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Understanding the Early Years Workforce

Qualitative research findings

Authors: Jonah Bury, Molly Mayer, Fiona Gogescu, Tom Bristow, Fatima Husain

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NatCen Social Research
35 Northampton Square
London EC1V 0AX
T 020 7250 1866
www.natcen.ac.uk

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Executive summary

Background

In recent years, although there has been a sizable increase in take-up and provision of early years education in the UK, the sector has struggled to recruit and retain practitioners. This has been partly driven by limited development opportunities and low pay.

This qualitative study is part of a multi-strand research project conducted in collaboration with the Education Policy Institute (EPI) and funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The study sought to improve understanding of recruitment and retention challenges in the sector and explore perceptions of 'quality' within the workforce.

Research questions

The main research questions this study sought to answer are:

1. What motivates early years professionals to enter and remain in (or leave) the sector?
2. How and why do managers seek to recruit, retain and develop a 'high quality' early years workforce?
3. What are the barriers and facilitators to the recruitment/retention/development of a 'high quality' early years workforce?

Methods

The research comprised two elements carried out concurrently:

- **Provider case studies** – 9 settings were purposively selected as case studies. Across these 23 in-depth interviews were conducted with managers and practitioners.
- **Timeline interviews** – 19 in-depth interviews tracing professional journeys into and through the sector were conducted with early years professionals.

Key findings

Professional journeys

By analysing the primary motivations for entering and remaining in the sector, experiences of work, and work-related decision-making, a typology of early years professionals was developed. Across all journeys captured in the research three types of professionals were identified:

- *Career professionals* – those who entered and remained in the sector because of an inherent interest in early years education
- *Inspired professionals* – those who entered the sector because it was convenient but remained because they had developed a passion for early years education
- *Pragmatic professionals* – those who entered and remained in the sector out of convenience.

Views on 'high-quality' in the early years workforce

Participants identified both 'hard' and 'soft skills' as markers of 'high quality'. Generally, university degrees were considered helpful, but not essential to be a 'high-quality' practitioner. Key attributes of a 'high quality' workforce included those with:

- *Experience* – previous experience at ‘good’ settings was considered an important marker of a well-trained practitioner with knowledge of safeguarding and child development
- *Adaptability* – the key attributes of this were identified as the ability to respond to changing Ofsted requirements and handle and care for children with different types of needs
- *Communication skills* – the ability to communicate well was viewed as necessary to manage an increase in bureaucratic demands, such as frequent observation requirements and frequent communication with parents
- *Resilience* – this was explained as being able to cope with the emotional and physical labour of the job.

Breaking the professional journey into three core components: recruitment, retention and continuous professional development to help staff stay in the sector, we identified a range of barriers and facilitators for consideration. The key issues are set out below.

Recruitment

- *Inadequate pay* – reduced the pool of ‘high-quality’ candidates and deterred those with responsibilities of being a main breadwinner
- *Low status of the profession* – this meant that it is not viewed as a career-option, specifically for those with university degrees
- *Informal networks* – enabled settings to tap into a pool of local candidates, such as parents, who were already familiar with how the setting worked
- *Reputation of the setting and a favourable Ofsted rating* – reassured applicants about the quality and working environment at the setting.

Retention

- *Inadequate pay* – current levels of pay were viewed as being incompatible with the demands of the job. In school-based settings, practitioners perceived the sector as a ‘springboard’ to teaching reception or primary school children, where pay was higher
- *Emotional and physical labour* – the requirements of the role, such as carrying out ‘burdensome’ tasks such as potty training or teaching children how to brush their teeth were considered physically and emotionally demanding
- *Control over time* – the level of flexibility and the ability for practitioners to manage the amount of time spent with family whilst working helped them to continue working in the sector
- *Ethos of setting* – practitioners were attracted to a setting where the views on child development and pedagogical approach aligned with their own knowledge or beliefs.

Continuous Professional Development

- *Budgetary constraints* – lack of training budgets or limited funds of training resulted in settings either prioritising statutory training only or selectively choosing courses for their staff
- *Releasing staff for development opportunities* – settings experienced difficulties in finding and paying for cover to release staff for training
- *Working with training providers and sector organisations* – working with learning providers and sector organisations was seen to expand training opportunities for priority development areas

-
- *Supportive management* – management that actively encouraged staff to attend training courses or those who provided practical and academic support during practitioners’ part-time studies enabled retention.

Conclusions

Reflecting on some of the wider issues that our research points to, there are three areas of particular relevance for policy action: improving retention and progression pathways; professionalising the early years roles; and attaching more value to the profession.

Improving retention and progression pathways

Turnover of staff constituted a key challenge for settings. The two main reasons for this were lack of progression and limited development opportunities. Any workforce reforms could therefore include a review of:

- Defined training pathways that set out consistent requirements of the amount and type of training required to progress within a setting or between settings
- Key performance indicators for staff and how these align and support movement along progression and training pathways.

Professionalising roles

A mismatch between expectations and the actual job was one of the reasons practitioners considered leaving the sector. To address this, providing detailed and clear information about early years roles as professions should be considered, especially upon entering the sector. This could include strategies that:

- Continue to emphasise the knowledge and skills required to be a ‘quality’ early years professional focusing on a balance between i) the practical skills needed to care for children ii) pedagogical approaches used in the early years, and iii) the science of child development
- Explain the importance of external scrutiny (Ofsted) and requirements for professional practice to help build understanding that achieving and maintaining ‘quality’ where quality is measured against external standards is a core component of the profession.

Attaching more value to the profession

Reflection is needed on the broader issue of the social and financial value associated with the early years sector. To enhance the value of roles within the sector, approaches to consider are:

- Communicating that the profession is critical to addressing structural inequalities and to laying a solid foundation for children to achieve educational outcomes and professional success as adults
- Ring-fencing funds for continuous professional development
- Ways to reducing the pay discrepancies between childminders, group-based settings and school-based settings
- Creating a qualification equivalency between EYTS and QTS
- Matching pay in early years with primary teaching and counteract a perception of the early years as a ‘springboard’ for teaching in primary education
- Reviewing existing childcare qualifications to ensure they are fit for purpose and to avoid a mismatch between practitioners’ expectations and the realities of the profession.

Overall, our research points to committed early years professionals, who enjoy looking after children and struggle to reconcile emotion-based practice with the demands of a process of professionalisation and of maintaining ‘quality’ that is increasingly sought by settings, parents and more widely.

1 Introduction

1.1 Policy background

Over the past five years, the UK Government has introduced policy measures aimed at expanding early years provision for two, three and four-year olds. These include.

- **Extension of part-time entitlement** to the most disadvantaged two-year olds (September 2014)
- Introduction of **free 30-hours entitlement** to all three- and four- year olds (September 2017)
- Announcement of £20 million **Early Years Development Fund** to improving the quality of provision in the sector, with a focus on providing additional training for early years practitioners in disadvantaged areas (June 2019).

The expansion of early years education is a response to the large body of evidence highlighting the contribution early years education can make to addressing social inequalities and helping children's future cognitive, emotion and social development (Bonetti 2018, Sammons et al. 2007). The current government regards access to high quality early years education as a key mechanism to closing the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers: at present, 40 per cent of the socio-economic attainment gap at 16 is already present at age 5 (Hutchinson et al. 2016).

Although quality provision matters for closing the achievement gap and improving children's outcomes (Callanan et al. 2017; Barnes and Melhuish 2016; Lloyd and Potter 2014) it is unclear which features of 'quality' are most effective in doing so (Bonetti and Brown 2018). Operationalising and assessing 'quality' is difficult, because working with young children involves providing support on a wide range of aspects related to their cognitive, emotional and social development. For instance, disagreement exists in the academic literature on whether formal qualifications held by staff – which are more common in school-based providers (SBP) compared to group-based-providers (GBP) – are associated with better results for children. While some studies have indicated that staff and managers' qualifications are associated with 'quality' of provision (Mathers and Smees 2014, Nutbrown 2012, OECD 2012), a recent study by Blanden et al. (2017) suggests that staff qualifications have a more limited association with children's educational outcomes.

One of the most pressing issues affecting the early years sector across all types of provision relates to recruitment and retention of staff. Current turnover rates of 14 per cent for group-based providers and 8 per cent for nursery provision in school-based providers (Bonetti 2018) mean that settings are facing difficulties delivering on the 30-hour free childcare policy (NDNA 2018), with some settings struggling to fill existing vacancies. Poor pay and an absence of career progression routes appear to be significant barriers to attracting staff, particularly those with higher qualifications (NDNA 2018). Attracting well qualified staff is especially difficult for group-based providers, where average pay tends to be significantly lower than in school-based nurseries (Social Mobility Commission 2019).

Limited provision of continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities adds to the challenge of retaining staff. Budgetary constraints have resulted in some settings limiting CPD to mandatory training only (NDNA 2018). Moreover, the increased cost of obtaining qualifications means that fewer practitioners can afford gaining Level 3 qualifications, which is needed to become a qualified Early Years Educator (Bonetti 2018).

1.2 A note on terminology

1.2.1 Early years providers

The fragmentation of the early years sector is reflected in the wide range of providers. In this report, we follow the categories as outlined in the Childcare and early years providers survey (DfE 2018) and distinguish between school-based providers, group-based providers and childminders.

- **School-based providers:** nursery and reception provision in schools, including before- and after-school provision and maintained nursery schools
- **Group-based providers:** childcare providers registered with Ofsted and operating in non-domestic premises
- **Childminders:** Ofsted-registered childminders providing early years care and operating in domestic settings (excluding providers solely on the voluntary register).

1.2.2 Early years professionals

We use the more generic term 'early years professionals' to refer to all participants working in the sector.

Where possible, we make distinctions between different roles, we use the following terms:

- **Practitioners:** practitioners at school-based and group-based settings
- **Managers:** managers at school-based and group-based settings
- **Early years practitioners:** managers *and* practitioners at school-based and group-based settings
- **Childminders:** Ofsted-registered childminders.

1.3 Research questions and aims

The overall research question for the qualitative strand was: What current incentives and barriers exist to the recruitment, retention and development of 'high quality' early years staff?

Five sub-questions underpinned the main research question:

1. What motivates early years professionals to enter and remain in (or leave) the sector?
2. How and why do managers seek to recruit, retain and develop a 'high quality' early years workforce?
3. What are the barriers and facilitators to the recruitment of a 'high quality' early years workforce?
4. What are the barriers and facilitators to the retention of a 'high quality' early years workforce?
5. What are the barriers and facilitators to the development of a 'high quality' early years workforce?

1.4 Methodology

1.4.1 Research design and methods

A qualitative research design was considered the most appropriate approach to addressing the study's research questions. The value of qualitative research lies in its ability to describe what early years professionals experience and how they experience it, and the reasons they attach to their behaviours.

To obtain rich data and capture a wide ranging set of views and experiences at provider and individual levels, two specific methods were used:

1. Provider case studies
2. Individual timeline interviews

Case studies

Case study interviews explored:

- how and why managers sought to recruit, retain and develop a 'high quality' early years workforce
- the barriers and facilitators they faced in doing so.

The interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes and were conducted over the phone or face-to-face. This approach was appropriate since the focus of the case studies was specifically on triangulating experiences of recruitment, retention and staff development, rather than understanding and describing settings in a holistic manner. The interviews were conducted flexibly, guided by a topic guide. Separate topic guides were used for managers and frontline practitioners, which can be found in Appendix C and D.

Timeline interviews

The timeline interviews explored:

- what motivated people to enter and remain in the early years workforce
- routes into and through the profession
- factors encouraging staff to remain in, leave or move around within the sector.

The interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and, except for one telephone interview, were conducted face-to-face. During these depth interviews, we used the concept of a timeline as an elicitation tool. Interviewees were asked to identify the time point when they entered their current role. This time marker was then used as an 'anchor point' to get interviewees to think about their career journey, both back tracing and forward recording of important time points, experiences, decisions, thoughts and feelings. Through face-to-face interviews, we developed with interviewees a chronological timeline on a sheet of A3 paper to visualise the journey and to record key events and experiences. This supported interviewee recall and helped us to seek deeper insights of journeys through the early years sector. The interviews were conducted flexibly, guided by the timeline. The topic guide in Appendix B sets out broad themes covered in the discussion.

1.4.2 Recruitment

We opted for two recruitment approaches: one for case studies and one for timeline interviews.

Case studies

An introductory email was sent to the setting manager. This was followed by a telephone call to provide further detail about the research and enquire about their interest in their setting taking part. Once the manager agreed for the setting to be used as a case study, the manager identified staff to participate in telephone interviews. Study leaflets and a webpage were provided to ensure participants were sufficiently informed about the study. A follow up call with participants was then conducted to provide more information about the research, answer any questions, and to gather information on key sampling criteria. A time and date to conduct the interview was then arranged.

Timeline interviews

In the case of nurseries, initial contact was made with setting managers, who acted as gatekeepers for the research with non-managerial practitioners. We sent an email about the research, followed by a telephone call to provide further detail. Managers were invited to take part in the research themselves or to pass information about the research on to practitioners and let us know if their staff wanted to take part. Individuals who opted in to the research were provided with a study leaflet explaining the purpose and requirements of the interviews and a link to the study webpage, which provided more information, including a privacy notice. A confirmation call was then conducted to answer any questions that participants had, and to gather information on key sampling criteria. A time and date to conduct the interview was then arranged.

The process of recruiting childminders was more straightforward, as no gatekeeper was required. We sent an email about the research, followed up by a telephone call to discuss the study and gather information on sampling criteria. Once the childminder agreed to take part, a time and date to conduct the interview was arranged.

1.4.3 Sampling

We adopted a purposive sampling approach. The underlying principle of purposive sampling is to select a sample that will offer as wide a range of views as possible on a specific issue without leading to thematic saturation. Purposive sample sizes are usually small, selected based on a set of key criteria that are considered most relevant to the research.

Local authorities (LAs) were selected to achieve a geographical spread in terms of region and rurality as well as accounting for levels of affluence. The childcare market and labour market are different across the country (see Bonetti 2018), likely affecting both employers and employees' experiences and decision-making. For timeline interviews, seven LAs were selected, six of which were included for the case studies.

Case studies

Table 1:1 provides an overview of the achieved sample. Overall, 23 depth interviews were conducted with a total of nine case studies across six local authorities. Five case studies included three interviews (one with a senior manager and two with frontline practitioners) while four case studies included two interviews (one with a senior manager and one with a frontline practitioner).

Sampling criteria ensured a range of settings, participants and LAs were included. Sampling criteria for case studies included:

- **LA's proportion of rural/urban population** – using 2011 Census data
- **LA's level of affluence/deprivation** – based on the LA's Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI)

- **Geographic region** – London, Midlands, North, East/South East, South West
- **Participant’s role in setting** – managers or practitioners
- **Provider type** – school-based or group-based providers.

Table 1:1 Case studies – overview of sampling criteria

	Case studies		Participants	
	School-based providers	Group-based providers	Managers	Practitioners
Urban affluent	1	0	1	1
Urban deprived	2	2	4	6
Rural affluent	1	2	3	5
Rural deprived	1	0	1	2
Totals	5	4	9	14
	9		23	

Timeline interviews

Table 1:2 includes an overview of the achieved sample. Overall, we conducted 19 timeline interviews with early years workers.

Sampling criteria were set to ensure we accessed a range of perspectives. Sampling criteria for the timeline interviews included:

- **Provider type** – childminder, group-based provider (GBP) or school-based provider (SBP)
- **Qualification level** – Level 3 and below, Level 3-5 and Level 6 and above
- **Participant’s role** – managerial or non-managerial

Table 1:2 Timeline interviews – overview of sampling criteria

By provider type		By qualification level			By role	
		Level 6+	Level 3-5	<Level 3	Managerial	Non-managerial
Childminder	9	1	7	1	6	3
Group-based provider	6	3	2	1	5	1
School-based provider	4	2	1	1	2	2
Totals	19	6	10	3	13	6

1.4.4 Analytical approach

All interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. The transcribed data was managed and analysed using the Framework approach, developed by NatCen (Ritchie et al. 2013) and embedded in NVivo. Key topics emerging from the data were identified through familiarisation with the transcripts. An analytical framework was drawn up and a series of matrices set-up, each relating to a different thematic issue. The columns in each matrix

represented the key sub-themes or topics and the rows represented individual participants. Data was summarised and categorised systematically by theme. The final analytic stage involved drawing out the range of experiences and views from the charted data and identifying similarities and differences. It is important to note that qualitative samples are intentionally small and qualitative data analysis is *not* focused on the number of people or settings who hold a particular view; instead it thematically considers the range of perspectives.

1.5 Overview of report

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

Chapter two provides an overview of attributes managers seek in 'high quality' staff, the barriers and facilitators to recruiting 'high quality' staff and a range of approaches settings take to recruiting 'high quality' staff.

Chapter three presents barriers and facilitators to retaining 'high quality' staff and different approaches settings use to retaining 'high quality' staff.

Chapter four discusses barriers and facilitators to developing 'high quality' staff and an overview of contrasting approaches settings draw on to developing 'high quality' staff.

Chapter five sets out a typology of early years professionals' journeys through the sector.

Chapter six draws out key conclusions and outlines suggestions for policy.

2 Managing recruitment

This chapter begins by outlining managers' views on key attributes they look for in 'high quality' practitioners. It then provides an overview of challenges early years settings face in recruiting a 'high quality' workforce before presenting a range of factors that can facilitate recruitment. The chapter concludes with an overview of different approaches identified by respondents for recruiting 'high quality' staff.

2.1 Staff attributes

This section discusses the key attributes managers considered to be markers of 'high quality' in staff, including:

- desire to work with young children
- previous experience at 'good' settings
- adaptability
- communication skills
- the ability to 'fit in'
- resilience and empathy.

2.1.1 Desire to work with young children

One view managers of school and group-based providers shared was that a practitioner's ability to engage with children and enjoy working with children was more important than their qualification level. Managers considered this ability and enjoyment to be "*innate*" rather than something practitioners could learn.

"[E]njoying to play with the children (...) I don't think that this can be learnt in university (...) It's more an innate enjoyment of playing with children. I think you need to have that when you're working in the Early Years."
(1047_SBP_Manager)

Managers noted that practitioners who enjoyed spending time with children were likely to be responsive to and patient with children that required more attention. They therefore preferred to train practitioners without formal qualifications than hire more qualified practitioners who did not demonstrate a genuine interest in children and children's development.

"You can be as qualified as you like, but if you don't enjoy children (...) that shows up straightaway."
(7072_GBP_Manager)

One approach settings employed to determine whether practitioners enjoyed working with children was to observe how practitioners interacted with children when recruiting new practitioners. This ensured they did not rely on their qualifications or interview performance alone (see 3.4).

"I've had interviews where they've talked the talk and they've been absolutely fantastic and they've gone to work with the children and they've just got nothing about them."
(3091_GBP_Manager)

2.1.2 Experience at good¹ settings

School-based managers valued practitioners with prior experience in ‘good’ settings, which they regarded as more important than their level of qualifications. Practitioners who had been employed at ‘good’ schools were seen as well trained and knowledgeable on essential aspects such as safeguarding, child protection and child development, even if they had different qualification levels.

“I wouldn’t judge someone that has an NVQ or a degree or a master’s because I have staff that have the three different qualifications that have the same high standards of practice (...) I would say the practice and the experience in working in a high-quality environment is much more important than their qualification.”

(1047_SBP_Manager)

2.1.3 Adaptability

Adaptability was another attribute managers at school and group-based settings looked for in ‘high quality’ practitioners. They considered adaptability important for two reasons: firstly, to respond effectively to what they saw as constantly shifting Ofsted requirements on settings. Secondly, to adapt to the variety of needs children had. A manager of a standalone independent nursery explained this by contrasting the importance of adaptability “*on the ground*” to standardised requirements set out by the head office of a nursery chain; unlike their own setting, people in the head office of nursery chains did not fully understand that differences in children’s backgrounds required practitioners to adapt their practice.

“[T]heir standards are rolled out from a head office, from a faceless person who doesn’t know the children within the setting. Whereas our practitioners are given the freedom to tailor the environment, the curriculum, the routine, to suit the children that are currently attending.”

(4053_GBP_Manager)

2.1.4 Communication skills

Managers in school-based settings explained that the demands of the role could not always be met by “*hands on*” training on the job or a willingness to learn but required more formal communication skills. Because observations and paperwork have become a key part of the job in early years, managers expected practitioners to be capable and willing to do the bureaucratic side of the role as well. This involved weekly observations, written plans for development and regular assessments of children’s progress.

“I’m looking for someone that also has a lot of knowledge in terms of (...) planning, and observations, that paperwork side, yes, let’s say, bureaucratic side of the role.”

(1047_SBP_Manager)

Maintaining effective school-parent relationships was another reason communication skills were regarded as important. In the example of a preschool that feeds into a private primary school, the manager searched for candidates who were able to communicate with parents of what they considered a higher professional status, such as doctors or lawyers in a way that demonstrated competence and trustworthiness. The manager selected candidates based on candidates’ good command of grammar and writing skills because of the high academic standards from practitioners they felt fee-paying parents required.

¹ In this context, ‘good’ describes early years professionals’ perceptions of a setting rather than the Ofsted rating.

“I want to know that they can communicate with our parents in a way which builds confidence (...) I also want to know that they can write well. They could write a written communication, if they were to respond to a parent, if they were writing a pupil report. I want to know they've got good levels of grammar and writing (...)”
(5024_SBP_Manager)

This setting looked for candidates with degree level qualifications to meet the requirements of communicating with parents, even if candidates' degrees were not directly related to the early years education or development.

2.1.5 Fitting in with the team

Managers of group-based settings and nurseries in maintained schools considered how candidates would fit in within the existing team before hiring them. They felt this led to team cohesion, which was necessary when working with colleagues in early years.

“Early Years is a really big team effort and (...) staff members have got to get along.”
(2027_SBP_Manager)

Those with this view regarded qualification levels, teaching skills or prior experience were less relevant if an individual's personality complemented the team.

“I'm not too worried about the level of their qualifications because I can train them (...) [S]ometimes (...) previous experience isn't what I actually want. I want them (...) to fit into the staff team because I've got a quite a varied staff team.”
(7052_GBP_Manager)

2.1.6 Resilience and empathy

There was agreement among managers that childcare was an emotionally and physically tiring occupation and required staff to be resilient. One view was that resilience was about the ability to cope with children's many needs. Especially in more disadvantaged areas, school-based practitioners were expected to carry out 'additional' tasks they might have been unprepared for, such as potty training or teaching children how to brush their teeth.

“The potty training is really a killer for nursery staff.”
(2027_SBP_Manager)

Another view was that resilience was important for dealing with vulnerable parents. A manager of a nursery school in a deprived urban area explained they looked for staff that empathised but remained unaffected when dealing with “tricky” parents, such as those suffering from alcohol or drug misuse.

“[Q]uality is (...) somebody (...) who can contain parents when they're upset, can empathise and understand but can put boundaries around it (...) skills that come into play when you're dealing with tricky parents.”
(1003_SBP_Manager)

2.2 Barriers

2.2.1 Low pay

There was a view that low pay reduced both the quantity and the 'quality' of applicants. Three implications related to low pay were identified:

- single-earner families choosing better paid professions to support their family than the early years
- graduates opting for better paid professions
- 'high quality' practitioners seeing early years as a 'back-up' to reception or primary stage.

Managers argued that the practical difficulty of supporting a family with low income deterred those with responsibilities of being main breadwinner. Managers believed this was the primary reason few men applied for jobs rather than their gendered perceptions of the profession. The relatively low pay in early years compared to other graduate professions also meant there was a limited pool of qualified candidates that wanted to join the workforce. Managers therefore had mixed views about the governmental policy of attracting more graduates into the sector.

"They're trying to make the job more appealing, so they've opened it up to graduates which is a brilliant idea, but in practicality they have not got the money. They can't pay graduates a graduate wage."
(7025_SBP_Manager)

Managers felt that aspirational candidates regarded the early years as a "back up" to a better paid job at reception and primary level. This perception meant that settings either received few applications or struggled to retain staff once they got better positions (see 4.1). For example, a manager at a school-based setting contrasted the lack of applications at their nursery with the high volume of applications at their primary school.

"When the job went out for a reception teacher there was a deluge of responses (...) [F]or the pre-school years (...) not (...) because I just think it's the pay that completely puts people off."
(5024_SBP_Manager)

2.2.2 Low status profession

There was concern that wider society regarded the role of early years practitioner as "easy" and "unskilled". As a result, they believed that career-minded individuals eliminated the early years profession as an option.

"I don't think anyone thinks of it as a career. I think they think it's just something to do."
(7025_SBP_Manager)

Managers in both nursery schools and group-based settings felt that applicants who chose to work in the early years sector because it was "just something to do" often lacked the required qualifications or experience. In their view, this was reflected in the high number of unsuitable applications received.

"You can put an advert out and you might get 25 applications and you'll go to the long list and shortlist and think oh my God, these applications are absolutely dreadful (...) that is a symptom of how people see the profession. They see it as less professional than it is."
(1003_SBP_Manager)

2.2.3 Inadequate qualifications

Managers emphasised that applicants' limited understanding of the professional demands resulted from the poor quality of their NVQ training or BTEC qualifications. They believed

these qualifications were lacking in theoretical and practical terms and did not teach practitioners about the meaning of purposeful play or *how* to interact with children. This stood in contrast with the quality of older qualifications such as the National Nursery Examination Board (NNEB), which better equipped practitioners for the role.

“I can't find any good staff that meet those kinds of staff that did their NNEB (...) [S]taff that actually were really good with children, could play with children and understood play (...). Nowadays they don't know how to play with children when they come into a nursery and they don't know how to change nappies. They're not trained up to do these things and training is a huge problem.”
(7025_SBP_Manager)

2.2.4 Limited flexibility

Early years professionals were attracted to settings that gave them flexibility over their working hours and days. This was because it allowed them to combine their job with family commitments. Settings unable to provide practitioners with this flexibility and control found recruitment of staff challenging. An example of this included a group-based setting, which found it challenging to recruit staff because they were only open on three days a week and unable to offer practitioners any flexibility on those days.

2.3 Facilitators

2.3.1 Early years as a vocation

Because intrinsic motivation for working with children was a key reason for entering the early years (see 5.2), there was always a supply of candidates who applied regardless of pay. For such individuals, their vocational career choice meant money was secondary.

“[A] lot of people are in it for the love of the job rather than, as I say, for the money at the end of the month.”
(7072_GBP_Manager)

However, managers were clear that a desire to work with children did not in and of itself guarantee a ‘high quality’ workforce.

2.3.2 Informal networks

Managers in group-based settings discussed the usefulness of informal local networks for finding ‘high quality’ candidates. They were able to tap into a pool of potential staff, for instance by offering parents volunteering opportunities at the setting. This had the advantage that parents were already familiar with colleagues, processes and the ‘ethos’ of the nursery and so required no time settling in. Parents’ knowledge of the setting also meant they were likely to maintain team cohesion and *“fit into the system”*.

A second advantage was that using informal local networks was beneficial for building effective relationships with parents. This was because parents perceived practitioners as being like them if they came from the same area.

“All my staff are local, and I find that actually helps with understanding and knowing the parents who live in the area as well.”
(7052_GBP_Manager)

2.3.3 Reputation and Ofsted rating

One key factor practitioners considered when applying to settings was the setting's reputation. Practitioners who lived near the setting relied on local knowledge or word-of-mouth to gain an informed view of the setting. Others looked at Ofsted reports, which provided practitioners with a detailed understanding of the setting's 'ethos' and helped them decide whether they would fit in.

Similarly, managers suggested that Ofsted ratings were a way to reassure applicants about the quality of provision and working environment at a setting.

"We have an 'outstanding' setting (...) I think that attracts high-quality staff (...) [P]ractitioners that don't come to view the setting before they apply (...) think, oh, it's an 'outstanding' setting so it's going to be good, for sure."
(1047_SBP_Manager)

2.3.4 Using online job boards

Settings trying to recruit candidates beyond their local area used online job boards. It expanded the pool of applicants and helped to find a candidate that matched their expectations or brought innovative practice to the setting.

However, others disagreed about the value of using online job boards. For instance, a manager at a group-based setting in a deprived urban area felt that advertising online was often time-consuming and did not enhance the 'quality' of applicants. Instead, the view was that some applicants were not serious about working in the sector.

"Probably when we're looking for staff I probably spend most of my time arranging interviews that don't turn up (...) [M]ost of the time they're not actually interested in childcare (...) just ticking a box for their Jobseeker's."
(3091_GBP_Manager)

2.4 Approaches

Managers based their recruitment approach on three considerations:

- the local area
- the families their settings catered for
- the type and size of setting.

Differences in approaches were reflected in how candidates were targeted, assessed, and the process by which final decisions were made.

2.4.1 Advertising jobs

'Formal' advertising

This approach was the more standard approach to recruitment. Jobs were advertised to a broad audience, using online job boards and sector specific magazines and newsletters. The rationale for this was to maximise the chances of finding candidates with the required qualifications or experience. In particular, school-based providers and nursery schools pursued this 'formal' targeting of candidates. They published detailed job specifications, with input from senior stakeholders, such as trustees, head teachers and managers.

'Informal' targeting

This involved reaching out to known individuals usually by word of mouth, or advertising in local schools, libraries and businesses. The perceived benefit of targeting individuals with local ties was to have a workforce that was familiar with the local context, understood families' needs and as a result was able to maintain supportive relationships with parents.

2.4.2 Assessing candidates

Formal assessment

Deploying standard recruitment practices, nurseries reviewed candidates' application forms and shortlisted the most suitable ones based on how well they matched the requirements of the role. In settings where formal processes were the norm, one or more of the following activities were organised:

- **The formal interview** – a formal interview with a manager or panel interview with senior staff, such as early years managers and head teachers, was reported as being crucial to learn more about candidates' motivations and expectations. It also provided an opportunity to clarify any questions related to the CV.
- **Lesson observations** – these gave managers the opportunity to see how practitioners applied their knowledge of child development to their classroom practice and how well they interacted with children. It was viewed as benefiting 'high quality' practitioners who underperformed in the interview.
- **The written task** – managers who had used written tests felt that it gave them an indication of the candidates' literacy skills. Communicating by writing well was described as a key skill for the workforce, both for communicating with parents and preparing reports.

'Soft' assessment

An alternative approach described by group-based setting managers was a process which did not require filling out standard application forms. This was also a way to limit the burden on candidates and typically recruited from a pool of local candidates they knew, for instance parents that had previously volunteered at the setting. Parents' or other volunteers' experience at the settings also meant that managers knew about their ability to interact with children without requiring a formal observation. Any interviews held were therefore more 'informal' chats with one senior member of staff.

2.4.3 Deciding on candidates

Senior decision-making

This was reported as the practice undertaken at school-based providers. The number of senior leadership members involved in decision-making depended on the position advertised. More members of the senior leadership team tended to be involved in appointing teaching staff rather than support staff, as a teaching position carried more responsibilities.

Collaborative decision making

- **With parents** – this approach was favoured by group-based settings with strong parental involvement, for instance through parent committees. This had the advantage of considering other factors alongside 'hard' qualifications. In one example, a parent decided with a manager to hire a 'quality' practitioner with

experience or working with special needs children even though they did not hold formal early years qualifications.

- **With staff** – There were examples of settings that involved staff in hiring decisions. Such settings tended to be small group-based providers with high levels of need among their children and where practitioners relied on each other to sustain motivation and team cohesion. The inclusive approach of involving all staff made practitioners feel valued.

3 Managing retention

This chapter maps the barriers and facilitators to retaining ‘high quality’ professionals by drawing on views from managers and practitioners. It concludes by outlining two contrasting approaches to retaining ‘high quality’ staff.

3.1 Barriers

3.1.1 Inadequate pay

Managers and practitioners in school and group-based settings saw pay as a key barrier to retaining ‘high quality’ professionals. There were several concerns related to pay:

- the inadequate pay for single-earner families
- a discrepancy between pay and workload
- poor pay progression.

Early years professionals who were primary or sole earners did not believe their salary enabled them to support their family. This meant they did not view childcare as a long-term career option for them. A manager of a school-based setting explained their deputy was close to leaving for this reason.

“[M]y deputy is going to leave in the next year (...) because she can't afford to live on what I'm paying for her.”
(7052_SBP_Manager)

Unqualified practitioners and support staff were especially concerned about the heavy workload relative to their pay. The job required practitioners to juggle their time between a range of tasks: managing crises related to the safeguarding of children; overseeing classroom activities; completing detailed observations; and preparing for lessons.

“[T]here are so many demands made of you and expectations to bring stuff home, to bring planning home, to bring assessing home (...) [W]hen they're getting paid £7.50 an hour (...) you just think well why on earth should I carry on with this?”
(5024_SBP_Practitioner)

There was scepticism among managers about the introduction of free 30-hours entitlement to all three- and four- year olds, as they believed the policy added pressure on settings to deliver more hours for less money. For settings, this could mean reducing staff salaries and losing staff to other sectors.

Limited pay and career progression meant practitioners found it difficult to commit long-term to the early years sector. Managers explained that practitioners joining school-based settings tended to perceive the sector as a ‘springboard’ to teaching older age groups, where pay and career progression was better. Particularly teaching assistants joined the setting with a view to progress to teaching older year groups.

Other unqualified practitioners joined school-based settings to gain experience before going to universities to get their teaching qualifications. For example, a manager of a school-based setting recounted losing practitioners who went to work in primary education after gaining their teaching qualifications.

“[L]ot of young girls (...) are a couple of years with us (...) and then they move on to do teaching qualifications ... [T]hey take this as a learning process, but then they

don't want this because there's not a lot of career progression, and I think the salary's very low."
(1047_SBP_Manager)

3.1.2 Lack of social recognition

There was a sense of frustration practitioners expressed about the lack of recognition for the sector and its workforce. The societal view that working in early years was “easy” did not match their own experience. They believed their role was demanding, especially because it included a range of different tasks when compared to other education sectors.

"I think we're seen to be the poor relations of the education world really, whereas having worked in secondary and now this, I think that people who work in Early Years (...) have to have a much more rounded skillset."
(5024_SBP_Practitioner)

3.1.3 Emotional and physical labour

Practitioners emphasised how emotionally and physically tiring their jobs were. One reason for this related to the amount of paperwork required, which practitioners felt had increased over the past years and added to an already high workload. Professionals in deprived areas explained that in addition to paperwork, the range of ‘parental’ tasks added to their high exhaustion levels.

"You're not just educating children, you're teaching them (...) how to toilet, how to speak, basic things that really parents should have taught their children and it makes it really difficult. Every day is, we go home tired every single day, emotionally as well."
(2027_SBP_Manager)

One response to such additional tasks was to remain in the setting, display resilience (see 2.1) and invest “*that extra mile*”; such early years professionals did so because they regarded their job as a vocation. A contrasting response was to consider leaving.

"I just felt like I couldn't do it. I felt like I didn't have the brain space to help new children (...) I needed to be somewhere where I didn't need to be so front facing all the time."
(1047_SBP_Practitioner)

3.2 Facilitators

3.2.1 Control over time

For practitioners, control over free time included:

- controlling the amount of time spent with family
- controlling the time spent on gaining qualifications on the job.

Practitioners in group-based settings valued the ability to structure their work around their own family commitments. For example, a practitioner at a group-based setting regularly needed time off and praised their setting for being accommodating.

"[M]y son's actually got a very rare kidney condition and sometimes ends up hospitalised (...) They'll adapt my hours around whatever hospital visits and stuff he needs."
(7052_GBP_Practitioner1)

Those who pursued degrees while working appreciated being able to control the time they spent on gaining qualifications. This was facilitated by settings finding suitable working arrangement for practitioners during their studies. A practitioner at a group-based setting explained the benefits of working ‘compressed hours’, which allowed them to spend a whole day per week on their studies.

“My degree for example, doing it alongside work, they've been massively supportive of that (...) I have a day off in the week in addition to two days off at the weekend. I don't think I would be able to study if I worked five days a week.”
(4053_GBP_Practitioner)

3.2.2 Ethos of setting

It was important for practitioners to develop a sense of belonging to their setting. They wanted the ‘ethos’ of the setting to align with their own views on child development. For example, a practitioner remained at their setting because they strongly identified with the setting’s pedagogical philosophy, which had initially attracted them to the setting.

“I wanted to find a place that had Free Flow Play. Like play the way (...) I understand play. Whereas, I found a lot of other places (...) had really structured play.”
(1047_SBP_Practitioner)

For others, a setting’s ‘ethos’ was about strong ties with parents. These were developed when early years professionals lived locally and knew the children’s families. For example, a practitioner at a village pre-school contrasted their experience of school-based settings with their current setting that made them feel part of a “community”.

“[T]he community idea is very appealing to me, so knowing the families and seeing siblings coming through and knowing them (...) [J]ust being part of a community and just knowing all the families is just the best thing really.”
(7072_GBP_Practitioner1)

3.2.3 Enjoying working with children

For practitioners the enjoyment of working with children was decisive in choosing to remain in the sector. They valued the tangible feeling of achievement from being able to watch individual children grow and develop in the nursery environment.

“They start with us at two and a half and some of them are shy and not very confident and now they're about to go off to school full of confidence and you can see that they've progressed (...) [T]hat sort of thing, so that's the reward I feel.”
(7072_GBP_Practitioner1)

Other practitioners framed their enjoyment through the prism of “doing a difference for young people”. They were motivated by the ability to address social inequalities through teaching. Individuals with this view tended to be highly qualified and included young practitioners educated at master’s level or senior staff with National Nursery Examination Board (NNEB) qualifications.

3.2.4 Supportive management

Practitioners identified leadership as an important factor for remaining at their setting. One feature they valued in senior management was consistency of behaviour and openness towards staff views. This was seen to maintain staff morale. A practitioner at a nursery

school explained how their senior manager combined these attributes, which had the immediate effect of improving staff retention.

“[O]nce she came, I felt this is stable again (...) She's very strict about things but she listens to everybody. She lets people have their own ideas. She'll discuss things.”
(1003_SBP_Practitioner1)

Another aspect valued by practitioners was being empowered to introduce changes to classroom practice. In settings where managers had given staff autonomy to adapt their curriculum to the children's needs, staff felt the quality of provision improved.

“I feel the more the staff feel involved and the more they have ownership of their environment (...) it works better for everybody.”
(4053_GBP_Practitioner)

3.3 Approaches

Differences in settings' approaches to retain staff related to their perception of staff as professional and/or individuals.

Valuing staff as professionals

Managers in school-based settings knew opportunities for internal promotion or training opportunities were key to retaining staff. They displayed two strategies to ensure staff felt valued as professionals.

- **Intensive and ongoing professional support** – combining intensive support at the beginning of a practitioners' time at the setting with ongoing support throughout had three advantages:
 - Keeping staff motivated
 - Ensuring 'high quality' provision across the setting
 - Avoiding feelings of professional stagnation.

Intensive support consisted of assigning a mentor to each member of staff and practitioners receiving weekly feedback on the quality of their lessons and paperwork from a senior member of staff. Ongoing support was less frequent but still included regular meetings with line managers to discuss individual continuous professional development (CPD) needs, peer-moderation of paperwork or peer-observations.

- **Providing a range of training opportunities and choice** – providing practitioners with a range of training opportunities and the autonomy to select training opportunities based on their interests increased practitioners' job satisfaction. The ability to shape their own development was particularly important for practitioners who had left previous settings because of having training imposed on them.

Valuing staff as individuals

A contrasting approach to maximise retention was to offer benefits to make staff feel valued as individuals. Managers in both setting types used three strategies to achieve this.

- **Enhancing team dynamics at the setting** – practitioners were happy at settings that generated a “family” atmosphere where staff treated each other as “friends”. This was particularly valued by practitioners in group-based settings who attached less importance to their professional development. Managers achieved this family atmosphere in two ways.

-
- being supportive in allowing staff to fit work around family commitments and working part-time
 - organising informal social events, which enabled staff members to get to know each other in a non-professional context.
 - **Embedding the setting within the community** – by fostering local ties with parents, managers created a sense of belonging that practitioners cherished. There were two strategies of doing this.
 - holding regular community events such as fundraising events with parents
 - hiring parents who had volunteered at the setting.
 - **Offering perks** – by offering different types of perks, settings set themselves apart from other competitors. The types of perks offered differed and included.
 - private healthcare packages
 - free tea, coffee and fruit.

4 Managing development

This chapter maps managers' and practitioners' views on barriers and facilitators for developing a 'high quality' workforce. It then explores different approaches adopted by settings to developing 'high quality' staff.

4.1 Barriers

4.1.1 Budgetary constraints

Managers in both setting types were concerned that budgets restricted their ability to invest in continuous professional development (CPD). This had two implications for settings:

- prioritising statutory training over more specialised courses
- assessing the usefulness of courses in terms of value for money.

There was a view among group-based providers that paying for expensive statutory training left little money for non-statutory specialist courses. This meant that settings could not afford training courses that could improve practitioners' professional development and deepen their interest in thematic areas.

"[W]e have to be picky about what we do because there isn't much money in the pot. So, we do the things we have to do (...) [T]hey have nice conferences and things with great workshops but they're lots of money. They're £80 or something that we can't justify spending."

(7072_GBP_Practitioner)

In settings where practitioners requested to attend non-statutory training courses, the limited training budget required them to make a 'business case' to their superiors. This included outlining the benefits of taking up the training for themselves and their workplace. This expectation led to staff phrasing their requests in terms of value for money; for training to be approved and deemed relevant, it needed to have impact beyond the practitioners' own development.

"[I]f there's a course that you want to go on, we [practitioners and managers] have to submit to him [the head teacher] to say why we'd like to go on it and what would be the benefit of us going on it."

(2027_SBP_Manager)

In more deprived urban areas, managers explained that developing 'high quality' staff was made difficult through the removal of local authority grants. These grants would have previously enabled practitioners to study on the job. The removal of such grants limited practitioners' in-work development opportunities unless they were able to self-fund their studies.

4.1.2 Providing cover

Across both provider types, managers found it challenging to release staff for training opportunities because of the costs and difficulty of finding cover in their absence.

"If they have to go out of class, we have to get someone to cover their position, which is just impossible because we don't have anybody to cover in school."

(2027_SBP_Manager)

A solution to this was to offer training outside working hours. One view was that it was convenient, as it allowed early years professionals to stay at the workplace without needing

to travel. However, this was not viable for those with family commitments, as they did not have the time to pursue training outside working hours.

4.1.3 Timing of recruitment

Developing professionals was difficult for settings where senior staff delivered in-house training to more junior staff and where new staff members were hired at the beginning of the academic year. New staff needed to be trained when settings were already very busy with a new intake of pupils. Where senior professionals did not have the time to commit to training new staff, it could therefore take several years before new members were fully upskilled.

“The one I've got at the moment she's only been with me for a couple of years. She's actually starting to be very useful now, but there are still some things that she needs training on.”

(7052_GBP_Manager)

4.1.4 Local authority provision

Early years professionals felt there were limitations to attending local authority training sessions. Senior early years professionals expressed a view that local authority courses were pitched at the level of inexperienced practitioners. This left more senior professionals with a lack of local and affordable training options that suited their development needs.

“I think sometimes, myself and my deputy because we've been doing this for a long time, get frustrated that if we want to develop our knowledge base, a lot of the courses (...) are aimed at people with less experience.”

(7052_GBP_Manager)

Another concern raised by early years practitioners was that local authority trainers lacked the relevant practical experience of working in an early years setting. This meant they were unable to provide practical solutions to queries raised at training sessions.

4.2 Facilitators

4.2.1 Working in partnership with training providers and sector organisations

Settings worked in partnership with specialised training providers and sector organisations to expand the offer of courses available to practitioners. To reconcile the need for specialist training with limited budgets, settings turned to training providers and sector organisations for priority areas. For example, a school-based setting needed to train staff how to work with children in the outdoor area and brought in a specialist provider to deliver specialist training, which they would not have received at their local authority.

4.2.2 Supportive management

Practitioners felt motivated to develop professionally when they were supported by their management. One view on what constituted supportive management included management that gave practitioners time off by (a) providing cover and (b) avoiding to impose negative consequences, such as not paying staff on the day of their training.

Other practitioners praised management that provided practical and academic support during their studies. For example, a practitioner at a school-based setting recounted being supported by their setting during their Level 3 degree, partly because the nursery was keen to have a higher number of Level 3 staff.

“If I needed any help within the module that I was doing, they would provide any paperwork to help me (...) They were just always there to help. (...) [H]aving another Level 3 is much better for the nursery (...).”
(7025_SBP_Practitioner1)

For another group of practitioners, supportive management was about encouraging staff to identify training opportunities for their own development goals. Being tasked with identifying training needs was seen to make the training meaningful, even if it could be difficult for staff to identify their development goals.

“[E]ven though I'm not always feeling like I know what I wanted or where I'd go (...) I feel like I'm really well pushed (...).”
(1047_SBP_Practitioner)

4.3 Approaches

Settings demonstrated two contrasting approaches to staff development that related to (a) the existence of a setting-wide development strategy and (b) the range and type of training opportunities.

The comprehensive approach

School-based settings demonstrated a more comprehensive approach to developing ‘high quality’ staff. There were four elements underpinning this approach.

- **Setting-wide development plans** – these school-wide development plans covered areas of improvement based on management’s assessment of priority areas. Managers used the development plan to inform some of practitioners’ learning needs and objectives. This ensured that practitioners improved collectively and consistently in a specific area the setting identified as important.
- **Inset days** – putting aside several designated development days during the academic year enabled settings to enhance practitioners’ learning on different subject areas and provide time to reflect on practice. Some settings used inset days to invite external speakers; others relied primarily on senior practitioners delivering sessions and cascading learning, as this was a more cost-saving alternative.
- **Networking with other settings** – setting up formal relationships with other local settings to encourage peer-to-peer observations allowed early years professionals to critically reflect on their own teaching, pick up examples of good practice, and introduce innovative practice at their own setting.
- **Multiple training sources** – drawing on a wider range of training provision – including local authority training, training provided by external training providers and training sessions delivered by more experienced members of staff – allowed practitioners to access different types and levels of training depending on their needs.

The basic approach

Group-based settings displayed a more basic approach to developing ‘high quality’ staff. There were two features to the basic approach.

- **Lack of designated training days** – not having designated inset days restricted settings in the quantity of training they could provide to practitioners. This resulted in settings either offering no designated training day or being restricted to one annual training day dedicated to a priority area, such as learning about the new Ofsted framework.

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- **Reliance on fewer training sources** – a lack of money for training meant that setting offered a more limited range of training opportunities to staff, and either relied on local authority training or on informal training sessions provided by senior practitioners.

5 Journeys through the sector

This chapter presents a typology of early years professionals' journeys through the sector based on an analysis of timeline interviews. It begins with a rationale for analysing the journeys as a unit. It then explains how self-determination theory was used to analyse early years professionals' motivations for entering and remaining in the sector to inform the development of the typology. Three types journeys were identified:

- **Career Professionals:** Early years professionals who entered and remain in the sector because of an inherent interest in early years education.
- **Inspired Professionals:** Those who entered the sector because it was convenient but remain in the sector because they have developed a passion for early years education.
- **Pragmatic Professionals:** Individuals who entered and remain in the sector out of convenience.

Within each typology, the ways in which professionals' motivations influenced their movement within the sector, engagement with training and continuous professional development (CPD), and intentions for the future is explored.

5.1 Developing a typology

The unique value of the timeline interview methodology is that it allows for an exploration of how past decisions and actions influence future behaviour. To maintain this value, it was necessary to analyse each journey as a unit. The decisions each early years practitioner made when they entered the sector and while working in the sector were treated as interrelated, rather than as separate decision-making processes. Through analysing the journeys in this way, common patterns and themes were captured.

From these emerging patterns and themes, a typology was created. To develop a typology, people or phenomena are categorised based on different dimensions and processes. It involves working from the data, searching for common themes and behaviours relating to key dimensions, and grouping these together into different types. Although each type must be discrete and comprehensive, diversity within the types can be expected and should be displayed.

The main research question underlying the timeline interviews was: *What motivates EY professionals to enter and remain in (or leave) the sector?* In response, the typology helped to articulate early years professionals' primary motivations for entering and remaining in the sector. Although professionals had multiple motivations acting as catalysts to enter and remain in the sector, their primary motivation was defined as *the* reason with the perceived strongest influence. Once all motivations were identified, other reasons for entering and remaining were incorporated into the typology.

Self-determination theory

To apply a robust framework to the development of the typology, self-determination theory formulated by Ryan and Deci (2000) was used. Ryan and Deci's theory argues that people vary in their *level* and *orientation* of motivation. *Level* refers to the strength of the motivation and *orientation* refers to the underlying attitudes and goals that prompt a person to act. The orientation can either be intrinsic or extrinsic:

- **Intrinsic:** An action is intrinsically motivated when it is done for the fun or challenge of it, rather than because of external prods, pressures or rewards. In the context of the

early years sector, intrinsic motivations involve early years practitioners' love of children, interest in child development and passion for early years education.

- *Extrinsic*: An extrinsically motivated action can be performed with resentment, resistance or disinterest but it can also be performed with willingness that reflects an inner acceptance of the value or utility of the action. It can also vary in the degree to which it is autonomous. For example, a student may do their homework to avoid sanctions from a parent or teacher or they may do it because they believe it is valuable for their chosen career. Even though in the latter example motivation comes from the student's personal desire, the motivation is extrinsic because the action leads to an outcome that lies beyond personal satisfaction. In relation to the early years sector, external motivations involve personal family commitments, financial considerations, and career prospects.

Using the above definitions, each early years practitioners' primary motivation when entering and while remaining in the sector was classified as either intrinsic or extrinsic. As their motivations could be intrinsic or extrinsic at each juncture, three types of early years professionals emerged:

1. Those whose motivations were intrinsic when entering and while remaining
2. Those whose motivations were extrinsic when entering and intrinsic while remaining
3. Those whose motivations were extrinsic when entering and while remaining.

None of the early years professionals interviewed entered the sector because of intrinsic motivations and remained because of extrinsic motivations.

Ryan and Deci (2000) suggest that the quality of the experience and performance of an action can vary depending on whether one is behaving for intrinsic or extrinsic reasons.

The timeline interviews captured data on four elements of early years professionals' journeys once they had entered the sector: 1) movement with settings and between settings within the sector; 2) engagement with training and CPD; 3) job satisfaction; and 4) satisfaction with the sector. Each element was interrogated for differences in behaviour between the three types.

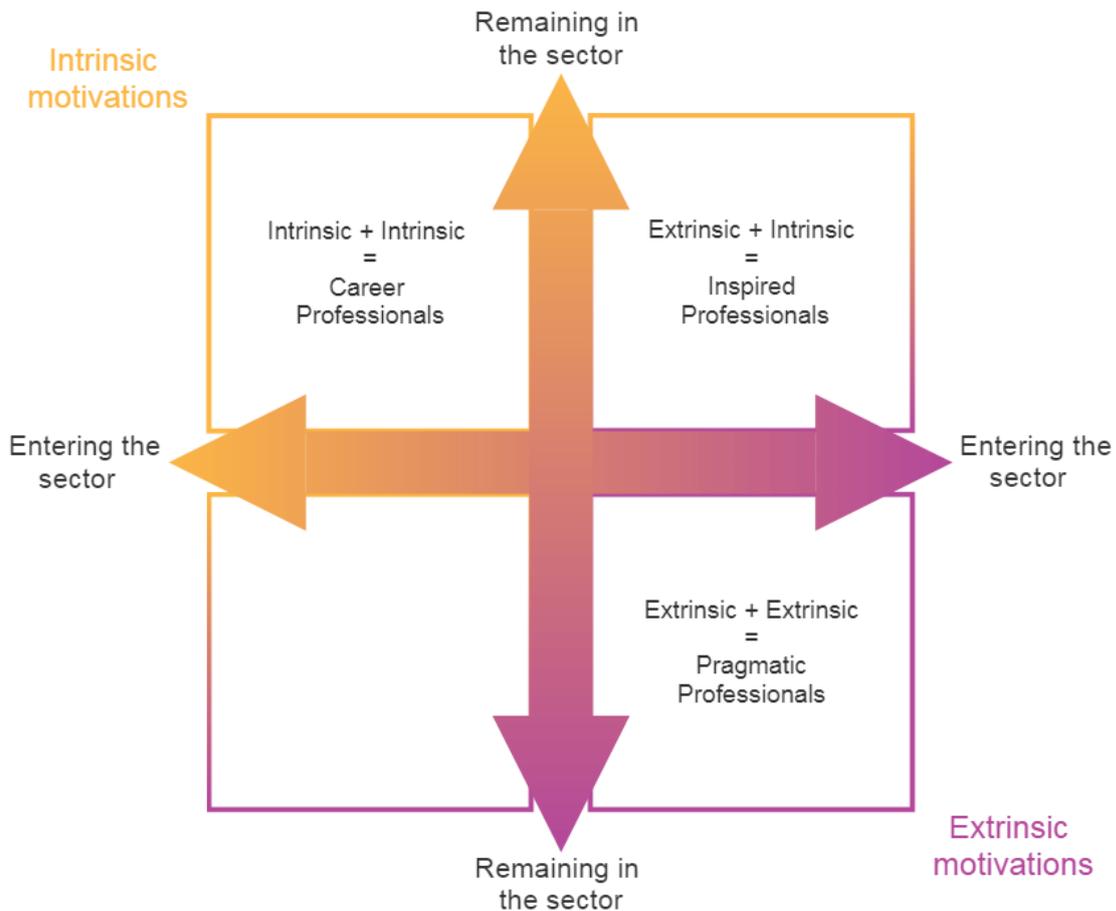
5.1.1 The typology

Bringing the primary motivations for entering and remaining in the sector, and experiences and behaviour within the sector together, early years practitioners can be categorised based on three types:

- Career Professionals
- Inspired Professionals
- Pragmatic Professionals.

Figure 5:1 summarises the three types.

Figure 5:1 Primary motivations of early years professionals when entering and while remaining in the sector



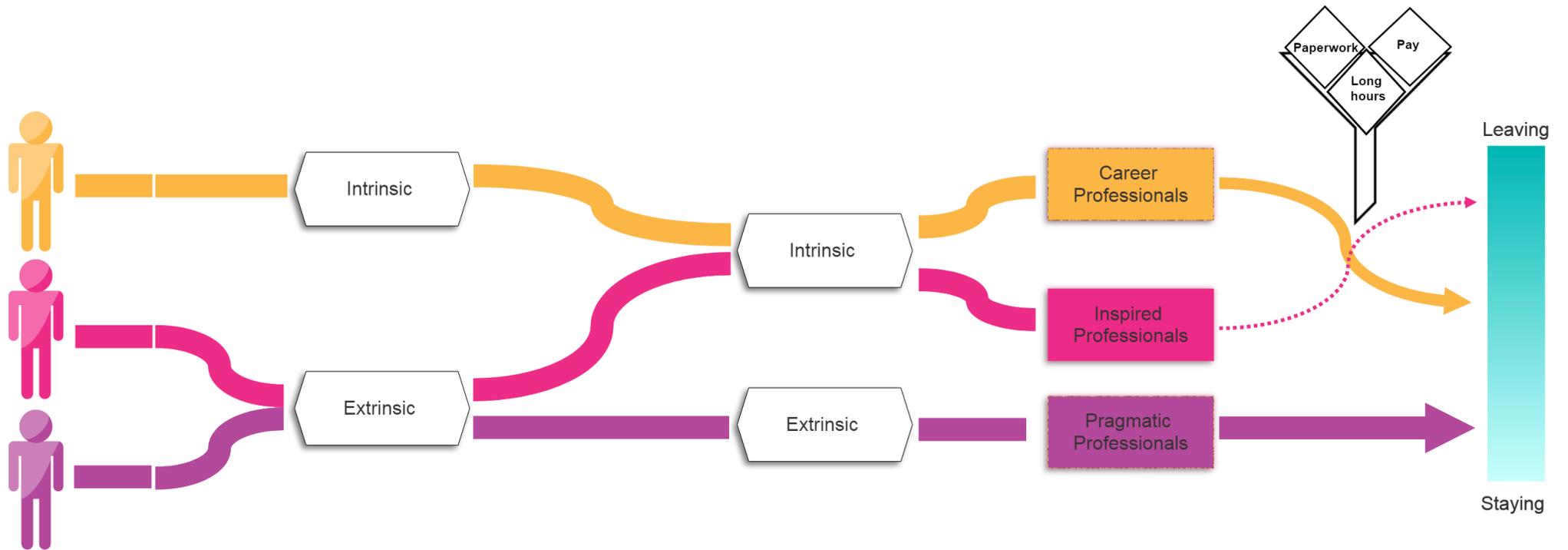
Understanding intentions to leave the sector

Early years professionals were also asked whether they planned to stay in the sector, and if they were to leave, why they would do so. The unique approach of the timeline interview helped to trace journeys backwards to explore if there were differences that may predict whether one type of professional was more likely to stay in the sector than another type.

Early years professionals taking part in the timeline interviews were aware of and affected by issues that ‘pushed’ workers out of the sector, such as low pay, long working hours and extensive paperwork. Complaints about the sector were mentioned regardless of the type of setting they worked at or their role. However, whether professionals planned to leave was not solely determined by how strongly affected they were by sector-specific challenges. Importantly, it was also shaped by their reasons for entering and remaining in the sector, which varied between the different types of professionals.

Figure 5:2 displays an overview of each type of journey. It presents the primary motivation for entering and remaining, and likelihood of leaving, for each type of early years professional. The following sections in this chapter provide a detailed exploration of each type of early years professional.

Figure 5:2 Typology of early years professionals' journeys through the sector



5.2 Career professionals

This type entered the early years sector because of an intrinsic desire to educate young children. They chose to remain in the sector because they were passionate about providing children with a solid educational foundation. These professionals tended to move roles and settings within the sector once opportunities for further development and promotion arose. They displayed high engagement with training and CPD but had medium job satisfaction and low satisfaction with the sector. A group of career professionals intended to stay in the sector because they were highly committed to early years. In contrast, others planned to leave for jobs that would allow them to have a greater impact on young children's lives.

5.2.1 Entering the sector

This type of professional entered the sector because of their love of children and interest in child development. They were particularly driven by the desire for making a difference in young children's lives.

"I think it's just the best age of children to work with because you're seeing, I think all ages see that, but you see so much progress and they are just learning everything for the first time."
(1047_SBP_Manager2)

Because of their inherent interest in working with children, Career Professionals were certain they would enjoy the work before entering the sector. They were motivated to work in the sector despite knowing that it did not pay well. Early years professionals who shared this view either joined school- or group-based providers when entering the sector. They typically entered the sector immediately after completing their formal education. For example, a professional described their decision to specialise in early years during their Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) induction year.

"I just really enjoyed it. I really loved being with younger children, the creativity, the fun element. The space, I think, not being constrained to a smaller classroom."
(3033_GBP_Manager)

However, other Career Professionals entered the sector after having previously worked in a different sector. When they had the opportunity to pursue further education, for instance due to financial support, they decided to follow their dream of working in early years. An example was a professional who left an administrative career to pursue a teaching degree and work in early years.

"I'm a very nurturing person and I felt like I'd really enjoyed being part of what my children had experienced in nursery... I like developing the earlier skills and being part of the early stages of schooling."
(6000_SBP_Manager)

5.2.2 Remaining in the sector

Career Professionals remained in the early years sector because they were passionate about teaching children and derived pleasure from the work. They described getting a "buzz" from working with young children and watching them develop. The professionals emphasised the importance of early years education and wanted to provide the children they taught with a strong start to their education.

“If we don't get this foundation - and that's why it's called the foundation stage right - then future learning will be disjointed and professionals may have to unpick later. So that's why I'm passionate; children deserve the best.”
(6000_SBP_Manager)

Moreover, this type remained anchored to the sector because they found their work intellectually stimulating. They believed their role was as much about intellectually engaging with child development than caring for children. Compared to those belonging to the other two types of professionals, Career Professionals were more likely to apply a pedagogical approach to educating children.

“I moved to a different nursery and that was a key in me staying in Early Years and making it a career because the practice in that nursery was inspirational... It wasn't just somewhere children needed to go because their parents were at work. It could actually add to their lives as well.”
(4048_CM_Manager)

Although there were a range of external motivations for remaining in the sector - such as enjoying being a member of the community or because the job was all they had ever done - these motivations were secondary to their intrinsic motivations of the job.

Movement within and between settings

Movement within and between settings was common among Career Professionals. As explained below, early years professional who remained in the sector because of extrinsic motivations did so partly because they enjoyed their specific job or the specific setting they worked at. In comparison, Career Professionals were not anchored to the sector because of their role or setting-specific factors; instead, they were anchored because of their overall desire to work in the early years sector. As a result, they were more likely to move within the sector than members of other types.

Within this type, movement within and between settings happened for three reasons:

- To move to a senior leadership position
- To better combine career and family commitments
- To want to work at a new setting.

As early years was their chosen career path, Career Professionals generally had high career aspirations. They wanted to move beyond entry-level practitioner roles, such as a nursery nurse, into senior leadership roles within their setting, such as nursery manager. This came from a desire to challenge themselves and effect greater change.

“I was coming to the end of my fourth year as a class teacher and I knew that I wanted to become phase leader (...) To be able to drive change, I'd like to see and to develop my Early Years pedagogy and yes, just develop that ethos amongst more classes.”
(1047_SBP_Manager2)

Another reason this type of professional moved roles and settings was to combine their career and family commitments. Those who moved for this reason left their school- and group-based settings and became childminders. This allowed them to remain in the early years sector and continue pursuing their passion while caring for their own children.

“I think partly it was more practical to childmind because I didn't need to find childcare for my, out-of-school care for my own children.”

(4048_CM_Manager)

A third reason Career Professionals moved within the sector was a desire to work at a new setting. This came from (a) unhappiness at their current setting or (b) being attracted to working at a different setting.

Setting-specific factors that 'pushed' early years professionals out were:

- unsupportive management
- lack of funding and
- overwhelming work demands.

Conversely, factors that attracted professionals to other settings included:

- the ethos of the setting matching their own approach to early education
- a 'hands-on' and supportive manager with a strong vision for the setting
- friendly colleagues who provide a family-like atmosphere.

Engagement with training and CPD

Due to their commitment to their career and desire to progress within the sector, engagement with training and CDP was generally high among Career Professionals. In addition to participating in statutory training and development courses, Career Professionals tended to continue with their education beyond their initial qualification, for instance by acquiring Early Years Teaching Status (EYTS).

Career professionals expressed three reasons for engaging in training and development:

- To raise their qualification level to become more employable and competitive in the workforce and to demand a higher wage from settings
- To make their job more satisfying by learning new approaches to educating children
- To follow a belief that it was part of a duty to their children that they taught to stay up-to-date with skills and knowledge.

For example, a Career Professional started as an apprentice and obtained a Level 2 qualification. They then went on to complete a Level 3 and Level 4 qualification. Their motivations to continue learning arose from their desire to keep progressing in their career.

"The Level 4 was an overview and actually, a recognisable step up in qualifications that would helpfully, would help me get a job, hopefully. If I'm a Level 4 and someone else is a Level 3 then hopefully, that helps."
(4048_CM_Manager)

Although these types of professionals were generally enthusiastic about development opportunities, there were others who did not engage in any additional training beyond their Level 3 qualification. They cited the following reasons:

- They did not consider themselves academic enough
- Insufficient funding at their setting for development opportunities
- Inability to take time off work.

5.2.3 Intentions to leave the sector

Among this type of professional, there were contrasting plans for their professional future. While some Career Professionals intended to continue working in the early years sector, others planned to leave the sector.

The Career Professionals who intended to leave the sector wanted to continue to work with children, albeit in a different capacity within or outside the education sector. Examples included taking on leadership roles in primary school settings or moving to the social work sector. These professionals were motivated by a new challenge and the prospect of making a stronger contribution to improving children's lives.

"I just feel like I need something to challenge me and push me forward a bit... I can't see myself leaving education, it would be to work with a wider range of children I guess."

(1047_SBP_Manager2)

The Career Professionals who intended to remain in the early years sector were frustrated with the many challenges the sector faced, notably low pay and funding cuts. However, they believed they had sacrificed too much to leave and felt a sense of responsibility towards the children they taught.

"Because I have a lot of knowledge, skills and experience; it shouldn't go to waste."

(6000_SBP_Manager)

5.3 Inspired professionals

This type of professional entered the early years sector to pursue a career and fulfil personal or family commitments. They tended to be career-minded from the start and viewed working in the early years sector as a facilitator to having a career. Once they entered the sector, this type of professional developed a passion for working in early years. There was medium movement within the sector in this group and medium engagement with training and CPD. Despite their developed passion for early years, this type of professional was most likely to leave the sector as they felt disillusioned because of sector-specific challenges.

5.3.1 Entering the sector

Inspired Professionals entered the early years sector for extrinsic motivations. They entered the sector as a means to an end; that is, to achieve a specific outcome. For Inspired Professionals, there were three 'push' factors that drove them to enter the sector. These included:

- Personal childcare responsibilities
- The convenience of the job
- Pressure from parents.

Inspired Professionals who entered the sector because of childcare responsibilities were stay-at-home-mothers who became childminders. They had previously worked in other sectors, such as administration, but struggled to combine working outside the home with caring for their own children. These professionals wanted to pursue paid work and viewed the job of childminder as an attractive option to do this. For example, an Inspired Professional had been a stay-at-home parent for five years before deciding to find a career that allowed them to work and look after their own children.

“The main factors were just working; this job would be easy for me to run my family as well as work with my family. If I had to pick up somebody from school, I could take my own children with me and pick somebody up from school.”
(1030_CM_Manager)

Another reason Inspired Professionals entered the sector was the convenience of the job. This included the settings’ proximity to their family home or the ability to manage their schedule flexibly. A professional decided to leave their professional career to become a childminder.

“I had to weigh up that work life balance with the children as well and the child minding allowed me to have that flexibility. If I went to a hospital appointment I could take the children with me and turn that into a learning experience.”
(3073_GBP_Manager)

Pressure from their own parents formed another reason for entering the sector. For those who experienced this pressure, the early years was not their first choice. However, they decided to enter the sector to please their parents who regarded it as a stable career.

5.3.2 Remaining in the sector

Even though they had entered the early years sector out of convenience or parental pressure, Inspired Professionals remained in the sector because they had developed a love for their work. For example, a professional became a childminder after the childminder who had looked after their children was suddenly unable to.

“I just said I’ll look after the children so you lot can go out to work. So then for the rest of the week I looked after all the children and I actually enjoyed it so much I just thought I can really do this as a career.”
(3073_GBP_Manager)

This type of professional cited extrinsic motivations, such as appreciating the flexibility childminding offered. However, in comparison with Pragmatic Professionals (see 5.4), they displayed a stronger inherent love of working with children and viewed additional external benefits as a bonus.

“You have to have a passion to have this job. If you don’t have the passion it’s not worth working in childcare...If you love children, it’s easy. I have no problem.”
(1030_CM_Manager)

Movement within and between settings

While there was movement within and between settings among Inspired Professionals, it was less pronounced as with Career Professionals. Those who did not move settings were still constrained by the same childcare responsibilities they had when entering the sector. They continued to work as childminders or close to where their children attended school.

“So my childminding children, I bring them home and I have my children here as well. It just works out fine, I get to see what my children are doing, be with them, and also be working as well.”
(1030_CM_Manager)

However, among these professionals, those who worked as practitioners outside of the home tended to move roles within their setting, for instance moving from nursery assistant to manager over time. Equally, the childminders gradually took on additional responsibilities, such as caring for children with special needs and disabilities.

Inspired Professionals who had moved settings moved for reasons similar to Career Professionals: career progression and a desire to work at a new setting. Once they became interested in early years, they wanted to develop their work into a career.

“I’ve got offered the manager position. I was driven by the same thought more or less and I’m always hungry to learn more. Every new position came with a new challenge, therefore with new training, so fulfil my needs as well.”
(7023_GBP_Manager)

This included professionals who had started as childminders and then moved into group-based settings. Doing so was an opportunity to achieve more in their career and take on new challenges. For example, a professional opened their own setting that offered care for children with special needs and disabilities.

“When I was child minding I had got two outstanding Ofsted inspections so I was at the top of my game there and I couldn’t do any more than sustain outstanding and for me I just felt like I could just go that bit further with opening the nursery.”
(3073_GBP_Manger)

Engagement with training and CPD

Because of their interest in early years, Inspired Professionals were generally engaged in training and CPD. Compared to Career Professionals, they had fewer qualifications on average, preferring to take part in local training courses offered by the LA rather than gaining additional NVQ qualifications. However, those who were particularly career motivated obtained higher qualifications, such as a master’s in educational psychology.

Inspired Professionals engaged with training and CPD for three overlapping reasons:

- To improve their professional practice
- To progress in the sector
- To pursue an interest in learning.

There was a sense among Inspired Professionals that engaging with new training and development opportunities was part of their professional responsibility towards the children they looked after. Training provided them with the necessary practical skills to do their job well, for instance how to effectively provide an environment for children away from home.

“When you’re looking after them, it’s things to do that they probably won’t do at home or making sure it’s a different environment from home. You’re trying to engage them and think of different things and ways of learning (...).”
(7032_CM_Manager)

This view was especially held by childminders. They explained that they engaged in training for their own development, since there were no progression opportunities as childminders. In contrast, professionals at group- or school-based settings believed that engaging in training also helped them to gain the required skills to advance in the sector.

Another reason for engaging in training and CPD was a new-found enjoyment of learning. Professionals who had not done well in school enjoyed learning about early years and achieved good marks during their qualifications. This increased their confidence as professionals and encouraged them to gain further qualifications.

Like Career Professionals, Inspired Professionals wanted to engage in more training. However, they were unable to do so for four reasons:

- The high cost of training and CPD
- The time of day (evening) when sessions were held, which conflicted with family commitments
- The long distance of training sessions to their home
- The lack of time available to complete course work because of work or family commitments.

5.3.3 Intentions to leave the sector

The Inspired Professionals group displayed contrasting plans for the future. On the one hand, there were professionals who were happy in their role and intended to stay in early years sector for the remainder of their career. These professionals wanted to continue to challenge themselves in the sector, for instance by becoming the manager of a setting or working with children with special educational needs. They were passionate about their work and enjoyed interacting with children.

“I think it is the reward side of it when you see a child arriving as a baby and then they're leaving as these young people going off to school. One of the first girls I was childminding, she went off to do her graduation this year and I just felt in my heart that's lovely.”

(3073_GBP_Manager)

These Inspired Professionals were generally satisfied with the sector. Apart from minor complaints about the amount of mandatory paperwork and low pay, they were content with the support provided from their employers and local authority to carry out their work.

In contrast, Inspired Professionals who were dissatisfied with the sector either intended to leave or had already left. This included childminders who no longer accepted children under the age of five.² These professionals were ‘pushed’ out of the sector because they did not want to continue completing the required Ofsted paperwork or undergo Ofsted inspections. They felt they had become too focused on the paperwork at the expense of interacting with the children.

“So I think all this paperwork is all about grading the school, but it's actually having not a good effect on the children because instead of playing with the children - because children only learn through play - you are bogged down with so much paperwork.”

(1030_CM_Manager)

Although all types of professionals were affected by sector-specific challenges, such as the amount of paperwork, Inspired Professionals were most likely to view them as

² These professionals did not appear to realise that because they only accepted school-aged children, they had left the early years sector. However, they still considered themselves members of the early years workforce.

factors that ‘pushed’ them out. They appeared more willing to leave because the issues affected their wellbeing. While they wanted to work with young children, they did not feel it was worth putting their wellbeing at risk.

5.4 Pragmatic Professionals

This type of early years professional either entered the sector because it was convenient or because they felt they had no other choice. They remained in the sector out of convenience, a lack of alternatives and the flexibility their job provided. This type of professional focused primarily on how their job fit with their personal and family needs. Subsequently, Pragmatic Professionals rarely moved roles or settings with the sector and did not engage in training or CPD as often as other groups. These early years professionals planned to stay in the sector as long as their job continued to be convenient, despite sector-related issues that they faced.

5.4.1 Entering the sector

Pragmatic Professionals entered the early years sector for the same extrinsic reasons as Inspired Professionals: personal childcare responsibilities, convenience of the job, and pressure from others.

Those who entered for personal childcare responsibilities were single-mothers who needed to be in paid work but were unable to work a full-time job. These mothers felt that entering the early years sector as a childminder or a teaching assistant was their only option. While the job of childminder gave them the ability to care for their own children while working, the job of teaching assistant provided the benefit of spending time with their family during school holidays.

“It literally was the only thing I could think of doing, apart from stuffing envelopes, that I could stay at home with my children.”
(4052_CM_Manager)

In comparison, Pragmatic Professionals who entered the sector out of convenience were less reliant on finding a job that allowed them to balance childcaring responsibilities with work. They had alternative childcare arrangements at the time of entering the sector but believed that entering early years was the best way to manage work and family life. For example, a professional’s partner had already been childminding from their home; because their working hours had been reduced at their workplace, they also decided to take on childminding. This gave them the chance to earn an income while being able to spend time with their children.

“I was fed up with working for other people, I now work for my wife I suppose and maybe it was just a bit of I wanted to get some time back with them maybe, I don’t know, I missed my eldest daughter walking.”
(7050_CM_Practitioner)

Finally, there were Pragmatic Professionals who entered the sector after being placed in early years by their head teacher or because they had family members already in the sector. An example of this included a childminding assistant who entered the sector because she grew up with her mother childminding from her house.

5.4.2 Remaining in the sector

Unlike the other types who remained in the early years sector for intrinsic reasons, Pragmatic Professionals remained for external factors. These professionals enjoyed

the work they did and expressed a love for the children they cared for. However, unlike Inspired Professionals, they had not developed a passion for working in early years. While Inspired Professionals were anchored to the sector because of their belief in the importance of educating young children and their commitment to the job, Pragmatic Professionals were anchored because of the benefits the job offered.

There are three reasons that Pragmatic Professionals remained in the sector:

- To maintain their lifestyle
- To meet family commitments
- Because of a lack of alternatives.

Pragmatic Professionals enjoyed the lifestyle that came from the flexibility of their job. This included those who worked from home as childminders and valued not having to commute or being able to set their own schedule. Those who worked in school-based settings referred to the convenient working hours as the main reason for remaining in the early years sector.

“I do enjoy my time at home... you're here and you've got the children, but you still do have the capability to do other things at certain times of the day... it gives me time to pursue my hobbies.”

(7050_CM_Practitioner)

The second reason Pragmatic Professionals remained in the sector was because their work continued to allow them to meet family commitments – the same commitments they had when entering the sector. For example, a child-minding assistant explained that they continued to work for their mother because they could bring their own child to work. They felt that a job in a different sector would not allow them to make enough money to cover childcare costs.

“If I had to pay childcare for my son, I'd probably get £4 an hour. Well, I suppose it's better than nothing but is it worth being away from my child for £4 an hour?”

(7052_CM_Practitioner)

There was also a belief among this type of professional that they lacked other alternatives. Pragmatic Professionals with this view had worked in the sector for several years and did not think they have transferable skills to work in a different sector. They expressed a desire to continue to use the qualifications and skills that they had invested in.

“I'm making a decent amount of money on the fact that I haven't really got any qualifications at anything. There isn't any other job that I could do with my lack of qualifications, that I would enjoy this much.”

(4040_CM_Manager)

Movement within and between settings

Pragmatic Professionals moved less frequently between settings compared to the other two groups. However, they differed in their level of movement depending on the type of setting they worked at.

Childminding Pragmatic Professionals did not become practitioners at group- or school-based settings. This was despite contemplating working at a nursery when the number of children they cared for dropped, as this reduced their earnings. However, they decided to continue childminding to maintain their autonomy. Moreover, they felt the

quality of education at nurseries was inferior to the education they could provide as childminders.

“I don't think nurseries can provide anything as good as that, so why would I go and work in one? (...) I wouldn't feel I had the same autonomy and control or as a manager where I'd feel up against it all the time.”
(4049_CM_Manager)

Among Inspired Professionals, there were professionals who had started as childminders before moving into management positions at group- or school-based settings. They did so because they developed an interest in early years and wanted to progress within the sector. In comparison, Pragmatic Professionals who were childminders did not express the same career ambitions; they were focused on providing the best environment for the children they cared for and were proud of their business.

“It works really well and I think that's a really genuinely good way for kids to spend their first five years of their life. I think I've created that and we've got a really nice outdoor space.”
(4049_CM_Manager)

Those Pragmatic Professionals who moved settings typically moved to reduce their workload and gain a better work-life balance. This included professionals who moved from large to small settings where there was more flexibility in working hours, while others moved from school-based settings into childminding.

Engagement with training and CPD

This type of professional displayed differences in their engagement with training and CPD. There were Pragmatic Professionals who did not engage with training beyond statutory courses, such as safeguarding. These professionals had the minimum qualifications needed to work in the sector. They believed they had the necessary knowledge to educate children and did not think there was any benefit to spending time and money on additional qualifications.

“The prospect of having to go out and do evening classes or something or studying and doing formal work in an evening after childminding I think I would find quite hard. Possibly partly because there's been no great need to, my wife has a Level 3 and I can pretty much in some respects just move along as her assistant in that respect.”
(7050_CM_Practitioner)

In contrast, other Pragmatic Professionals demonstrated high engagement with training and CPD and had earned a bachelor's or master's degree while working in the sector. However, whereas Inspired Professionals engaged in training and CPD to advance their career, Pragmatic Professionals regarded their love of learning as the primary driver for developing professionally. These professionals believed that working in the early years sector allowed them to continue their education.

“I started doing a master's with the idea that it will stop my brain going too mushy being at home all day.”
(4049_CM_Practitioner)

5.4.3 Intentions to leave the sector

Pragmatic Professionals intended to remain in the early years sector, even though professionals within this type were unhappy with sector-specific issues, such as low pay and the high amount of paperwork. This was because Pragmatic Professionals adapted a personal perspective on their career. This meant that they focused on their own practice and the children they cared for instead of focusing their time and energy on sector-wide challenges.

“This is the only job that I have had where I laugh every day and I don't get bored. There are a lot of negatives to it, but right now, it works. I'm making a reasonable amount of money to support myself. I'm here when my children get home.”

(4040_CM_Manager)

Their approach contrasted with Inspired Professionals, who tended to become disillusioned by low pay and paperwork. Pragmatic Professionals recognised these issues but regarded them as a ‘necessary evil’ to continue with a job that worked for them and their family.

6 Conclusion and policy suggestions

The early years sector in England currently finds itself in a fragile state regarding its workforce. Different types of providers comprising the early years sector have collectively experienced challenges recruiting, retaining and developing staff, particularly staff with higher qualifications. This has happened at a time when the UK Government has introduced reforms to increase demand and take-up of early years education among two-, three- and four-year old children.

The focus of our research was on those individuals – nursery managers and staff – tasked with meeting the demand for childcare places and implementing the reforms in the sector. To do this, we set out to examine what motivated individuals to enter, remain in or leave the sector. We also focused on understanding the barriers and facilitators managers experienced in recruiting, retaining and developing a ‘high quality’ workforce.

Moving away from the specifics of our research findings and instead reflecting on some of the wider issues that our research points to, there are three areas which may carry particular relevance for policy action. These are:

- Improving retention and progression pathways
- Professionalising the early years roles
- Attaching more value to the profession.

Improving retention and progression

Turnover of staff constituted a significant challenge for settings. Alongside pay, the two main reasons for this were limited progression opportunities and limited opportunities for professional development. The absence of pathways that link professional development with progression may also be a deterrent. Those who were interested in gaining further qualifications primarily did so out of personal interest and not because it would offer a progression opportunity at the setting. Alongside more information about sector roles as professions, any workforce reforms could include a review of:

- Defined training pathways that set out consistent requirements of the amount and type of training required to progress within a setting or between settings
- Key performance indicators for staff and how these align and support movement along progression and training pathways. These are considered inconsistent across provider types.

Professionalising roles

A mismatch between expectations and the reality of the job was one of the reasons practitioners considered leaving the sector. There was a strong tendency for practitioners to enter the early years sector because of an emotional attachment to children. This may be a reason why working in the sector is seen as a vocation – a job people (mainly women) do because they like children or want to help children. Upon entering the early years workforce, there is a realisation that upskilling, gaining knowledge about child development and paperwork to achieve required standards are core aspects of the role. Despite efforts to professionalise the sector, changing societal attitudes of the early years sector as ‘low skilled’, without clear progression routes and inferior to the primary and secondary sector may be more challenging. Within this context, providing depth of information about early years roles as professions should be considered, especially upon entering the sector.

Building wider understanding of the requirements of early years roles as professions could include strategies that:

- Continue to emphasise the knowledge and skills required to be a 'quality' early years professional to the current and future workforce. This would mean focusing on a balance between i) the practical skills needed to care for children, ii) the pedagogical approaches used in the early years, and iii) the science of child development.
- Explain the importance of external scrutiny (Ofsted) and paperwork for professional practice. This would help to build understanding that achieving and maintaining 'quality' where quality is measured against consistent external standards are core components of the profession rather than a 'burdensome' distraction.
- There is a further need to acknowledge and address the concern that the administrative requirements, particularly for Ofsted inspections, are perceived as burdensome and that standards are inconsistently applied.

Valuing the profession

A broader issue that could be considered critical for the sector is one of value. This pertains to the social and financial value that is associated with the early years sector. Views of jobs in the sector as being 'easy', 'unskilled' and primarily suitable for those with few other alternatives, especially women, affects how sector roles are viewed and rewarded. To imbue both social and financial value to roles within the sector, a range of approaches to consider are:

- Communicating that the profession is critical to addressing structural inequalities and to laying a solid foundation for children to achieve educational and professional outcomes as adults
- Ring-fencing funds for continuous professional development
- Ways to reducing the pay discrepancies between childminders, group-based settings and school-based settings
- Creating a qualification equivalency between EYTS and QTS
- Matching pay in early years with primary teaching and counteract a perception of the early years as a 'springboard' for teaching in primary education
- Reviewing existing childcare qualifications to ensure they are fit for purpose and to avoid a mismatch between practitioners' expectations and the realities of the profession.

Overall, our research points to committed early years professionals, who enjoy looking after children and struggle to reconcile emotion-based practice with the demands of a process of professionalisation and of maintaining 'quality' that is increasingly sought by settings, parents and more widely.

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Appendix B. Timeline Topic Guide

Understanding the early years workforce

Timeline interview – early years practitioners

Aim of the face-to-face interview:

The aims of these interviews with early years practitioners are to:

1. Plot their route into the early years sector, including education and career decisions which led them to it
2. Plot their jobs and qualifications in the early years sector, up to the present
3. At each juncture, investigate what factors affected their decision to take up a particular job or qualification in the EY sector
4. Investigate any events where they haven't taken up a career or training opportunity, and what affected this decision
5. Explore plans for the future – including motivations if they plan to stay in one place, or make a change

The attached timeline document should be used as an elicitation and mapping tool for participants' career decisions.

The topic guide:

This guide sets out a number of topics and questions that will be covered during interviews. The guide does not contain follow-up probes and questions like 'why', 'when', and 'how', etc., as participants' contributions will be explored in this way, as far as is feasible, during

Introduction

- Introduce self and NatCen Social Research – conducting this research in partnership with the Education Policy Institute, funded by the Nuffield Foundation.
- Overall project objectives, to explore and identify:
 - Staff motivations for entering, remaining in and leaving the early years sector
 - Their jobs and qualifications in the early years sector up to the present
 - What factors affected their decision to take up a job or qualification
 - When and why they haven't pursued any career or training opportunities
 - Their plans, including if they'll stay in the profession or leave, change workplace or take up more qualifications
- We would like to have a conversation about their views and experiences, so there are no right or wrong answers.
- We would like them to help us plot their experiences on a timeline. This will help us understand their motivations and decisions in their early years career and provide a visual aid as we move through the interview.
- Check they've read the research sheet – any questions?
- Participation is voluntary – can choose to have a break at any time, not to discuss any topic or halt the interview.
- Data collected will be anonymised and stored securely. Only the research team will have access to recordings. Within six months of the end of the project, anonymised data will be placed into the UK Data Archive and NatCen will securely delete any project data.
- Your information will be used to produce a report. We will not identify any setting or individual in the report.
- Anonymity and confidentiality: We will do our utmost to ensure that individuals are not identified. But only small number of nurseries are taking part so it may be that some of the information is identifiable. If you have any concerns about what is said during the interview, you will have the chance to review what was discussed at the end of the interview.
- We would like to record the interview and keep the completed timeline – to have an accurate record of what is said.
- Interview will last approximately 90 minutes, check OK
- Participant will receive a £50.00 book voucher as a thank you for taking part, to be given out and signed for after the interview
- Any questions/concerns
- Permission to start recording

TURN ON RECORDER

1. Background and context

Aim: To gather background information on participant.

- Their role and responsibilities
- How long they've worked in the early years sector
- How long they've worked at current setting in this role

2. Entry to current role

Aim: Establish when and why in they took this job. Plot on timeline as a point to work back from.

- How they identified the role
- When they took it up
- What motivated them to take it
 - Personal circumstances
 - Financial reasons
 - Personal growth / development
 - Setting-specific reasons – likes / dislikes

3. Previous jobs/roles

Aim: Working backwards, map the rest of their career on the timeline. Explore their motivations and contributing circumstances at each stage and map on timeline.

- *If current job is not their first, trace back their previous jobs [both within EY sector and not – but only touch briefly on non-EY jobs]*
- What motivated them to take each job / leave previous job
 - Personal circumstances
 - Financial
 - Career growth and development
- *If job in EY sector:*
 - Appeal of a particular setting
 - If changes in government policies prompted any moves
 - If any changes in setting policies prompted any moves
- Motivations to stay in role(s) for length of time that they did
 - Family reasons
 - Professional
 - Financial
 - Personal reasons.
 - If they've stayed in the same job throughout their whole career, explore what motivated them to stay

-
- *Once worked back to first job in EY sector: What motivated them more generally to work in the early years sector*

4. Training and qualifications

Aim: Explore their motivations at each stage for taking a qualification or training opportunity. Add contextual information to their timeline.

- Review what qualifications and training they have done. For each, probe;
 - Level of qualification
 - How funded (self, employer, local authority, other sponsor)
- What affected their decision to do each qualification, prompt for each one:
 - Personal growth and development
 - Opportunities for better jobs with more seniority
 - Extra skills they felt they needed from a qualification
 - Financial motivations
 - Any changes in government policy or workplace policy which pushed them to a qualification
- If no formal qualifications, why
- Whether considered qualifications at any juncture but not done them
 - Why

5. Reviewing career up till present on the timeline

Aim: have participants briefly review their timeline for completeness

- Invite participant to take a few minutes to review timeline, add any details or context
- Probe for any areas where detail and motivating factors are missing or vague

6. Looking forward

Aim: map out their ambitions and plans on the timeline. Explore if they have plans to stay in or leave their job, and whether they have plans to leave the early years sector.

- Map out their plans over the short, medium and long-term
 - If they will seek to leave their job – when and why
 - Leave the early years sector – when and why
 - If they hope to be promoted or upskill with more qualifications – when and why
- If they plan to stay in their job, explore why, probe for:
 - “Anchoring” factors – pay, family, opportunity for progression
 - What would make it easier to stay

-
- If they plan or want to leave their job for another in the early years sector, explore why:
 - “Push” factors – stress, overwork, poor pay, poor progression
 - “Pull” factors – what appeals about the alternative opportunities
 - What could change which would motivate them to stay in current job
 - If they plan or want to leave the early years sector completely, for what job and why:
 - “Push” factors – stress, overwork, poor pay, no opportunities for progression
 - “Pull” factors – what appeals about the alternative opportunities outside of the EY sector
 - Why they didn’t do it/haven’t done it yet – family, financial, personal reasons.
 - What could change to make them want to stay in early years

7. Final thoughts

- Anything else they would like to add

TURN OFF RECORDER

- Thank participant.
- Hand over incentive and collect receipt.

Appendix C. Case study Topic Guide – Managers

Understanding the early years workforce

Case study topic guide – Setting managers

Aim of the phone interview:

The aims of the interviews with early years setting managers are to:

1. Define what quality means to managers in early years staff
2. Explore how and why managers recruit, retain and develop a high quality workforce
3. Investigate barriers and facilitators to the recruitment, retention and development
4. Explore which of these poses the biggest challenge
5. Gather recommendations for how challenges could be addressed

The topic guide:

This guide sets out topics and questions to cover during interviews. The guide does not contain follow-up probes and questions like 'why', 'when', and 'how', etc., as participants' contributions will be explored in this way, as far as is feasible, during the 45 minute telephone interview. Researchers will use prompts and probes to understand how and why views, behaviours and experiences have arisen.

Introduction

- Introduce self and NatCen Social Research – conducting this research in partnership with the Education Policy Institute, funded by the Nuffield Foundation.
- Part of a wider project, including surveys and interviews, to understand the early years workforce and recommend changes to improve conditions for staff and outcomes for children
- Overall project objectives, to explore and identify:
 - Staff motivations for entering, remaining in and leaving early years
 - How and why managers hire, keep and train high quality early staff
 - Factors which make it easy or difficult for providers to recruit, retain and develop high quality staff
- We would like to have a conversation about your views and experiences, so there are no right or wrong answers.
- Participation is voluntary
- Check they've read the research sheet – any questions?
- As thanks participant will receive a £20.00 book voucher and their setting will receive a £30.00 book voucher.
- Data collected will be anonymised and stored securely. Only the research team will have access to recordings. Within six months of the end of the project, anonymised data will be placed into the UK Data Archive and NatCen will securely delete any project data.
- Your information will be used to produce a report. We will not identify any setting or individual in the report.
- Anonymity and confidentiality: We will do our utmost to ensure that individuals are not identified. But only small number of nurseries are taking part so it may be that some of the information is identifiable. If you have any concerns about what you tell us during the interview, we are happy to discuss this at the end of the interview.
- Check they are somewhere they can speak freely and without interruptions. Give them time to move if necessary.
- Interview will last approximately 45 minutes, check OK.
- We would like to record the interview – to have an accurate record of what is said.
- Any questions

1. Background and context

Aim: gather background information on the manager and their setting

Their setting

- Age range

-
- Number of children
 - SEND; EAL; FSM

Setting staff

- Number
- Gender split
- Levels of experience and qualifications, number of staff by level of seniority
- Part-time / full time split

Manager's role and responsibilities (in brief)

- Previous career
- Qualifications
- If they share responsibilities for recruitment, retention and development with anyone else, and how this works

Overview of main challenges at their setting

- Generally – finance, student numbers, materials, etc.
- In terms of staffing
- Which of recruitment, retention and development poses the biggest challenge for their setting and why

2. Recruitment

Aim: explore how they handle recruitment, what “quality” means for them in early years staff, what challenges they face and what would help

How the setting handles recruitment

- How often they recruit
- When they last recruited
- What their setting's recruitment process involves
- What channels they use – online, through an agency, word of mouth, etc.

What they look for when recruiting

- What “high quality” means to them in early years staff. *Prompt if necessary:*
 - Qualifications
 - Skills and attributes
 - Experience
 - Anything else they look for in staff: e.g. gender, local connections, etc.

Facilitators to recruitment

- What makes it easy to recruit. *Prompt if necessary:*

-
- How “attractive” their setting is to potential staff
 - Pay they can offer
 - Supply of suitable early years workers in local job market
 - Any support networks they have for recruitment
 - Factors that make early years an attractive career choice – sense of purpose, love of working with children, etc.
 - Anything else

Barriers to recruitment

- What makes it difficult to recruit. *Prompt if necessary:*
 - Pay they can offer
 - Local job market – supply of suitable staff/competition between settings for staff
 - Anything that makes their setting “unattractive” to staff
 - If it’s difficult to build networks for recruitment
 - Overarching reasons that put people off working in early years – poor pay, few hours, unskilled, etc
 - Anything else

Reflections

- What would help them with recruitment
 - What would be required for this to happen

3. Retention

Aim: explore how retention and turnover affects their workplace and what the barriers and facilitators to retention are and what would help them retain staff.

Turnover

- Typical staff turnover
 - e.g. over a year
 - If turnover is different between levels of staff – age, seniority, qualification level
- Where departing staff go
 - To other settings
 - To other professions entirely – what’s most common?
- How they are affected by turnover
 - If turnover is not an issue, why not
- Details of any special measures they take to address turnover

Facilitators to retention

- Why people *want* to stay
 - Why their setting is an attractive place to stay
 - Opportunities for progression, in terms of pay, responsibilities training
 - Any other reasons
- Alternatives and why people don't take them [why people *have* to stay]
 - Why other settings are less attractive
 - Alternative careers available in local job market
 - Any other reasons

Barriers to retention

- Aspects of their setting that make it difficult to retain staff. *Prompt if necessary:*
 - Lack of opportunities for pay and career progression
 - Issues with hours, working conditions
 - Any factors mentioned as barriers to recruitment earlier in interview
- Attractiveness of other options
 - What opportunities are available to early years staff within the sector
 - If they lose staff to other settings, what makes these settings attractive?
 - What opportunities are available outside of the early years sector
- Specific reasons people choose to leave

Reflection

- What would help them with retention
 - How would this work

4. Development

Aim: Determine how they approach development, explore barriers and facilitators and what would help.

What they do

- If they have a formal strategy for staff development
 - Pay and progression opportunities
 - Training
- How development opportunities differ between levels of staff
- How they source opportunities for training and development

Facilitators to development

-
- Factors that help setting to develop staff. *Prompt if necessary:*
 - Money
 - Time
 - Staff interest
 - Availability and quality of training opportunities in local area
 - Professional networks
 - Anything else

Barriers to development

- Factors that make it difficult to develop staff. *Prompt if necessary:*
 - Money
 - Time
 - Staff interest
 - Availability and quality of training opportunities in local area
 - Professional networks
 - Anything else
- (If not covered already) whether opportunities on offer in local area match what they need
 - Gaps in local offer
- If and how turnover affects development

Reflection

- What would help them develop their staff
 - What would be required to make this work

5. Recommendations

Aim: Gather recommendations for extra support to help with recruitment, retention and development.

- Anything else on what they do to recruit, retain and develop staff
- Whether and how they think settings can work together/share learning to alleviate challenges
- Support they would like from government
 - National
 - Local
- What they would do if they were in charge

If time:

- Whether the challenges they face are changing / have changed over time
 - Specific reasons for any change

6. Final thoughts

- Anything else they would like to add

TURN OFF RECORDER

- Thank participant.
- Hand over incentive and collect receipt.

Appendix D. Case study Topic Guide – Practitioners

Understanding the early years workforce

Case study topic guide – Non-managers

Aim of the phone interview:

The aims of the interviews with early years non-managers are to:

6. Explore the process of searching for a job and recruitment
7. Investigate the factors that encourage and discourage staying in the role, setting and sector
8. Explore experiences of career development and motivations for engaging in CPD
9. Develop recommendations for how the early years sector can recruit, develop and retain staff

The topic guide:

This guide sets out a number of topics and questions that will be covered during interviews. The guide does not contain follow-up probes and questions like ‘why’, ‘when’, and ‘how’, etc., as participants’ contributions will be explored in this way, as far as is feasible, during the 45 minute telephone interview. Researchers will use prompts and probes in order to understand how and why views, behaviours and experiences have arisen.

Introduction

- Introduce self and NatCen Social Research – conducting this research, funded by the Nuffield Foundation. This research is one half of a larger study into the early years workforce. The Education Policy Institute is carrying out the other half, which involves analysing survey data on the early years workforce and children's outcomes.
- Overall project objectives are to explore and identify:
 - Staff motivations for entering, remaining in and leaving early years
 - How and why managers hire, keep and train early staff
 - Factors which make it easy or difficult for providers to retain staff
 - Factors which make it easy or difficult for providers train and develop staff
- We would like to have a conversation about your views and experiences, so there are no right or wrong answers.
- Participation is voluntary—they can choose to have a break at any time, not to discuss any topic or halt the interview.
- Check they've read the research sheet – any questions?
- Data collected will be anonymised and stored securely. Only the research team will have access to recordings. Within six months of the end of the project, anonymised data will be placed into the UK Data Archive and NatCen will securely delete any project data.
- Your information will be used to produce a report. We will not identify any setting or individual in the report.
- Anonymity and confidentiality: We will do our utmost to ensure that individuals are not identified. But only small number of nurseries are taking part so it may be that some of the information is identifiable. If you have any concerns about what is said during the interview, you will have the chance to review what was discussed at the end of the interview
- We would like to record the interview – to have an accurate record of what is said.
- Interview will last approximately 45 minutes, check OK
- Participant will receive a £20.00 book voucher as a thank you for taking part, to be given out and signed for after the interview
- Any questions/concerns
- Permission to start recording

TURN ON RECORDER

1. Background and context

Aim: gather background information on the manager and their setting.

Note: Replace “setting” with “this nursery / pre-school / school” or “here” or name of setting. Use Early Years or childcare depending on setting and role type.

Current Role

- Role/s in setting
- Key responsibilities
- Length of time in role

Time working in Early Years or childcare

- Previous role/s in setting
 - Length of time in role/s
- Previous Early Years or childcare roles
 - Length of time working in Early Years or childcare

Qualifications

- Current qualification level
- Previous qualifications earned

2. Recruitment

Aim: to understand what the recruitment process looked like and how it could be improved.

Attraction to role and setting

- Features that attracted them to original role (responsibilities, characteristics of children, etc.)
- Features that attracted them to setting (type and size of setting, pay, workload, etc).
- Importance of role vs. setting features in deciding to apply and accept job

Job Search

- Circumstances at time of application to setting (e.g. unemployed, employed, in school/education, etc.)
- Experience of job search
 - Length of time searching for a job
 - Number of jobs applied to
 - Number of jobs available / perceived competitiveness for jobs

Recruitment process at current setting

- How and when became aware of first position at setting
- Steps taken to apply
 - CV and cover letter

- Interview/s
- Practical assessment in setting /trial day /week, etc.
- Views of recruitment process
 - What the setting did well
 - What the setting did poorly
 - Prompts if needed:*
 - Information provided
 - Length and steps of process
 - Transparency of process
- *If applicable:* recruitment process for current role in setting
 - How and when became aware of current role in setting
 - Steps taken to apply
 - Views on recruitment process

Recruitment process in comparison to others and past

- *If worked in other settings recently:* How recruitment process at this setting compares to recruitment at other places they have worked at
 - Steps in recruitment process
 - What this setting does well compared to others
 - What this setting does poorly compared to others
- *If worked at current setting for long time:* How recruitment process has changed since they were originally recruited

3. Retention

Aim: to understand what factors encourage the participant to stay in their setting and sector and what factors lead them to encourage leaving the setting and/or sector.

Plans for retention

- Whether currently considering leaving the setting or Early Years/childcare
- Whether ever considered leaving the setting or Early Years/childcare

Note: Based on the answers to the questions above, ask about the relevant topics below.

Retention in setting

- Factors encouraging staying in setting
- Factors discouraging staying in setting

Prompts:

- Type and size of setting
- Pay and benefits
- Workload, work arrangements, flexibility
- Responsibilities of role and in setting
- Opportunities for development and progression
- Steps taken by setting retain staff
- What the setting does well to retain staff

Retention in sector

- Factors encouraging staying in Early Years/childcare
- Factors discouraging staying in Early Years/childcare

Prompts:

- Pay and benefits
- Workload, work arrangements, flexibility
- Attractiveness/unattractiveness of other alternatives
- Match between expectations and reality of career

4. Development

Aim: to explore what CPD they have experienced, their reasons for doing so, and how CPD can be improved.

Experiences of development

- What continuing professional development (CPD) they have undertaken at their setting. For example: a training course in children's speech development or a one day session in techniques for teaching numbers to children.
 - *For each: whether this was self- or setting-directed and formal or informal*
- Support received from setting to engage in CPD (time off, funding, etc.)
- Ease of engaging in CPD (number of available opportunities, time commitment, etc.)

Motivations and importance of CPD

- Motivations for engaging in CPD (personal, career progression, etc.)
- Views in importance of engaging in CPD
- How much importance setting gives to CPD

Reflections on CPD

- What elements of CPD have worked well
- What elements of CPD could be improved

-
- Suggestions for improvement
 - Whether there are any gaps in the CPD offered
 - *If so:* views on reason for gaps

5. Recommendations

The Setting

- Suggestions for what setting could do to better to recruit, develop, and retain staff

Prompt: What they would do if in charge

Early Years and childcare

- Suggestions for what Early Years/childcare sector could do to recruit, develop, and retain staff

The government

- Ideas or suggestions for what the local authority could do to recruit, develop, and retain staff
- Ideas or suggestions for what the national government could do to recruit, develop, and retain staff

6. Final thoughts

- Anything else they would like to add

TURN OFF RECORDER

- Thank participant and close.