**TWO-YEAR-OLDS in England:**

**an exploratory study**

**Stage One Report:**

**Literature Review and Key Informant Interviews**

**by**

**Jan Georgeson, Verity Campbell-Barr and Gill Boag-Munroe**

**with**

**Sandra Mathers and Rod Parker-Rees**



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# Introduction

Early education plays a crucial role in the Government’s vision for the foundation years (DfE/DH, 2011) and from September 2013 free early education has been provided to the 20% most disadvantaged two-year-olds, to be extended to around 40% of two-year-olds in 2014. The places are offered by a mixed economy of providers, including an expansion in the number of places available in the maintained sector (i.e. nursery and primary schools), helped by the removal of requirements that schools register separately with Ofsted when offering provision to two-year-olds

This unprecedented expansion of funding for two-year-olds has implications across the sector, including child-minders, nurseries, preschools and schools. As a targeted intervention, it is more than just the downward extension of the universal free places for three- and four-year-olds; it reflects Government interest in early intervention to compensate for disadvantage (DfE/DH, 2011; HM Government, 2010) and to identify and intervene to address possible special educational needs (DfE, 2011). Evidence for funding early years provision builds on research that suggests entry to preschool before the age of three is associated with greater cognitive gains (Hopkins et al., 2010; Sammons et al., 2004; Sylva et al., 2008), but there are issues with the current offer of free places for two-year-olds which require further exploration. These include sufficiency and quality of places, and appropriateness of practitioners’ qualifications/experience, amid growing concerns from some stakeholders (e.g. PACEY, 2013) that, with the current ‘schoolification’ agenda, the primary aim of the initiative is to promote a narrowly defined interpretation of future school readiness,

Because of uncertainty over availability of places in high quality settings (Evans, 2012; Gibb et al., 2011), we also propose to investigate further how suitable settings are identified. Using current government guidance, local authorities should place children in settings graded as ‘good’ or ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted where they can, but otherwise in settings graded as ‘requires improvement’. Expansion of child-minding provision was a key strategy in the 2012-2013 trial (DfE, 2013) and many local authorities are also relying on child-minders to meet demand. However, it could be argued that there are anomalies here: settings are required to meet criteria for quality if they offer free places for two-year-olds in group care but not in home settings. Furthermore, research evidence to support the funding of places for two-year-olds comes from studies that seldom included child-minders.

Research also casts doubt on whether Ofsted grades are an adequate measure of quality, particularly for children under three (e.g. Campbell-Barr, 2010; Mathers et al., 2012), which has obvious implications for eligibility criteria based on Ofsted grades. A further issue concerns overreliance on a narrow range of indicators that assess the effectiveness of interventions with reference only to their outcomes (Campbell-Barr et al., 2011; Campbell-Barr, 2012). The importance of process quality was reaffirmed in the evaluation of the pilot programme; improvements in vocabulary and in parent-child relationships were only seen for children and families attending settings with high quality provision (Smith et al., 2009; Maisey et al., 2013).

The policy intervention for two-year-olds asks much of practitioners, both in schools facing the challenge of taking two-year-olds for the first time and in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector where staff working with the youngest children tend to have fewer opportunities for professional development (Goouch and Powell, 2013). There is a new consensus that pedagogy for children under three is specialised, and different from teaching and learning in the three-to-five age range (see Dalli et al., 2011). The physical environment must accommodate, for example, sleeping and nappy changing facilities, whilst also providing suitable play spaces and equipment. Those working in settings offering places for two-year-olds need appropriate qualifications, which could be particularly problematic for schools because initial teacher education generally involves working with children no younger than three or four. Qualifications tend to be lower in baby/toddler rooms (Mathers et al., 2011; Norris et al., 2010) but it could be argued that it is particularly important that staff working with two-year olds have secure skills and understanding because the number of two-year-olds entitled to a place who have an additional need is likely to be higher than average and, as shown by previous evaluations of the two-year-olds offer (Gibb et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009), this requires considerable resources. In addition, the two-year-old check will require many practitioners to contribute information on children’s (dis)abilities.

### Aims and scope of the research

Our study investigates the provision of funded places by addressing the following research questions:

1. What does the research literature tell us about the dimensions of early childhood quality that are important for two-year-old children’s development?

2. What are the current central and local government policy and frameworks and practices for supporting the two-year-old programme?

3. What are the practices among settings providing funded early education places for two-year-olds? And who are the staff?

4. What do key stakeholders consider to be the essential components of quality for two-year-olds, and what successes and difficulties do they report in providing these?

5. What are the implications of 1, 2, 3 and 4 above for policy, practice, resourcing and provision in relation to the two-year-old early education programme?

This report presents a brief literature review followed by an analysis of interviews with a series of key informants to consider what are the most important components of quality for provision for two-year-olds. We will therefore be focussing here on questions one and four; a second report will focus on questions two, three and four and consider the implications that emerge from the study as a whole.

# A Review of the Literature

### Scope and context of the review

In comparison with the literature on over-threes, there is limited evidence on what quality looks like for under-threes, and little research at present focusing directly on what might count as quality for two-year-olds in England. Two recent pieces of work – Dalli (2014) which explored the current literature in the field in relation to practice in the UK, USA and Australia, summarising and extending Dalli et al. (2011), and Mathers et el. (2014) which focuses on the structural and pedagogical aspects of practice across the 0-3 age range – are exceptions to this and offer useful insights.

Dalli’s (2014) brief review of the literature on aspects of quality in provision for babies and toddlers highlights the shift in debates about infant care since the 1960s, from questions about whether out-of-home care benefits or harms children, to analysis of the features which differentiate beneficial, high quality care from practice which could cause lasting damage. Dalli points out that more recent research has highlighted the complexity of interactions between knowledge, attitudes and structural dimensions, such as ratios, qualifications and career structures, each of which can influence how other factors contribute to quality. At the heart of high quality provision, however, lies the quality of interactions between children and caregivers and Dalli (2014, p.2) identifies the key features of relational pedagogy which have been shown to be associated with high quality provision:

*‘… the use of language that is respectful and responsive; maintaining a steady stream of positive and warm communication; appropriate use of warm sensitive touch; responding to children as individuals; comforting and supporting children’s emotions; inviting participation in activities rather than requiring it; offering choices; engagement in shared activities; daily routines that create a sense of safety and security; and minimising changes of staff’*

The Sound Foundations study (Mathers et al., 2014) reviewed research into the dimensions of quality in early years education and care that facilitate the learning and development of children under three, drawing mainly on the psychological and educational literature from England, the USA, Australia and New Zealand. While its aim was to gather evidence from rigorously conducted empirical research, the relative scarcity of robust studies in relation to under-threes resulted in a broader approach, supplementing the quantitative literature with qualitative and exploratory studies and the expertise of practitioners in the field.

The review identified four key dimensions of good quality pedagogy for all children under three:

* Stable relationships and interactions with sensitive and responsive adults.
* A focus on play-based activities and routines which allow children to take the lead in their own learning.
* Support for communication and language.
* Opportunities to move and be physically active.

It also identified a number of ‘key conditions’ for achieving good quality pedagogy, recognising structural factors such as the qualifications of the early years workforce and the environments that support or hinder practice, notably:

* knowledgeable and capable practitioners, supported by strong leaders;
* a stable staff team with a low staff turnover;
* effective staff deployment (e.g. favourable ratios, staff continuity);
* secure yet stimulating physical environments;
* engaged and involved families.

The final report also made a number of recommendations for policy and practice, focused specifically on the early education programme for two-year-old children. These recommendations related to staff qualifications, issues of pay, access to ongoing professional development and the creation of a workforce development fund to facilitate these recommendations.

In this short review, we aim to build on the work of Dalli and Mathers et al. by attending to knowledge, pedagogy and interaction. This will help us outline the debates around working with two-year-olds and providing them with quality environments. The full report (as explained at the end of this interim report) will provide a more detailed overview of relevant literature shaped by findings emerging from the different strands of data collection in the study.

Our strategy involved first conducting a search using the term ‘two-year-old’ within a time frame of the last ten years, and then following references cited in relevant papers which this search produced. Through this process we identified two broad sets of literature, one concerning what it means to be two and the second around working with two-year-olds, We have organised our findings around three interconnected aspects of work with young children: knowledge (**what** we understand by ‘two-year-olds’ and ‘quality’, and how we come to know what we know about this); pedagogy, which refers to **how** practitioners work with two-year-olds, and is shaped by knowledge, and interaction – looking at issues around **who** is working with two-year-olds, including the caring aspects of their work and the kinds of relationship that develop within and around early years settings. Through these three lenses, we have teased out strands of thinking to support an understanding of quality for two-year-olds in early years settings.

### Knowledge

The ways that stakeholders come to know about their practice are shaped by their personal epistemologies, perspectival lenses through which they view the world and their places in it. This will inform how practitioners perceives their work, what they are trying to achieve, what is available to help them do this and the various affordances and constraints that make things easier or harder. When different stakeholders adopt different epistemologies, this can lead to tensions, which can make it more difficult for them to work together to achieve shared aims. Here we consider the ways in which two-year-olds are understood before going on to consider how this interplays with policy objectives and the drive for quality within these objectives. This will help us to construct a complex picture of what it might mean to provide high quality environments for two-year-olds.

#### The ‘Twoness Of Twos’

Eraut (2000) suggests that personal knowledge available for use in any workplace is made up of different kinds of knowledge acquired in different ways, and we have used Eraut’s typology to consider how practitioners come to know about work with two-year-olds. As well as drawing on personal experience, practitioners’ knowledge about what two-year-olds are like is informed by what Eraut would describe as codified scientific knowledge, derived from the academic literature on child development, or recontextualisations of that literature, (e.g. Lindon, 2012), as well as national curriculum guidance and policy objectives. In England, the learning and development needs of children aged from birth-to-three have been incorporated into statutory frameworks over the course of the last 12 years. The well-received Birth to Three Matters guidance (DfES, 2002) became incorporated into the first Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in 2008 (DCSF, 2008a, 2008b) uniting guidance and regulation for children from birth to the end of the reception year into one Foundation Stage. The revised version of EYFS (DfE, 2012) reintroduces the idea that there is something different about working with the youngest children by directing practitioners to focus primarily on just three of the seven areas of learning: Personal, Social and Emotional development; Physical development and Communication and Language. Practitioners also draw on Development Matters (Early Education, 2012), the non-statutory guidance material that supports practitioners in thinking about what children of different ages might be expected to do and the kinds of activity that might be appropriate to help children to make progress.

Eraut highlights the importance of other kinds of cultural knowledge, some of which might be written down or otherwise captured and, in the context of knowledge about two-year-olds, this includes popular texts such as ‘Toddler Taming’ (Green, 1999) or programmes like ‘Supernanny’ (Channel 4, 2004). Eraut also refers to other knowledge acquired through acculturation into a workplace setting: this would include the ways in which practitioners, parents and families talk about two-year-olds. Both in the academic literature and within popular discourse, two-year-olds are often portrayed as a distinctive sub-group, as the popular terms ‘Terrible Twos’ and ‘toddler tantrums’ imply.

Many practitioners will have acquired an understanding of the ‘twoness of two’ from textbooks setting out developmental milestones updating the work of Sheridan (1960), such as Meggitt and Sunderland (2000). These sources present an image of ‘the two-year-old child’ derived from psychological literature: developmentally, a child’s third year is generally marked by a rapid expansion of expressive language, great strides (often literally) with mobility and oscillating shifts between the pursuit of more independence - an ‘explosion of self-awareness’: Goldschmied and Jackson, 2004:142) - and continuing need for help with meeting basic needs (eating, drinking, sleeping and toileting). However, using information about developmental milestones can restrict and constrain practitioners’ view of the development of an individual child (Burman 2007) and care needs to be exercised when applying knowledge of the broad developmental sequences by considering the context in which that development is taking place. Increasing mobility and dexterity mean that two-year-olds can access a much wider range of places to explore. Although this will depend on their opportunities in their first two years, many will still need help with personal hygiene and feeding; they will generally need more sleep than their older peers; and require the guidance of adults to help them develop appropriate boundaries for interactions and emotional responses as they move into more complex social environments. This range of development unfolding on so many fronts tends to amplify the variability both between children and within individuals, meaning that all two-year-olds will have their own particular combinations of care and educational needs. It is against this backdrop of general variability in the third year that a range of developmental delays and disorders may become apparent, such as speech and language difficulties, autism, developmental dyspraxia and complex learning difficulties and disabilities (CLDD) (Carpenter et al., 2011).

Working with two-year-olds can therefore be physically and emotionally demanding, labour intensive and unpredictable (O’Sullivan and Chambers, 2014). Furthermore tensions between different ways of thinking about this age group mean that practitioners can find the work mentally taxing as well, because they are trying to negotiate a narrative through the competing voices which shape their understanding of their work. This will include their understanding of policy objectives, notably how they understand the thinking behind investment in the two-year-old provision. We have already outlined in the introduction the initiative’s focus on supporting disadvantaged families; when this is combined with a curriculum that has evolved through Birth to Three Matters to the current EYFS this amounts to a policy investment in providing a developmental support structure to promote equal life chances for two-year-olds. Key to providing this developmental support is ensuring that two-year-olds are able to access a high quality early years education place. Quality is therefore understood as central to the successful provision of places for two-year-olds, but this then raises questions about what constitutes ‘quality’ and leads us to consideration of the contested nature of quality.

#### Thinking about Quality

Debates on the nature of quality in early years provision are well rehearsed (see for example; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Rosenthal, 2007; Penn, 2011; Cottle and Alexander, 2012). The debates are not only about the features that can be used to *describe* quality (both in relation to structural and process characteristics), they are also concerned with the *role* of quality (as a system of accountability or a mechanism for informing and developing practice). Layered upon these debates are contested positions: whether quality is an enlightenment project (with an end goal to be strived for and reached) or a dynamic post-modern concept that is culturally and historically determined. A positivistic and rationalist epistemology frames quality as an evaluative concept (Dahlberg et al., 2007; Moss, 2014), focused on cognitive and economic outcomes, goals, and quality assurance procedures.

 *‘Conditions for learning in pre-school are influenced by ideologies and theories that are developed in global ecosystems and that inextricably link together time, culture and society. Thus, the meaning of pre-school quality and teacher competence is tied to the influence of culture, context and societal intentions relating to the child and childhood (Moss, 2004) as well as to the political and educational intentions for preschool (Sylva et al., 2006)*’ (Sheridan et al, 2011, p. 416).

The cultural contexts of early years settings are complex and can be part of positivist systems of accountability as the result of policy frameworks (such as Ofsted), as well as reflecting the perspectives of a range of other stakeholders: practitioners, parents and children. Here we consider these multiple perspectives and the consequences for practitioners who need to take into account this multitude of views.

The position of a monitoring body such as Ofsted means that it can be open to criticism for operating as a panoptic gaze that monitors, regulates and (according to some) controls early years practitioners (Osgood, 2006). Where the dominant discourse is that of the funding and regulating authority, practitioners may feel pressured into framing their work so that it matches what the funder appears to require, which can raise questions about the authenticity of work and therefore its quality (Löfdahl & Pérez Prieto, 2009). Cottle (2011) talks of practitioners ‘doing quality’ work and finds that practitioners feel that they are learning from accounts of ‘what works’ elsewhere rather than from internally formulated understandings of what might constitute quality, an approach which Biesta (2007) argues ‘won’t work’. The notion of an oppressive system of accountability (Ball, 2003) that moulds the character of provision through various policy objectives (Osgood, 2006) is perhaps inevitable given political structures and their influence on early years practice. However, the degree of variation in the form and activity of early years providers points to the importance of negotiating what quality frameworks mean for individual early years settings and of working out how practitioners understand and respond to different versions of quality.

Ofsted gradings are frequently used as markers of quality (Butler et al., 2014) but Butler et al. also note that Ofsted gradings were poorly correlated with other markers of quality such as ECERS (Harms et al. 1998), a finding which Mathers and Smees (2014) have confirmed. Whilst Ofsted serves the function of monitoring the quality of provision in a mixed market model, such a model also means that, even where places are funded by the state, as with the two-year-old provision, parental choice also plays a role in formulating a view of quality. Whilst there have been criticisms that parents do not always know how to assess the quality of provision, this assumes that there is an agreed definition of quality to which they should subscribe. Increasingly there is evidence that parents turn to Ofsted grades in their assessments of quality, but questions have been raised over parents’ capacity to digest the information provided in the reports (Mathers et al., 2012). Parents also use other ways to come to a judgement about quality; they talk to each other and respond to how they are met within the setting, using their personal experiences and interactions to construct their own judgements of quality (Brooker, 2010). Grammatikopoulos et al. (2014) in Greece and Hu et al. (2014) in Australia note that parents and practitioners may have different priorities in considering what constitutes quality. The market model, however, positions practitioners in a role that requires them to respond to multiple perspectives – including those of parents and Ofsted – to remain viable.

Taguma et al. (2012), working within the epistemological stance underpinning New Zealand’s early childhood education (ECE) curriculum, acknowledge that families and communities need to be involved in developing ‘quality’ provision for two-year-olds, but they recognise that adapting to local needs can pose challenges. Where communities and families are involved in developing provision, they will focus on what works for them and even in local contexts the priorities of families and communities may be complex and conflicted.

The ideas and practices of those working in the early years sector are also shaped by practitioners’ own histories and learning (Cottle, 2011). Their professional experience is rooted in the emotional aspects of their work, aspects that are far less reducible to scales and numbers for measurement. Success is understood as being highly contextualised to the individual setting (Tobin, 2005). Practitioners use more qualitative terms to talk about what early years provision is all about, using the language of subjective experience (feel, care, experience, see, observe), drawing on their own experiences of childhood and of caring for their own and others’ children outside the work context (Wickett and Georgeson, 2012).

### Pedagogy

Given the multiple influences on understandings of quality, it is perhaps unsurprising that there are numerous ways in which to approach how to work with children. Pedagogy is here understood as the implementation of epistemology; thinking in practice about how early years teaching and learning happen. It relates to how practitioners combine caring and educating: how they believe they can help children learn what they believe children should be learning. It covers structural issues such as staffing ratios, staff qualifications and resources as well as curriculum matters: how children should be learning different aspects of the curriculum; and what the role of the practitioner might be. In addition, it extends to how the environment might be arranged to support learning and how the setting invites or deters potential users through the use of what Georgeson and Boag-Munroe (2012) call ‘architexture’: the particular combinations of shapes, materials, textures and colours used to construct and decorate settings.

How adults should go about promoting children’s learning in the early years continues to be subject to debate; while play is widely placed at the centre of children’s learning and development, there is less agreement about how much adults should intervene to guide play. Wood (2009) outlines the development of a pedagogy of play which includes planning and resourcing a challenging learning environment - the more behind-the-scenes aspects of pedagogy - as well as supporting children’s learning through both planned and spontaneous activities. This includes extending and developing language and communication through play as well as observing and assessing through play, to ensure continuity and progression. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) goes further to place the pedagogical role of ‘teaching’ at the centre of efforts to improve quality, but from both perspectives, effective pedagogy is about co-construction of learning between adults and children through the medium of play, in activities which afford opportunities for learning. In the context of the two-year-olds offer, this raises the issue of whether such co-construction, which depends on a level of familiarity, may be more difficult to achieve between practitioner and child than between parent/primary caregiver and child.

In the Swedish view of pedagogy, for example, it is an explicit aim to educate teachers for a professional role and to make preschool more pedagogical, that is, more learning-oriented and of higher quality (Sheridan et al., 2011). In a study based on interviews with teachers from 15 preschools in the cities of Stockholm and Gothenburg and 15 preschools in a rural area in Sweden, Sheridan et al. (2011) suggest that Swedish preschool practitioners need to have the skills of knowing the how and why of teaching, and of understanding that it is relational and situational. Co-construction of a curriculum in contexts where teachers are expected to exercise pedagogical responsibility does not always, however, leave space for child perspectives. Teachers, through their decisions about what questions to ask, are effectively the ones making decisions about what curriculum content to develop, in order to stimulate children’s development through their choice of questions, with the danger that ‘little time is afforded to the children’s own questions, their responses and expressed ideas’ (Jonsson and Williams, 2013).

#### Structural issues

Staffing ratios, qualifications, resources and collaborative ways of working are identified as important structural aspects of quality (Campbell-Barr, 2009) and high value is frequently placed on cleanliness, and the promotion of children’s health (e.g. Sheridan, 2007). Two-year-old children are at a stage of development when they still need nappy changing and sleep routines in the nursery, and approaches to how the intimate needs of these children are met can offer valuable indicators of quality in two-year-old provision. The change required to move from a ‘no-nappies’ policy (as noted in Brooker, 2010) to high quality provision for two-year-olds highlights the extent of the difference between models of pedagogy associated with work with three- and four-year-olds and those required for work with two-year-olds.

In Nordic countries, preschool attendance by children under three is high; in Norway and Sweden, preschool places are offered to children from the age of one year at the parents’ request and in Iceland 93% of two-year-olds attend preschools. Staff in all three countries are well qualified but, in a study using data collected from preschool teachers in Iceland, Sweden and Norway, Alvestad et al. (2014) investigated what practitioners found to be most important and most challenging in their work with toddlers and found that it did not match up to the pedagogical ideals outlined above. The teachers reported challenges in working with young children arising from structural factors (number of children and new physical environments to accommodate these larger groups) as well as issues concerning professional development. These included:

* *lack of specific focus on the youngest children in the revised preschool curriculum.*
* *in-service courses not focused on pedagogical work with young children: instead staff were often instructed just to make adjustments ‘for the smallest ones’.*
* *insufficient coverage of work with youngest children in the education of preschool teachers*

The experiences of teachers reported in this study offer valuable insights for the expansion of provision for under threes:

*“The youngest children are marginalized in many ways both in the public debate and in preschool […]. In reality, the preschool was responsible for children’s upbringing and learning, and the teachers felt like substitute parents. They required clear policy formulation about the ideology and expectations regarding very young children in preschools today. There was lack of understanding from policymakers regarding issues, such as group sizes, and economic profit was valued more than children’s well-being.”* (Alvestad et al. 2014:682).

It is perhaps not surprising that the teachers in Alvestad et al.’s study expressed frustration, given the history of the arguments about pedagogical quality in Nordic countries. In Sweden, for example, quality is understood to be ‘based on security, joyfulness and learning from a sociocultural perspective’ (Alvestad et al., 2014: 674). These teachers felt that structural factors (such as large numbers of children and inappropriate buildings) made it difficult for them to provide what they thought of as high quality pedagogy.

### Interaction

In the UK, *Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children* (HM Treasury, 2004) argues that good quality is about the nature of interactions and relationships within a setting more than staffing ratios. Relationships might be between practitioner and child, child and child, practitioner and practitioner, parent and practitioner, or with other stakeholders who are tangentially linked to the setting. It is generally agreed across the literature relating to early years provision that relationships lie at the heart of practitioners’ work. Relationships with children and parents are frequently discussed and understood to be at the core of early years work, but relationships also need to be built with other practitioners both within and outside the setting. This can generate additional professional development; draw in extra expertise and assist with making visible the work which is done in the setting.

For Edwards (2007, 2011) relational agency, rooted in the relationships which constitute a network of expertise, is a key factor of work in caring environments’. She defines relational agency as:

 *‘a capacity to align one’s thoughts and actions with those of others to interpret aspects of one’s world and to act on and respond to those interpretations. […] it is a capacity to work with others to expand the object that one is working on by bringing to bear the sense-making of others and to draw on the resources they offer when responding to sense-making’*. (p. 3)

From this perspective, practitioners exercising relational agency might be able to put themselves in the position of a two-year-old and attempt to understand how the child is making sense of her world, and then step outside again to use the understandings of how the child’s mind is working to assist the child to work on the activity in which she is engaged.

Papatheodorou (2009) offers a similar line of thinking in her definition of relational pedagogy, which is ‘understood as the empowering force for knowing ourselves […] and others; for making sense of others and making sense of ourselves because of others. [It] is about individuality and the collective consciousness that is shaped and transformed in time and place.’ (p.14). For Papatheodorou, relational pedagogy has the promise of bridging ‘the false dichotomy’ of standards-focused practice and process-oriented work and offers an alternative to the ‘school-readiness’ agenda.

#### Dispositions

Enacting Relational Pedagogy presupposes certain other dispositions, including Noddings’ concept of receptive attention (Brooker, 2010) and Tronto’s (1993) concept of the ethic of care which maintains, continues and repairs our world, and Levinas’ (1989) ethic of the encounter (in which he understands the role of the professional to be to offer a respectful welcome but to take care not to try to make the Other ‘someone like us’, (p.184). What is important is the ability of the practitioner to feel, understand and relate to what is experienced and needed by each, individual two-year-old. The sort of emotional skills needed by practitioners working with young children would therefore include seeing from the perspective of others; empathy; and collaboration, while the care element is about meeting children’s needs; helping, supporting, discerning, identifying, confirming, and offering possibilities. This includes the ability to value, plan, and act to promote a child’s wellbeing, learning and development (Sheridan et al., 2011).

Harwood et al. (2012) consider the role of ‘presence’ in their study of professionalism in the early years in Ontario, Nigeria and South Africa. They offer Rodgers and Raider-Roth’s (2006, p. 265) definition of presence as ‘the state of alert awareness, receptivity and connectedness to the mental, emotional and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of the learning environment, and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step’. The mental demands of working with children who are ‘still struggling to express themselves’ are described by practitioners in Wickett and Georgeson’s (2012) study,

*‘I think it’s a different type of tiredness I would say because you are thinking for them and you are trying to work out what their needs are … The older ones can talk back, but the younger ones, it’s not so easy.”* (Wickett and Georgeson, 2012).

Cottle (2011) points to DfES (2007) and the assertion that the personal qualities of the practitioners are essential to quality, quality here being defined in terms of professional qualifications, intuition and empathy. Other writers (e.g. Berthelsen and Brownlee, 2007; Alexander, 2010) also point to the importance of personal traits and dispositions that make a successful practitioner: the ability to maintain positive relationships; being attentive and responsive; and the ability to build trust. It is how those qualities are attuned to the particularities of being two that will determine the quality of provision in work with that age group.

### Conclusion

As the literature reviewed here shows, quality is a highly complex concept. The quality of provision for two-year-olds can be understood as a product of knowledge (what), pedagogy (how) and interactions (who). From one perspective quality may be a measurable and countable thing, objectively described; whilst from another viewpoint it is more ephemeral, contextual or abstract. Practitioners need to make moment-to-moment decisions about which perspective is foregrounded.

There are some specific behaviours and patterns of organisation highlighted in the literature that can be associated with provision of high quality care and education for two-year-olds. As this review has shown, work with two-year-olds is a complex blend of care, development and learning. The needs of the children can be addressed through structural aspects of a setting (staff ratios, resources, organisation of space and so on) and through the kinds of learning activity that are available to the two-year-olds. These are items that can lend themselves well to measurement and checklists. Less easily definable aspects of the setting and, in particular, the quality of interactions between adult and child, are more difficult to measure but need to be captured in an adequate description of the quality of settings.

# Expert Perspectives on the Provision of Funded Two-year-old Places

### Introduction

As we have seen in the literature review, understandings of quality and perspectives on best practice for two-year-olds are complex and shaped by a range of factors: concepts of children, childhood and childcare, views on the role of early years services, political objectives, parental demands. In turn we have seen how these factors shape the what, how and who of early years provision for two-year-olds. In this section we consider a series of key informant interviews in order to ascertain what are the perspectives of principal stakeholders on quality in early years provision for two-year-olds and revisit the what, how and who identified in the literature review with regard to the interview data. We concentrate on what knowledge is needed to work with two-year-olds and the role that qualifications play in this, how the services are being provided (the pedagogy) and who is providing the two-year-old places and the relationships needed to support this. We begin this section by providing an overview of how the key informants were identified, the questions they were asked and how their responses were analysed. Having presented an overview of the findings we revisit the themes identified in the literature review and consider the next steps of the research.

### Methods

Thirteen key informant interviews were conducted in order to generate an understanding of how the early years sector views quality in early years services for two-year-olds and the challenges and opportunities that have been encountered in delivering the funded two-year-old offer. Key informants were selected to represent the breadth of the early years sector and included because: they were involved in working for charitable organisations representing the views of early years practitioners from across the sectors (private, voluntary, independent and maintained); they were employed by local or national government to support the needs of early years providers and/or were involved in the delivery of the two-year-old offer, or they offered training to those delivering two-year-old places. In some instances the key informants fell into more than one of these categories. Details of the identity of the key informants have been limited in the reporting of the data in order to preserve the anonymity of those who participated. They are all however experts in the field of early years provision because of their roles which provide them with an overview of the perspectives of service providers, and because many of them have been involved in early years services for over 30 years.

Key informants were invited to participate in either a face-to-face or telephone interview. The interviews were focussed around two questions:

1. Quality is regarded as central to the provision of places for two-year-olds. What do you think are the key characteristics of good quality provision?
2. One aspect of the quality of provision is the workforce; how do you feel the workforce has coped with offering two-year-old places?

Prompted by these two core questions we asked respondents to consider what had shaped and informed their responses and whether they felt there were any variables that informed their understandings of quality and the role of the workforce. In addition we asked about their role and background, what they saw as being the next steps for the two-year-old offer and any other comments they would like to make.

Notes were made from each interview and sent to the participants to check for accuracy. They were then analysed in relation to the questions, with a second layer of analysis to identify the themes emerging from the responses (see appendix one for further details). The themes identified were:

* characteristics of good quality;
* child development and an understanding of being two;
* sector variables (including details of variations in quality, funding and sustainability);
* skills needed to work with two-year-olds;
* working with families;
* training;
* communication;
* next steps.

Within the discussion Key Informants are referred to KI followed by a number and description. The number is to indicate the different respondents and the description gives a brief overview of the research participant. The discussion that follows is based on the themes that have been identified, but also relates back to the literature discussed in the previous section as well as to policy agendas around the two-year-old offer.

### Characteristics of Quality

As we have seen in the literature review there are multiple perspectives on what constitutes quality early years provision for two-year-olds. Whilst the key informant interviews reaffirm that quality is a complex and layered construct, and that perspectives on quality for two-year-olds are multiple and varied, a number of clear themes emerge.

Within the interviews it was evident that all respondents were committed to ensuring that the provision for two-year-olds was of high quality. When asked what constituted quality, respondents offered a range of descriptors. The descriptors echo many of the areas discussed in the literature review. The commonality in the descriptors used suggests that there are shared understandings and principles as to what constitutes quality for two-year-olds and that the terms extend beyond subjective standpoints. We have grouped the descriptors into three broad areas: pedagogical practice, the environment and dispositions.

Table 1 presents an overview of all of the descriptors that key informants used to describe what they felt constituted aspects of ‘quality’ in provision for two-year-olds. In many instances respondents suggested that the quality of provision for two-year-olds was not something that could be seen as distinct and different to that of provision for other age groups, as respondents felt that there was a relationship between what settings offered two-year-olds and what they offered other aged children. As one key informant stated:

*‘The process of developing our two-year-old offer involved much the same thought process as when we developed our three- and four-year-old offer.’*

KI:4 Current Practitioner and National Charity Representative

Table 1: Descriptions of Quality Provision for Two-year-olds

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Pedagogical Practice*** | ***Environment*** | ***Dispositions*** |
| * educare (bringing together care and education)
* child-led, children in control of the space
* strong relationships
* play-based approach
 | * stimulating
* free flow with the outdoors
* smooth transitions
* appropriate materials
* home like
 | * love
* reflection
* people who want to make a difference
* Sensitivity
* empathy,
* passion,
* warmth
* being emotionally accessible
* emotional intelligence
 |

The overlap with the other age groups means that key informants often talked about adjusting the elements identified in Table 1 to respond to the children they were working with. In many instances these informants reported that it was less about the age of the child and more about focussing on the needs of the child as advocated by the notion of ‘child led’ practice in the pedagogy descriptors.

#### Pedagogical Practice

As discussed in the literature review, pedagogy refers to ways of working with children and whilst the review identified that there are variations in how pedagogy is interpreted, there were common principles evident within the key informant interviews as detailed in Table 1. The pedagogical descriptors identified are representative of those upheld by the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The relationship to the EYFS is evidence of the effect of historical policy and curriculum developments that focus on a play-based curriculum where children lead their learning – or alternatively that policy and curriculum have finally caught up with practice.

#### Environment

The play-based, child-led approach that we have identified in relation to pedagogical practice does overlap with environmental factors. For example, a number of key informants spoke about the importance of having outdoor spaces for children and ensuring that this was ‘free-flow’ (accessible at all times) so that children could access the outdoors as they wished. The availability of outdoor space was seen as particularly important for those children accessing funded places as it was identified by some key informants that, given the link between the two-year-olds offer and socio-economic deprivation, there were some children who would not have access to the outdoors in their home environment. Here is it important to clarify that the reference to the early years environment being ‘home-like’ was in relation to the indoor environment, with the outdoors offering an additional space. Within both the indoor and outdoor environment key informants identified a need to ensure that there were resources of interest and appropriate for the two-year-olds to play with. Key informants were concerned that toys offered sufficient challenge but considered that some were better suited to older children. However, again there is overlap with pedagogical practice as it was felt that practitioners needed to be able to respond to the needs and interests of the child. As one local authority officer said *‘there is no typical two-year-old’*.

There were evidently different patterns of provision with respect to whether two-year-olds were in the same rooms as three- and four-year-olds or in separate rooms, with no conclusive evidence that one approach was considered better than the other. However, in viewing quality as a concept that stretched across the age groups, many of the key informants offered examples of where they felt that the three- and four-year-old provision had improved as a result of the focus on quality for two-year-olds.

#### Relational Skills

In all interviews, when asked about features of quality, key informants began to talk about the role of the workforce and it was clear that quality and the workforce were inextricably linked. From these discussions it was apparent that the key informants felt that the skills set needed to work with two-year-olds extended beyond measurable indicators of quality (as often featured in quality assessments) towards something less tangible.

 *…it’s beyond qualifications, a personal feel and the ability to deal with difficult situations and questions. I suppose in a way it’s about the emotional intelligence of being able to deal with families and children and their challenges.*

KI:11 Policy Officer, National Charity Representative

The idea that working with young children requires a set of relational skills has been written about extensively (see the literature review), but when working with two-year-olds who are being allocated free early education places due to a wide range of complex needs, it was felt that these skills were even more crucial as practitioners needed to be able to deal with the emotional needs of both the children that they worked with and their families. In turn, some key informants raised a concern that this would also place a pressure on the emotional well-being of the workforce and that this should not be underestimated (see the section below on working with families).

It is difficult to evaluate relational skills when looking to judge the quality of early years provision, as they are not easily defined in a way that can be assessed. This problem also extends to qualifications, as it is not clear whether such skills can be taught/learnt. Previous work has reported that the skills to work with young children are often regarded as innate (e.g. McGillivray, 2008; Penn, 2011), so that individuals either possess the skills or they don’t. Some key informants considered that whilst an individual might be well suited to work with three- and four-year-olds, they might not possess the dispositions needed to work with two-year-olds. Despite this, respondents did feel that qualifications played an important role in ensuring that practitioners were equipped with a range of necessary skills.

#### Qualifications

Nearly all respondents were committed to the recommendation that a Level Three qualification should be a minimum requirement for those working with children (as recommended in the Nutbrown Review, 2012). Key informants praised the progress that had been made in up-skilling and investing in the continual improvement and development of the workforce. However, respondents were also clear that more progress was needed and many had concerns about the qualifications that were available for practitioners, or about the recent reforms that were underway (see Mathers et al., 2014).

Five of the key informants suggested in their interview that the government should have acted on the recommendations of the Nutbrown Review (2012) and introduced a minimum qualification of Level Three for those working with children. However, some key informants raised the need to ensure that the Level Three qualifications were fit for purpose. Concerns raised were in relation to how robust the assessments were and the skills sets of those conducting the assessments. Three of the key informants gave examples of where they felt people undertaking Level Three qualifications had not been assessed regularly enough and where they felt the assessments were ‘light touch’. One key informant (who had been an assessor and was involved in recruiting apprentices) mentioned that it was important to acknowledge that there were different pathways within the Level Three qualifications: college- or employment-based. This key informant felt that there were significant differences between the two pathways, with the college-based route providing more theoretical input that offered greater depth to the qualification, which was not evident in the employment-based route. With regard to the skills of those conducting the assessment, three key informants reported that often those assessing students doing a Level Three qualification only had a Level Three qualification themselves. Their feeling was that assessors needed to hold qualifications higher than those they were assessing (see Nutbrown, 2012: 3.18, 3.19).

It is significant to note that not all key informants were critical of Level Three qualifications and one emphasised that it was important not to undermine the hard work of those who had undertaken and achieved new qualifications. Many of the key informants also noted that the introduction of the Early Years Educator means that the situation could be in the process of changing for the better, although this would need to be revisited. Overall, the interviews suggest a need for continual review of content and assessment of the courses that are on offer, including monitoring the adequacy of Level Three qualifications (including those who assess them) as the Early Years Educator pathway matures. The interviews also suggest revisiting the Nutbrown recommendation of having a Level Three baseline for the workforce.

The introduction of GCSE entry requirements led to conflicting responses from the key informants. Some felt that the notion of minimum entry requirements was a good thing as it would help raise the standards of those working with children, particularly in recognition of the role that these people have in educating children. However, a few key informants questioned whether having good GCSEs would make a difference to the way in which the future practitioners would work with children. One key informant also raised concerns that the minimum entry requirement could potentially deter people from entering the childcare workforce. There are some people who have much to give in terms of working with children, even though they may be academically less able and/or qualified. As one of the key informants commented, excluding these people from the workforce may lead to a shortage of staff in the short term. Overall the key informants were in favour of the focus on up-skilling the workforce, but not all respondents felt that GCSEs in Maths, Science and English were necessary to achieve this. The key informant data also suggest a need to monitor the impact of a tightening of entry requirements on the take-up of qualification pathways as well as on quality of provision, so that any decline in recruitment is detected and acted upon.

Whilst there was considerable discussion about the Level Three qualifications in the key informant interviews, six of those we spoke to felt that there should be a commitment to increase the proportion of staff qualified to degree level (level 6). They observed that people with degrees demonstrate significantly greater depth of knowledge and understanding. Key informants acknowledged that being able to reflect on practice is one way in which to develop the dispositions discussed earlier in the chapter. It was felt that degrees require practitioners to reflect on their practice in a way that would support the dispositions mentioned, but also that reflecting on practice was an important condition for developing the quality of provision. Those who argued for the importance of degree level qualifications felt that degrees helped practitioners to be better able to understand children, and ways of working with children, including how to extend children’s learning.

Whilst there was general support for degree level qualifications, two respondents emphasised that it was important that the degrees should be appropriate for working with two-year-olds. BEd and PGCE qualifications do not usually cover the needs of two-year-olds and they argued that those working in graduate roles with two-year-olds should have a degree level qualification which adequately addressed the developmental needs of these children.

In summary, the key informant interviews indicate that the sector welcomes the focus on up-skilling the workforce and believes that qualifications underpin the quality of early years provision. Many highlighted the importance of both Level Three and degree level qualifications, but they were clear that qualifications need to be fit for purpose, both in how they are assessed and their content.

#### Local Authority Training

Ten of the key informants discussed the training that was provided by local authorities. In some instances it was clear that local authorities had either been proactive in offering training around working with two-year-olds or had been asked by providers to offer training. It was acknowledged that local authorities and charitable organisations offered a range of training opportunities and that during the lead up to the introduction of the two-year-olds places there had been training that was focussed on the needs of two-year-olds, with such training ongoing and extended where needed. Such training sometimes focused on developing an understanding of two-year-olds (see the following section on child development) or in meeting the additional needs that two-year-olds might experience (see the section on working with families).

However, many of the key informants raised concerns that the training offered by local authorities was decreasing and that, in many instances, providers now had to pay to access courses that were once free, as a result of policy changes. In addition, some key informants were conscious that many local authorities had seen a decrease in the number of people they employed to support early years practitioners and this was having a knock-on effect on the amount of support that was available. As a consequence, there were fears that the declining role of local authorities would result in a negative impact on the quality of early years provision.

### Child Development

As stated, many local authorities have been involved in offering training that focussed on the needs of two-year-olds. The focus on the importance of qualifications and/or additional training that considered the needs of two-year-olds was upheld by all key informants stressing that those working with two-year-olds must have a sound understanding of child development.

*They need to understand how two-year-olds learn, how they like to learn, the sorts of character of their learning, their desire for learning.*

KI:3 Trainer, Consultant and National Charity Representative

*It’s the skills and the way staff work and engage with children, so then having that good understanding of child development and the particular needs of two-year-olds.*

KI:11 Policy Officer, National Charity Representative

The justification for knowing about child development was that this was necessary to enable practitioners to respond to the needs of the child without underestimating the abilities of two-year-olds. This emphasis on the importance of focussing on the needs of the child echoes the pedagogical descriptors outlined in Table 1. Key informants felt that those working with two-year-olds needed to be able to respond to the individual child and that a secure understanding of child development was central to this. This was expanded upon by many of the key informants as they noted that the needs of two-year-olds were very complex due to the rapid development that a child goes through at this age. Many of the key informants observed that children who are only just two and those who are nearly three require very different understandings of what it is to be two.

When discussing the need to understand early child development, key informants also drew attention to the fact that the two-year-old funded places are targeted at children with additional needs and/or from disadvantaged backgrounds. As such, the two-year-olds accessing the funded places could often come with additional complex needs that would require a greater understanding of the variation inherent in child development. Key informants felt that it was important that practitioners had a sound and rich understanding of what it meant to be two to enable them to cater for the needs of all two-year-olds and to provide appropriate environments for them.

Despite the complex range of needs that practitioners were encountering when working with two-year-olds respondents spoke about how important it was that practitioners did not underestimate the abilities of these children. They felt that the focus on child development was also about understanding children’s language development and their abilities and interests so that practitioners would feel able to extend their learning. It was apparent within the discussions that key informants recognised child development as complex and more than a series of milestones at particular ages and stages.

### Working with Families

It was acknowledged by the key informants that working with and understanding the needs of two-year-old children also required a range of other skills.

*It’s not just about working with the child, it is about having aspirations for the child and having aspirations for the family and supporting the family to move from where they are… these practitioners need skills in working with parents.*

KI1, Consultant, Training and National Charity Representative

Key informants also recognised the importance of engaging with the home learning environment to extend the learning of two-year-olds. Just as two-year-olds came with a range of complex needs, so did their families and all key informants emphasised that working with children was also about building relationships with their families and that this was a key feature of quality provision for two-year-olds.

*‘There is a large amount of work there with families and being able to engage with the family... the child can be settled, but the family has difficulties that impact on the child being able to take up the place.’*

KI:10 Trainer, National Charity Representative

Key informants from with the local authorities (N=5) particularly acknowledged that the complex needs of two-year-olds and their families often meant that there was a need for additional support within the setting. This support could involve drawing on the expertise of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO), getting advice from the local authority or attending additional training. Key informants identified that early years practitioners were having to extend their skills set to meet not only the needs of the children they were working with on a day to day basis, but also to enable them to engage in additional responsibilities such as participating in Common Assessment Framework (CAF) meetings. In some instances key informants identified that they were aware that some practitioners needed to develop their skills set to be able to make assessments of children and to attend the CAF meetings, and this made additional demands on time and resources.

Even where two-year-old children were not identified as having an additional need or area of support, key informants still stressed that working with families took time and resources. This could be exacerbated for those accessing the funding as the funded children were often from vulnerable backgrounds (for a range of reasons) and it could therefore take time to build relationships with them and their families. Despite the additional time and resources that it requires, key informants still stressed that working with families was an essential feature of quality provision for the two-year-olds funded places.

In a small number of instances key informants acknowledged that in taking children who had been allocated a funded two-year-old place it was important to be aware of existing users of the setting. Just one of the key informants reported that in one setting which took funded two-year-olds, some parents had moved their children to another nursery. This was because parents of unfunded children were concerned that the additional needs of the disadvantaged children and their families would mean that practitioners would be less able to give attention to their children. This was a sole example and in contrast many of the key informants spoke positively about the advantages of having a mix of children from different social backgrounds together in the same setting.

### Leadership and Management

Both working with families and supporting the workforce in their professional development highlights the importance of leadership and management. Whilst the management of a setting can often involve dealing with logistical issues, such as ensuring staff cover for someone attending a CAF meeting and managing resources (see the next section for more details), key informants also spoke about the need for a clear vision on quality with an effective leader to take this forward. Many of the key informants thought that leadership was a feature of high quality provision. Leadership was seen as being key for articulating a vision of quality and then supporting a team to enact this vision. Leadership was also seen as being important for developing the relationships within the setting, to ensure good team working, but also for working with families.

Some key informants discussed the role of leaders and/or managers in supporting the social and emotional needs of the workforce. One of them observed that, for some settings taking on disadvantaged two-year-olds, this is the first time that they have encountered the complexities that socio-economic disadvantage can bring with it. As a result, this key informant was aware of practitioners who were struggling to cope with the emotional pressure of supporting vulnerable families. Other key informants could also think of examples of where practitioners were struggling to deal with the emotional complexities of working with disadvantaged families.

### Sector Variables

Some of the key informants felt that particular early years providers were better able to offer the additional support that both the children and their families needed and often this was related to resources. It was felt that small independent early years providers would be most likely to struggle with providing additional support for two-year-olds as they did not have additional resources on which to draw. Conversely, schools and settings that were either part of a chain or connected to a children’s centre were able to draw upon the additional resources available to support them in addressing the needs of the children and their families. Sometimes the resources were financial, such as being able to pay for staff cover for attendance at meetings or one-to-one support for a child. On other occasions, it was about being able to draw down resources in the form of expertise from a wider team of people other than those present in a small independent nursery.

Being able to access additional resources clearly raises the issue of the level of funding that providers were allocated to provide the two-year-old offer. One key informant reported that the funding allocated was only enough to cover staffing costs, whereas another suggested that the funding was sufficient so long as the child did not need any additional resources or one-to-one support. A small number of the key informants also argued that providers needed to be aware of the number of funded two-year-olds that they were taking so as not to become overly reliant on funded places as they would then be vulnerable if there was a change in the rate of funding. It was also felt that over-reliance on funded places would limit the potential to be able to cross-subsidise the rate of funding by charging for other services.

#### The Role of Schools

Whilst some key informants thought that schools were well positioned to support the additional resources needed for working with two-year-olds, we have also discussed in relation to the workforce the need to have knowledge and understanding of two-year-olds and qualified teachers are unlikely to be trained to work with under-threes. These two contrasting views extend throughout the key informant interviews with diverging opinion as to whether schools are appropriate environments for such young children. Whilst some key informants clearly felt uncomfortable with the idea that two-year-old children were in schools, others felt that schools could offer appropriate environments and opportunities if there was appropriate capacity (in relation to the physical environment) and appropriate knowledge and expertise for meeting the needs of two-year-olds. One key informant also felt that schools might be better placed to build relationships with families as they have a history of being embedded in communities and have already developed trust within those communities.

The key informant interviews do not provide an indication of a consensus over the suitability of any one sector in the provision of early years places. There were clearly differing views on the suitability of schools as environments for two-year-olds. However there was unanimous agreement that those working with two-year-olds need to have knowledge and understanding of child development and capacity to foster positive relationships with families. Key informants also recognised that adequate resources were needed both to develop the skills set of the workforce and to work with families.

#### Quality Assessment Tools

Many of the key informants talked about the use of Ofsted grades as the sole indicator of quality in determining the allocation of funding for the two-year-old places. Recognising that quality in early years settings is complex, some of the key informants felt that Ofsted inspections do not provide sufficient indications of quality. In other instances, key informants referred to recent research that had called into question the accuracy of the Ofsted grades when they were compared with other quality indicators, especially when considering provision for two-year-olds (Mathers et al., 2012). As a result many of the key informants discussed quality assurance schemes that were recommended and/or used by the practitioners they worked with to help guide settings with both their development and the articulation of quality.

Both ECERS and ITERS (Harms et al. 1998; 1990) were mentioned in key informant interviews as were sector and local authority endorsed tools such as the Bristol Standards, the National Day Nurseries Association and Pre-school Learning Alliance’s quality assurance schemes. Such tools were seen to be helpful in guiding practitioners in their self-evaluations and quality improvement. Whilst there was no specific focus on the needs of two-year-olds (with ITERS being the only tool to have an age specific focus that included two-year-olds) it was felt that settings actually needed to be thinking about the quality of their service as a whole. Quality for two-year-olds was therefore part of quality for the whole of the setting and so focussing on developing the quality of provision for two-year-olds was about developing the quality of the whole setting.

### Next Steps according to Key Informants

Many of the key informants called for policy makers to listen to the expert opinion and advice that was available in the sector before making policy changes. Many of the key informants felt that policy makers were not listening to the sector or recognising their concerns about the roll out of two-year-old places (as in the discussion above). Some key informants felt uneasy about the pace of change that had taken place in order to secure sufficient places for the two-year-old offer. Consequently some key informants were in favour of recent recommendations to slow down the expansion of the two-year-old offer until there was a clearer picture of how settings were coping with the current level of provision and of how new qualifications were operating.

Two of the key informants were concerned that school readiness debates and assessments of children in the foundation stage were diverting attention away from focussing on the quality of two-year-old provision. Whilst all key informants supported the core principles of supporting disadvantaged children and their families and investing in early years services, there were concerns that the motives were more about being able to assess impacts on children, than about identifying what is a good quality environment for a two-year-old. In some instances, key informants stressed that having a child who felt safe and secure in their early years environment, with parents who trusted the setting, amounted to success, but there was a feeling that such views of success were not valued within current policy frameworks.

Among the local authority respondents it was clear that local authorities were at different stages of development in regard to their two-year-olds offer. This meant that some local authorities identified their need to promote the two-year-olds offer more widely in order to expand the take up of free places, whereas other local authorities felt they were at a point where they needed to expand their provision. The picture that came through from the key informant interviews was that the level of provision (sufficiency), quality of provision and the support to develop the quality of provision was variable between different local authority areas.

## Key Messages from Key Informants

The data from the key informants presents some clear messages about what is needed to help ensure the quality of funded places for two-year-olds.

It is clear that the early years sector as a whole is working hard to meet the needs of families and children through the two-year-old offer. All key informants agreed that **those working with two-year-olds must have a critical understanding of child development and the complex needs of two-year-olds.** Child development should not, however, be thought of as an easy knowledge set which practitioners simply acquire; they also need to understand that development is the result of a complex interaction between individual predisposing factors, social opportunities and cultural expectations.

In meeting the needs of two-year-olds **pedagogical principles of child-led practice and playful learning were regarded as particularly important** by the key informants.

The key informants supported the drive to up-skill the workforce, but many felt that further steps were required, for example that **a Level Three qualification should be a minimum requirement**.

**At present there are concerns over the adequacy of the Level Three qualification in relation to the thoroughness of the different pathways and the robustness of the assessment**. While the qualification framework has recently been revisited, our findings suggest that there is still a need to look at the assessment processes and the qualification levels of those conducting the assessments.

**Many key informants also acknowledged the role of study at degree-level in deepening practitioners’ understanding**, helping to develop their skills in reflection and to foster the skills, knowledge and characteristics regarded as necessary for working with two-year-olds.

It is clear that the expectations of the early years workforce have shifted as a result of the two-year-old offer and many practitioners are having to expand their skills set to meet the complex needs of the children and families with whom they work. For example, the key informants were very clear that **relationships with families are a key feature of quality provision for two-year-olds and therefore that** practitioners need to be sufficiently skilled in working with families.

The summary above makes it clear that **we are asking a lot from early years practitioners and that they need to be both well prepared and well supported in the work they are being asked to do**. The next stage of the study will help us to find out the extent to which they feel this is the case.

#### Next Steps for the Research

The data collated from the key informant interviews have been used to inform the next steps of the research and extend the review of the literature. One of these next steps is an online provider survey. This survey aims to find out about aspects of the issues raised in this report from a large group of early years providers to develop a broader picture of the current two-year-old offer. The survey considers the nature of the workforce involved in providing places for two-year-olds (such as qualifications levels, additional training accessed), how they have developed their skills to work with two-year-olds and how they feel about working with two-year-olds. In addition to this, the survey has a number of questions that relate to the aspects of quality raised in this report, such as minimum qualification requirements and working with parents.

Alongside the survey we are collating a series of examples of practice. These examples of practice are clustered in four local authority areas and involve case studies of settings. The case studies include interviews with managers and (where possible) setting tours and observations in the settings and discussions with staff about these observations. The case studies are not designed to be representative of all settings but instead offer illustrative examples. We have therefore sampled settings that represent different circumstances, types of settings and urban/rural locations. The case studies will add to the data we have presented here in order to formulate an understanding of the provision of early years places for disadvantaged two-year-olds in England.

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# Appendix One: Analysis of data

All key informant interviews but one were audio-recorded and detailed notes made from the recording. The notes were then sent to the key informants to check for accuracy and to enable them to make additional comments. In most instances the notes were accepted as an accurate account of the conversation, with a few occasions where key informants supplied supplementary information, such internal reports pertinent to the conversations.

All notes were entered into Nvivo for analysis. The first wave of analysis coded the key informant responses in relation to the questions that had been asked (see appendix 1). The second layer of analysis adopted the principles of grounded theory to identify themes that were emerging from the data in relation to each of the questions. This thematic approach was particularly important for the two key questions:

* Quality is regarded as central to the provision of places for two-year-olds. What do you think are the key characteristics of good quality provision?
* One aspect of the quality of provision is the workforce; how do you feel the workforce has coped with offering two year old places?

To support the thematic analysis, a framework analysis using Nvivo was also adopted. The framework analysis enabled the project team to create a summary table that considered the responses to each of the themes by the individual key informants as well as a summary of each key informant’s responses.

Following an initial written outline of the data being generated and to support the discussion of the findings, the recordings were revisited to check for accuracy of analysis and to identify relevant quotes from the key informants. Details of who made the comments that are quoted are limited to preserve anonymity.

# Appendix Two: Interview questions

1. Can you tell me about your role?
	1. How does this relate to the current policy agendas to provide places for two-year-olds?
2. Quality is regarded as central to the provision of places for two-year-olds. What do you think are the key characteristics of good quality provision?
	1. What has shaped this understanding?
	2. What quality assessments are you using within your local area (if relevant)?
3. One aspect of the quality of provision is the workforce; how do you feel the workforce has coped with offering two-year-old places?
	1. Variation between sectors?
	2. Issues relating to qualification levels?
	3. Have you offered any additional training or advice to help support practitioners in offering two-year-old places?
4. What do you see as the next steps?
	* Practitioners (including those not providing the places)
	* Parents
	* Children
5. Are there any other comments you would like to make?