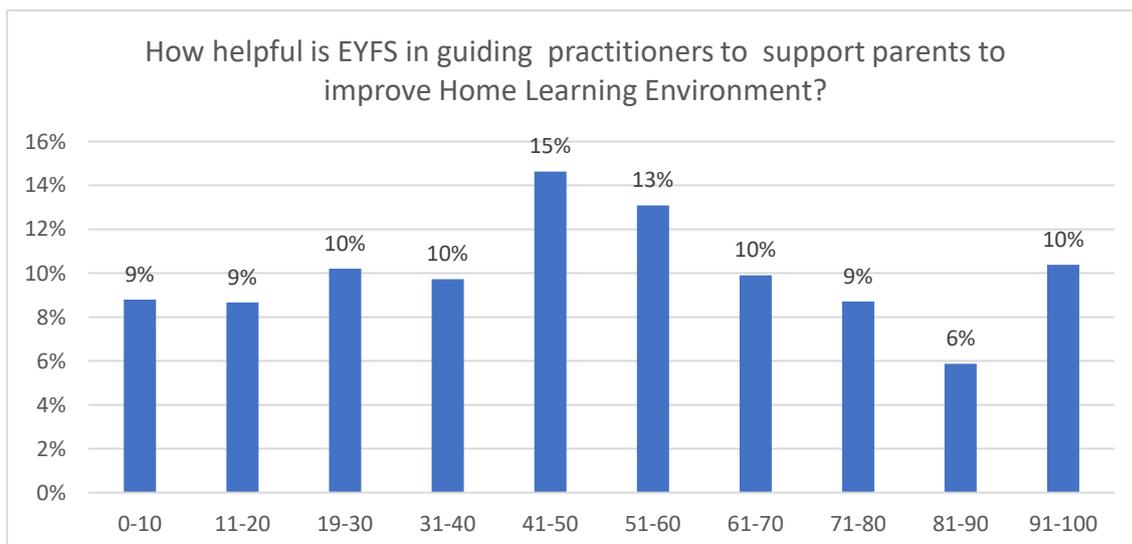


Figure 13: How well the EYFS supports the home learning environment

The influence of the home learning environment on children's development was a recurring theme in responses throughout the survey. Participants raised issues about parental understanding, children's speech and language difficulties, inadequate funding to support families and lack of access to early years places.

The EYFS Statutory Framework itself is not seen as a resource that is helpful in addressing these concerns. But its use, in association with Development Matters, as guidance for working with children in early years setting is reported to be beneficial, providing there is sufficient funding, access to specialist support services, resources and knowledgeable staff.

*I don't really think this is about the document... Work needs to be done with settings to ensure they understand the importance of shared experiences and conversations led by children and the role of free play in developing early communication skills. Also, the role settings and children's centres can play in supporting parents and the home learning environment is key. (Supervisor: Maintained Nursery School: 10+ years' experience)*

*The home environment plays such a key role in early years therefore support for family's needs to begin from birth onwards, as practitioners we are able to help, support and guide parents to some extent and nurture the children when in our care. (Childminder: 5-10 years' experience)*

Some respondents highlighted the need for support to be offered to parents in their homes, and explicitly questioned whether putting disadvantaged children in settings was the best way to support their development:

*Taking children out of the home environment at an increasingly earlier age for increasingly longer periods of time is not the answer. We need to educate parents so they understand their role in this & stop expecting school/early years settings to solve this problem. (Teacher: Primary School: 10+ years' experience)*

Respondents highlighted working with parents as more important to "close the gap" rather than changes to the EYFS, and described strategies used by early years settings to address this issue:

*No 'document' (EYFS) alone can close the gap. Resources, support and parental engagement are essential. We invest heavily in time and money engaging with parents through parents evening, open mornings, book swaps, and home visits for all new starters. (Owner: Private Nursery: 10+ years' experience)*

Comments highlighted the need for consistency of approach between home and setting:

*The EYFS is not the problem but consistency in learning and unfortunately those from disadvantaged families don't get the same experiences during holidays as their peers to build on their knowledge (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

*Childcare providers can only do what is expected of them but they must have parental support. Without the aims of EYFS being continued at home then the child gets mixed signals and normally the parents' attitude will prevail. (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

Respondents also drew attention to the need for earlier intervention in order to close the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children:

*Children who do not attend early years settings do not access the EYFS until they are 3 then could only have one year before [they] start reception at a disadvantage (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

*Children in deprived areas need earlier intervention and parents need earlier support - closing Sure Start centres has not helped. (Manager: Charitable Preschool: 10+ years' experience)*

*I think that the support needs to happen prior to children starting in provision. Children have less good role models around language as they are accessing electronic devices more and more and from a much younger age. We must encourage parents to be talking to their children face to face. The EYFS gives some support around this, but there needs to be a funding incentive to kick start this. (Headteacher: Maintained Nursery School: 10+ years' experience)*

Respondents highlighted areas in which parents might need support to encourage children's development. Many of these were concerned with communication; as well as the "face to face talking" mentioned above, respondents referred to the need to "understand the damage dummies do to a child's speech", to be "aware of the importance of songs/rhymes/stories for toddlers", of not being "constantly on their phone" and a concern that "technology is introduced at too young an age" which has implications for the "role models around language" mentioned above.

### **Improving social mobility**

The influence of the home-learning environment and effects of disadvantage are therefore seen as key factors to consider in closing the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children. If all children meet the early learning goals at the end of the reception year, this could be interpreted as an indicator that children start school on a level playing field, thereby facilitating social mobility.

However, survey respondents did not see the EYFS Statutory Framework as a tool that in itself is helpful in facilitating social mobility. The EYFS sets out which areas of learning should shape the activities provided by practitioners working with children between birth and five and the early learning goals that they should be helping children to work towards. Coverage of these areas of learning is statutory and the EYFS "seeks to provide quality and consistency in all early years settings, so that every child makes good progress and no child gets left behind". While this might help to facilitate social mobility through fair "distribution of opportunities" to learn (HM Government, 2011), the EYFS itself does not indicate how settings will be supported to offer this quality and consistency, beyond legislating for adult-child ratios and staff qualifications.

*I think the EYFS tells us what to look out for, but not how to get there. (Childminder: 2-4 years' experience)*

Furthermore, the government's social mobility strategy has ambitions not just to offer opportunities to all but to *improve outcomes* for disadvantaged children (DfE 2019).

However, while the EYFS includes points for and methods of assessment so that practitioners might identify children who are not making progress towards improved outcomes, the EYFS is silent about *how* to support progress so children are not left behind.

Participants' responses suggest there are important considerations about how to support social mobility that cannot be addressed through the simple expedient of improving outcomes in each area of learning with the aim of all children starting school having reached an expected standard:

*The main barrier to closing the gap is feeling pressured to have children at a certain level when they are not ready. We need time to spend playing with the children and getting to know them before they are ready for more formal learning. Pushing them on before they are ready doesn't work. (Deputy Head: Primary School 10+ years' experience)*

*The expectation for all children to achieve the same regardless of their starting points, therefore branding them as failing at the end of reception. (Foundation Stage co-ordinator: Primary School: 10+ years' experience)*

Respondents identified a variety of factors related to the four principles of the EYFS that, if not given adequate consideration, might act as barriers to improving social mobility, namely pedagogical considerations about how children learn and provision of adequate support for children with additional needs (see sections 5 and 6 for more limiting factors):

*I believe that the framework is not supportive of small steps. It does not take into consideration how children learn. (Manager: Charity playschool: 10+ years' experience)*

*The EYFS has no scope for children who need more support with PSED/CL. The steps are huge and unattainable by a lot of children with extra needs. (Manager: Private Nursery: 10+ years' experience)*

Proposed revisions to EYFS are seen by some respondents as, in some respects, detrimental to promoting social mobility because of the introduction of "unachievable ELGs, formal teaching and learning" so that children from disadvantaged backgrounds will be left further behind their more advantaged peers. Comments here focus on the Early Learning Goals, particularly in Literacy and Mathematics:

*The proposed revisions to the EYFS will hit these children and families the hardest as changes to the ELGs and areas of learning will mean that the Gap will widen due to them being developmentally inappropriate. (Consultant: 10+ years' experience)*

*ELGs in specific areas of literacy and maths are set too high, or judged too early in child's school life to compensate for a home learning experience prior to school that did not help children develop understanding and confidence in these areas. Some such children need more than 5 terms to develop the underpinning language skills that are prerequisites of literacy and numeracy. If schools were able to delay statutory assessments until the end of year 1, as the phonics test is, it would give them nearly 2 vital years to support children disadvantaged in these areas to catch*

*up and perform more in line with their peers, thus reducing inequalities. . (Foundation Stage co-ordinator: Primary School: 10+ years' experience)*

Other barriers to social mobility highlighted by respondents could be attributed to gaps in the framing of the EYFS, such as insufficient emphasis on consideration of mental health needs and building dispositions to promote lifelong learning:

*Emotional well-being and mental health need a stronger consideration to ensure that children have resilience for the future. They need to build on the intrinsic value of the reward of learning to be able to continue throughout their educational journey. (Manager: Charity playschool: 10+ years' experience)*

However, many more of the barriers to social mobility cited by respondents are those which sit outside of statutory guidance for the Foundation Stage, and indeed lie beyond the direct influence of early years settings. These include a lack of funding and resources, lack of access to specialist support, lack of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (linked to low pay), poor levels of speech and language, and, of principal concern, issues with the home learning environment and parental engagement, as already explored.

*Lack of funding is the main barrier, not enough hands (only 2 in a class of 30) with such a range of needs to support. (Deputy Head: Primary School 10+ years' experience)*

These factors which limit the scope of what practitioners working within the EYFS can do to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds are explored further in the two sections that follow.

## **5. Influencing Factors**

### **Practitioner Knowledge and Experience**

Although respondents acknowledged that the EYFS provides guidelines for supporting children's learning and development, there was a consistent message that it is the quality of practitioners in settings that makes the difference to children's development. The EYFS Statutory Framework itself does not impact on children's development but the work with children both in the setting and at home does.

*EYFS gives us the guidelines to help but it is the attitude and dedication of the practitioner to enrich the lives of the child (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

Comments highlighted the qualities needed by practitioners to make this happen: they should be "experienced", "knowledgeable", "skilled", with "expertise" and "a good level and understanding of how communication works within education".

*It boils down to innovative, caring and proud practitioners who are working in childcare who have high expectations for every child. They need to provide challenges that push children to think and thrive for learning. The EYFS makes up a small part of the bigger picture. (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

Respondents pointed out the need for appropriate training and professional development to create a workforce with these levels of knowledge and skills, and then also indicated the importance of attractive levels of pay and conditions to attract such practitioners and retain them long enough to become experienced.

*EYFS doesn't need to be changed. What must be enhanced are practitioner skills, training and funding available to settings to increase salaries and attract higher calibre teachers. . (Manager: Private Nursery: 10+ years' experience)*

*I feel that it is not the EYFS that will help reach this goal but the practitioners. Often practitioners become fixated on the EYFS and not look at the individual child and their specific needs. e.g. EYFS says child led and this is taken to be gospel and so the child is not challenged to develop skills in areas that they would not ordinarily gravitate to (Manager: Sessional SEND opportunity group: 10+ years' experience)*

### **Approaches to Communication and Language, and Literacy**

Communication and language were seen as central to supporting children's progress through the EYFS, with one respondent pointing out that there is insufficient emphasis on supporting and responding to the many different ways in which children communicate:

*Communication is the key to learning in the EYFS, opportunity to increase vocabulary and experience stories and storytelling will support the development of reading skills. (Teacher: Primary school: 10+ years' experience)*

*EYFS does not see communication as being multi-modal, and therefore does not support this as part of children's overall communicative competence. (Consultant: 10+ years' experience)*

Particular concerns were raised by respondents over the interpretation of literacy in the early years, and the provision of sufficient opportunities to develop skills in language and communication. There was a recurring concern about promotion of an overly formal approach to learning rather than an active and holistic approach to children's development, and a need to avoid a sudden transition in pedagogy between EYFS and KS1.

*A good EYFS setting will be skilled providing experiences that enrich and enable communication and language, early literacy skills; unfortunately since 'bold beginnings' many schools have taken early literacy as formally reading and writing sitting at tables instead of child centred learning experiences (Teacher: Primary school: 10+ years' experience)*

*EYFS practitioners need to be confident to provide appropriate communication and Literacy experiences through play and first hand experiences as outlined in the EYFS rather than giving in to 'top-down' pressure to teach young children in inappropriate ways before they have truly embedded the foundations of these skills through a play based curriculum. (Teacher: Maintained Nursery School: 10+ years' experience)*

Rather than altering early years practice to align with Year 1, several respondents suggested instead that Year 1 practice should be aligned with EYFS, particularly for children who had not yet achieved the ELGS.

*EYFS principles need to be extended beyond the Reception year so those who haven't met the ELGs have time to develop those skills in Year 1. (Assistant Headteacher/EYFS lead: Primary school: 10+ years' experience)*

### **Early intervention/specialist support**

Related to comments about the importance of children developing communication skills were considerations about access to services for children who might need support in particular areas to enable them to reach their potential. Long waiting times and paucity of services were highlighted as reasons why children might not have the opportunities to benefit from such support.

*Access to other professionals... The wait is too long at the moment (Foundation stage Coordinator: Independent school: 10+ years' experience)*

*Communication and language and PSED areas where there is much need, but lack of services available. (Teacher: Group Sessional care: 10+ years' experience)*

*Lack of services such as Outreach, CAMHS, SALT etc (deputy Head: Maintained Nursery School: 10+ years' experience)*

Respondents pointed to the need for services to offer early intervention before children started attending an early years setting:

*Early intervention is essential, but much earlier than it currently is happening. (Teacher: Group Sessional care: 10+ years' experience)*

*Foundations need to be in place from birth i.e. health visiting services which are almost non-existent in our area and find our parents who need this support have not had it, why are children not being recognised as having the needs we are discovering e.g. having no play skills in the home, toys even, this early support is important and parent classes post birth on how to communicate with their child, what to provide and help recognised when there is poverty. Our parents deserve better and need this from birth with this flowing and continuing into early years provision, instead of waiting for nurseries to pick it up. (Manager: Group Sessional care: 10+ years' experience)*

Support was needed not just for families but for early years settings unsure about how to address particular needs:

*Having advice and support available to practitioners when a concern is raised. We often feel unsupported and unsure of what is available to children when learning behaviours are noticed (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

Difficulties in accessing support from other services because of funding limitations on these services were cited as barriers to settings helping children and families who needed extra support

*Lack of availability of professionals e.g. educational psychologists. Funding not covering the costs needed to support those who need it most (Teacher: Maintained Nursery School: 5-10 years)*

*Lack of speedy early intervention, patchy implementation of two year offer, lack of education for parents in deprived areas, lack of experiences for children of deprived families and then the burden is on schools to provide them yet budgets are being slashed so it becomes difficult to give children what they need.(Assistant Head: Primary school: 5-10 years)*

## **Training and professional development**

There was a strong message from respondents about the importance of the quality of the workforce and the related topics of training and professional development. Implementing the EYFS as a statutory framework, with Development Matters as a guidance document, required knowledge, skills and experience.

*I think it takes skill to apply the EYFS to children learning and that, whichever curriculum we are using, practitioners need continuing professional development and discussion in order to use the guidance wisely. (Headteacher: Nursery: 10+ years' experience)*

*I feel that Early Years Staff need a deeper understanding to use the EYFS and training on how to teach it to make the most impact. (Supervisor: Private Nursery: 10+ years' experience)*

*Although the EYFS is a tool to support this, experienced and knowledgeable practitioners are more vital to enable this aim to be achievable. (Supervisor: Group sessional care:: 10+ years' experience)*

*EYFS and reaching children is subject to practitioner knowledge and experience as well as parental engagement and understanding of their children's learning needs. (Co owner: Private Nursery: 10+ years' experience)*

In order to achieve these skills and acquire this knowledge, practitioners need appropriate training and ongoing professional development particularly (as mentioned in the sections above) with children from diverse backgrounds, and appropriate remuneration for this skilled and sensitive work.

*It's not the EYFS that's the issue, it's the way staff are not trained effectively enough to understand how to implement it, too many settings are trying to teach phonics to children too early with little experience of what they are doing. (Manager: Private Nursery: 10+ years' experience)*

*It is necessary to have a more in depth understanding of language development and possible ways of intervening than is provided in EYFS. (Foundation Stage co-ordinator: Primary school: 10+ years' experience)*

*[Main barriers to closing the gap include] inadequate training for diverse and complex communities - especially children with EAL; lack of awareness and understanding of children's cultural repertoires for learning (Consultant: 10+ years' experience)*

## **Working with parents and outside professionals**

The need for effective parental support and inter-professional working was recognised by many; it was identified as an essential factor in narrowing the gap, improving social mobility, and reducing workload. However, a number of barriers to effective practice in working with parents and outside professionals were identified by respondents, including poor attendance patterns, difficulties engaging in partnership with some parents, a lack of time and resources to work alongside as well as limited access to specialist support services such as speech and language therapists.

*Attendance, working partnerships with parents, hard to reach parents, training of early years professionals, availability of local support services such as SALT. (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

*Lack of availability of professionals e.g. educational psychologists. Funding not covering the costs needed to support those who need it most. (teacher: Maintained Nursery School: 10+ years' experience)*

Although practitioners are able to identify children who need extra support, it can then prove difficult to access this support:

*The problem is lack of support from other professionals. Practitioners are skilled at early identification but there are not the experts on the ground or the funding required to act swiftly and appropriately to move the children on. (Manager: Private Nursery: 10+ years' experience)*

*There are more children being identified with [speech and language] delay before 3yrs which is good and staff can therefore support however professional support and therapy for specific difficulties is lacking, waiting lists are lengthy. (EYFS Lead: Primary School: 10+ years' experience)*

There was also a suggestion in some responses that this work was not given high enough priority within the EYFS:

*Partnerships working with families and other professionals should be made more explicit in the framework. (Advisor: Local Authority: 10+ years' experience)*

## 6. Issues of resourcing

An overall message emerging from the sector survey was less about the need to develop the EYFS itself as this was generally seen in a positive light, but for the urgent need to develop resources.

*Improvement would be in funding for resources and staffing. The current EYFS works well but schools are overstretched. (SENCo: Maintained Nursery School: 10+ years' experience)*

This includes opportunities for staff training and time for supporting parents and working with outside professionals. Representative comments illustrating these themes are included below.

### Funding issues

Respondents commented that the different funding sources did not meet the needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, or children with special educational needs, whose parents did not qualify for 30 hour funding.

*2 year old funding - EYFS great although 15 hours per week too little time for those disadvantaged. (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

*30 hours [funding]. It is the disadvantaged children who would benefit from free 30 hours. 15 hours is not enough for either children or parents (who do not have enough childcare to explore further study or work). (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

*Funding! Children from disadvantaged families tend to only qualify for 15 hours whereas children of families earning up to £200,000 per year qualify for 30 hours*

*of funding. they can't afford it. (Manager: Private Preschool: 10+ years' experience)*

Furthermore, there was insufficient funding to attract “good experienced practitioners” or access to SEN/D expertise to support children to reach their potential, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds:

*Lack of funding for staff. The biggest impact on supported disadvantaged is adults. They are the ones who hold meaningful conversations and support, extend and challenge learning and without this it is very difficult to close the gap as a lot of teacher and adult time can be spent on behaviour management and SEN specific support. (Teacher: Maintained Nursery School : 5-10 years' experience)*

*Lack of funding for specific SEND resources. (Manager: private nursery: 10+ years' experience)*

*Access to funding and multi professional teams. (Teacher: Maintained Nursery School : 5-10 years' experience)*

*Insufficient resources for parents to have help to show them how to play with their children at home. (Practitioner: Registered Charity Preschool: 5-10 years' experience)*

Some respondents linked this to perceived low status of early years practitioners and the associated low levels of pay:

*Adequate funding. It's far too low for childcare and there is STILL a perception that childcare practitioners are generally unqualified baby sitters. (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

*Funding levels- it's hard to get good experienced practitioners when you can only pay them around minimum wage. (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

*More money for nurseries to provide high quality staff and resources would help to close the gap. (Manager: Private nursery: 5-10 years' experience)*

Other respondents saw the lack of funding as a more widespread issue across the whole sector:

*Funding! The EYFS is written and can be shared but there is lack of funding to provide quality training and support for children and families. (Manager: Private nursery: 10+ years' experience)*

*Lack of funding in ALL children's services including Education, social care, family support, health, mental health (Manager: Primary school: 10+ years' experience)*

And that the inadequacies of funding were shaping the constitution of the workforce itself:

*Lack of funding does mean that many practitioners lack basic skills themselves and struggle to work effectively with children, particularly in phonics and early reading. Many 16 year olds who go into childcare do not have sufficient qualifications or knowledge to do this. However, older, better qualified people are not going to work for the minimum wage forever. (Foundation Stage Lead: Primary school: 10+ years' experience)*

## **Staffing**

This brings us to specific issues related to staffing that were raised in connection with barriers to children achieving their potential. Respondents mentioned

inadequacies in support for children because of unfavourable adult:child ratios, variations in level of qualification and limited access to training:

*Access to support and training for staff to increase their knowledge. (Manager: private nursery: 10+ years' experience)*

*Funding - more practitioners in classes of 30. At least 3 full time needed. (Teacher: Primary School: 10+ years' experience)*

*Unqualified staff and inconsistencies in qualifications (Deputy Head: Maintained Nursery School: 10+ years' experience)*

*Lack of quality adult support, ratios too high, lack of deep understanding of early childhood development (Foundation Stage Lead: Primary school: 10+ years' experience)*

*Ratios should be changed! 1:30 for reception children is ridiculous! All ratios should be the same regardless of qualifications. A degree doesn't give you more arms, eyes or a bigger lap!!!! (Headteacher: Maintained Nursery School: 10+ years' experience)*

Respondents identified some of the consequences of these inadequacies, namely a rush to cover all areas, insufficient time spent working out children's individual needs:

*Lack of understanding and focus, practitioners feeling they need to cover all areas of EYFS for next steps, when focus on one would make so much more sense and be achievable. Knowing the child well is the key, not memorising the EYFS next steps for lots of children. (Headteacher: Group sessional care: 10+ years' experience)*

*Number of staff. We work on the ratio of 1:13. With 139 children in a large area, quality interactions are sometimes difficult when you always have to go and deal with 'incidents'. (Teacher: Maintained Nursery School: 10+ years' experience)*

Inadequate training and poor mentoring were also identified as problems related to settings having enough staff with the necessary qualities to meet children's needs effectively:

*Practitioner knowledge of research and effective methods due to poor mentoring and training. The confusion between childcare and education for many practitioners who are only interested in childcare. (Teacher: Independent Prep School Nursery: 10+ years' experience)*

*Practitioner understanding and experience of young children's learning. The focus on increasing the standard of the workforce has fallen by the wayside. Dumbing down the EYFS because government have allowed a dumbing down of practitioner qualifications is a poor response to children's needs. (Teacher: local authority portage service: 10+ years' experience)*

*Practitioner's passion and knowledge. You can have the most effect plan in place but if the practitioners don't see it as an important part of their job role it won't be effective. (Supervisor: Group sessional care: 10+ years' experience)*

Finally, there was recognition from respondents of the pivotal role played by high quality staff with the sensitivity, knowledge and experience to support children from

disadvantaged backgrounds and/or special educational needs. Low pay, insufficient funds for training, long hours, unfavourable ratios and loss of support from Teaching Assistants were identified as factors making this more difficult. For some respondents, this went beyond showing competence in supporting children towards the ELGs, to consideration of children's trajectory through the education system and society itself.

*The support of [Teaching Assistants] is so important in supporting teachers to help the children achieve in all areas of the curriculum! Cutting this support for our children is detrimental to the children's learning and should be a priority! if this government really wants to make a difference. Fund more TA's as they are the people who support teachers and make a difference. (Teacher: Special school: 10+ years' experience)*

*Practitioner understanding of real issues. Understanding of equalities and what this means for children. Understanding of cultural capital. Understanding of your own unconscious bias. Whole team culture, ethos around making a difference. Understanding of behaviour that impacts learning Professional love - the ability to want to deeply connect and learn together. (Consultant: 10+ years' experience)*

## **Workload**

The survey was focused on views on the EYFS with regards to the areas of learning, possible changes to the ELGs, the characteristics of effective learning and closing the gap for children who are disadvantaged. There was no direct question about the relationship between the EYFS and workload.

However, workload was raised as an issue across a number of areas with particular reference to the amount of paperwork and consequent reduction in time spent working directly with children:

*All the paperwork we have to do that takes us away from actually developing and providing quality care for those who are disadvantaged! (Childminder: 5-10 years' experience)*

*Less paperwork and more time to play with the children/ for more practical tasks. (Childminder: 5-10 years' experience)*

The purpose of the paperwork was linked to "recording", support for children with special educational needs and inspection requirements:

*Less paperwork, or recording, and spending more time, hands on with the children. (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

*A lot of stress on settings as SEN plans are needing to be put in place and extra resources and tools to help each child for their individual need. (Supervisor: Private Nursery: 10+ years' experience)*

*Too much paperwork, too time consuming to produce evidence for Ofsted. (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

But with some uncertainty about what was actually required:

*More direction / clarity given as to what paperwork is necessary and expected and what is not. (Foundation Stage co-ordinator: Primary school: 10+ years' experience)*

*Too many myths around between settings trying to 'please' Ofsted rather than focusing on statutory framework and their setting. (Practitioner: Private Nursery: 10+ years' experience)*

There were also suggestions about how the inspection process could be better – and which would be echoed by Ofsted:

*Less paperwork - more flexibility is needed to how practitioners support children to achieve the ELG. (Manager: Group Sessional care: 10+ years' experience)*

*Creates too much paperwork for Childminders. There needs to be a simpler way to evidence we are following the criteria. Ofsted inspectors need to be aware of the differences between Childminders and other day care providers and inspect accordingly. (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

The frequent referrals to the amount of paperwork and to a lack of time and resources are interesting when considered in light of the requirements of the EYFS Statutory Framework, which do not stipulate a requirement for paperwork. Comments from respondents suggest that the need for paperwork comes from settings' *interpretations* of Ofsted expectations.

From respondents' comments about workload, there was evidence that practitioners consider that demands for paperwork cause stress, make the profession less appealing and leading to a reduction in the workforce

*It's heavy and takes up too much time... Too many excellent practitioners are lost due to this cumbersome paperwork. (Manager: Childcare on domestic premises: 10+ years' experience)*

*Too much paperwork and the enjoyment of teaching the children has gone because of the pressure of having to be told how to do things after all these years in childcare. (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

*Over complicated. Much of the work I do is common sense and follows through with each child's development. Just putting it all on paper to demonstrate it continuously takes a lot of the fun out of the job. (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

## **7. Concluding remarks**

Practitioners working in the early years sector are keen to be trusted to make the EYFS work and to enter into supportive relationships with parents which will help improve the home learning environment and so facilitate social mobility. The strong message from responses to this survey is that it is not the EYFS which is preventing this from happening, but that a lack of funding and perceived demands for paperwork are restricting the effectiveness of the sector. Nonetheless, those working in the sector are doing their best to make it work, relying on creativity, goodwill and hard work.

*It is what it is, we find creative ways to make it work. Give practitioners the skills to be creative. (Childminder: 10+ years' experience)*

*Relationships with parents are crucial to building trust and understanding and this requires time and expertise. The sector needs to be funded properly to enable this to happen more effectively and stop the services being scaled down. Effective home visits, drop-ins, community joined up working, access to Family Support, SEND services, health, availability of practitioners to meet with parents/carers/redo home visits etc. (Assistant Head: Maintained Nursery School: 10+ years' experience)*

*Our setting employs qualified teachers and intelligent graduates. This enables us to ensure we educate the little ones and work hard to support their development and learning. I believe that if funding into early years reflected the quality of educational expectations then this would not be such a problem across the sector. Also I think it is important to remember that the expectation of academic achievement is slowly being shuffled down through the education system onto younger children and even up to relatively recently the early year age bracket was catered for by playgroups and childcare without the academic skills. Many of the settings and much of the provision has evolved from such foundations as playgroups or daycare and it is hard to keep up with the rapid advance and pressure. Particularly when the respect and funding in the sector has also failed to keep up. Until EYFS is funded at the appropriate level to employ staff with professional expertise then there will be many lagging behind, and many in a similar situation as mine where the high calibre staff are on minimum wage and the manager does not draw a salary just to enable us to fulfil the requirements with excellence and stay open. I believe it is not the framework which is the problem and therefore a review of it is a waste of time, effort and resources. Nor can the entire sector rely on the goodwill of staff such as my own. (Manager/Owner: Group sessional care: 10+ years' experience)*

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## **Early Education**

The British Association for Early Childhood Education

54 Clarendon Road, Watford WD17 1DU

Telephone: 01923 438995

Email: [office@early-education.org.uk](mailto:office@early-education.org.uk)

Website [www.early-education.org.uk](http://www.early-education.org.uk)

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