"Helping me to notice more things in children's actions."

How early years practitioners, working in socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods, developed their theories about children's learning and their role as educators during a programme of support and professional development.

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This thesis is dedicated, with all my love, to my partner Caroline and my daughter Maisie.

Julian Grenier, London, October 2013.

Abstract

The English government is significantly expanding the number of free nursery places for two-year olds; but little is known about what sort of training and professional development might help early years practitioners to offer appropriate styles of early education and care for such young children. This thesis explores a project to offer professional support and development to eight early years practitioners working with two-year olds in a highly socially disadvantaged area in London.

The project began with the participants being trained to use a structured child observation tool, and developed through fortnightly group meetings over a three-month period. These provided an opportunity for the participants to engage in dialogue and critical reflection about their data. The data were interpreted using a qualitative research methodology drawing on grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory. Evidence from the study suggests that the participants developed skills in "keen observation" (Dalli *et al*. 2009), and that they used the data they had gathered to develop their understanding of the children's learning. The findings from the research increase the visibility of the practitioners' theories: in particular, their theory that their work enables the children to act more autonomously in the nursery settings.

Both the methodological approach used and the small size of the sample mean that no generalisations can be made from these findings. However, widely-held assumptions that early years practitioners are lacking in the capacity to reflect on

and theorise their work are not supported by this research. Future studies might continue to make practitioners' own theories about their work more visible, in order to explore them more deeply. This would enable the further development of approaches to training which engage with and enrich the practitioners' own thinking.

Declaration and word length

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

I confirm that the following thesis does not exceed the word limit of 45,000 prescribed for the Doctor in Education Degree (exclusive of appendices, the list of references and bibliographies but including footnotes, endnotes, glossary, maps, diagrams and tables).

Signed:

Julian Grenier.

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Statement

I was initially disappointed that my doctoral study at the Institute of Education began with an exploration of professionalism. "Professionalism" was just a copperplate word to me, filling the middle position in Continuing Professional Development, something I was required to do and report on annually. Professionally, I was the headteacher of a small nursery school in a poor part of central London. I had been almost overwhelmed in my first year by the accumulation of real "stuff" everywhere – sheds full of it, and a lock-up garage, and cupboards, and shelves – and their metaphorical counterparts, the ghosts, the partly-suppressed conflicts and the general weariness summed up by the parting words of one of the nursery nurses: "lots of people have tried, but they always have to give up in the end." Not only was the school failing, but it was within a local authority which had been judged a failure and been obliged to give up the running of its schools to a private company. I wanted to get on, to do things and to make a difference. I did not want to look back and reflect on teacher professionalism.

I was wrong, in ways which have proved to be useful. Researching and thinking about teacher professionalism I considered my first years working in a London authority, and particularly the controversy which followed the screening of *Culloden: a year in the life of a city primary school* (BBC, 1990). The series led to serious criticism in the press, as well as some rather bizarre interventions like the decision of the *Mail on Sunday* to hire a community hall in Poplar and test the reading and spelling abilities of children from Culloden. Spelling, reading and a good education overall were judged to be lacking both by the *Mail* and by Her

Majesty's Inspectorate (Department of Education and Science, 1991). It was a brutal episode and a tough initiation for a young teacher working in inner London. Yet viewing the documentary two decades on, I was more struck by the rampant professionalism of the time: a confident dismissal of parents' opinions and views, because teachers knew best, and a failure to acknowledge the poor level of progress being made by the children. The footage of the youngest children coming into Culloden depicted a beautiful oasis of calm, rich play, and loving care in one of the toughest parts of east London; but as Margaret Donaldson (1978, p.11) had argued two decades earlier, the initial image of inner-city early education might be utopian, yet it seemed merely to lead to a despairing and unhappy experience of later schooling: "the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire", in the words of the drunken porter in *Macbeth.*

Yet thinking deeply about my own professionalism as a teacher produced a sense of uncertainty, to a disturbing extent at times. I felt, and I continue to feel, strongly that the "discourse of derision" (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 175) used against teachers is a type of "symbolic violence that goes unperceived as violence" (Bourdieu, 1999, p. 126), likely to produce despair, retrenchment and a passive conformity to external measures like Ofsted. But the previous era, when teachers had almost unlimited professional discretion within the "secret garden" of the school curriculum is not an era I celebrate. Studying professional identity and engaging in extended self-reflection made me question notions of authenticity and consider how professional and personal identities might be thought of as performances. But in my own school, I continued to use notions of authenticity as an important shorthand when trying to judge my own interactions with children, parents and colleagues, and trying to judge the interactions of others. It seemed as if what I thought I knew was dissolving. I wished, but was not yet ready, to substitute

"evolution-from-what-we-do-know for evolution-toward-what-we-wish-to-know"
(Kuhn, 1996, p.171).

At this point in my scholarship, a consideration of ethics, both in terms of my
established profession, and my nascent role as a researcher, proved a powerful
catalyst. Sachs (2003, p.148) argues that "ethical practice relates to how people
interact, how they communicate information and how they use information. It
recognizes the needs, interests and sensitivities of various parties". I found this
emphasis on interaction, needs, interests and sensitivities compelling, but also
perhaps lacking in an appropriate emphasis on professional practice. Here, I found
Webster and Lunt (2002, p.104) convincing in their criticism of the type of ethical
approach which "neglects the broader collegial function of improving...practice as a
whole and challenging poor practice at service, organisational and institutional
level".

This type of ethical approach to research and practice strongly informed my
work through Methods of Enquiry One and Two, and the specialist module (Using
Psychoanalytic Perspectives to Make Sense of Education and Educational
Research). I focussed my research efforts on taking an *emic* approach (Silverman,
2006, p.284): working with the conceptual frameworks of the participants, and
problematising simplistic notions of authenticity and the "romantic approach" to
research that holds that one can "tap directly the perceptions of individuals"
(Silverman, 2006, p. 45). I was working with an understanding of meaning as
something produced through the interaction of different parties, in this instance
between researcher and participants.

I also needed to think about how those interactions were produced and shaped.
Previously, when studying for my MA, my structural position as a senior leader in a
school had created a very uncomfortable situation in which a colleague had felt as if

she had been minutely examined as a practitioner, and then had her shortcomings laid bare over several thousand words. This painful experience, as well as the ethical arguments outlined above, encouraged me to attempt to create a space for research where, as Lather (1991, p.164) says, "those directly involved can act and speak on their own behalf".

Yet this did not mean merely attempting to shrug off my position in the school hierarchy or more generally in the social field. Foucault (1977, p. 194) offers a perspective on the nature of power which is sceptical but not dismissive, arguing that "we must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms … power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production." One might argue, therefore, that a scepticism towards the "truth" of the meanings produced through research is warranted, but a rejection of all meanings and a slide into mere relativism out of sensitivity to power relationships is not. Likewise, Bourdieu's (1993, p. 23) argument for a reflexive stance towards research does not imply a disavowal of scrutiny, study and categorisation; instead, he proposes that the *reflexive* standpoint can make the "scientific gaze" available to participants, "which, when turned back on oneself, makes it possible to accept oneself and even, so to speak, lay claim to oneself, claim the right to be what one is."

However, as I prepared for my Institution-Focussed Study (IFS) I felt that my research up to that point would still be more accurately described as having "subjects" rather than "participants": the research tools and techniques had stayed firmly in my grip. In my 2009 Portfolio Statement, I contrasted Kvale's (1996) image of the researcher as miner, digging out nuggets of information or meaning and bringing them to the surface, and his image of the researcher as traveller,

walking alongside people, engaging them in conversation and drawing on these experiences to make new narratives about human actions and their consequences.

My IFS was an action research project. I attempted to weave together my professional concern to improve the quality of care and early education in the nursery school, with my concern as a researcher to act more like a traveller than a miner. These came together through a research design in which the participants, a group of nursery nurses, were trained in the use of the Target Child Observation tool (Sylva, Roy and Painter, 1980) so that they could direct the focus of investigation for themselves (choosing who to observe and when) before coming together regularly in groups for analysis of their data and for critical reflection. The process privileged agency for the participants, negotiation of meanings, and a striving towards "best practices" for specific children, in specific places and contexts. I concluded that engaging nursery nurses as research participants appeared to be a fruitful approach to professional support and development.

The following three years, during which I have been working on my thesis, have proved to be more challenging. I moved out of school and into a Local Authority role as senior Early Years adviser. As financial cutbacks began to intensify, I found myself cycling in the snow one day, mulling over the final draft of my IFS and also preparing to meet the staff in a daycare setting and explain to them that their posts were now "under review". I wondered what use, if any, research and reflection might have in a difficult situation like this. I felt that I had little to offer overall and was just a catalyst for conflict. I felt sorry for myself, yet I was only delivering the message: it was the staff team, crowded into a small room where an unexpected meeting can only mean bad news, who really deserved sympathy.

This experience encouraged me to think about the extent to which such staff teams felt a lack of power, that things were just "done to them". When I visited

settings and wrote reports which sometimes had challenging or critical elements, staff would sometimes use my opinion as a starting point for professional discussion; but other times they would respond with anger or tears, or withdraw from communication altogether. I wondered if this day-to-day work problem could be reconceptualised as a messy problem of practice and theory. I wondered if we – nursery staff and local authority advisers - needed an agreed framework and language for the evaluation of quality, to try to reduce the feelings of personal slight that seemed to come with professional challenge. It was striking that a number of research projects, including the EPPE Project (Sylva *et al.*, 2010), had found that outcomes were better for children who attended early years settings with good or better scores in the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS-R) and Infant-Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS-R) (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 1998; Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2003). Yet there were also many apparent problems with these quality schedules, discernible to the early years team, to me as a doctoral research student who was becoming practised in the very close scrutiny of documents, and also well documented in the research (e.g. Rosenthal, 1999). I recalled a joke retold by Christopher Hitchens (2005) in a newspaper article: "a professor at the École Normale Superieure is popularly supposed to have said: 'I agree that it works in practice. But how can we be certain that it will work in theory?'"

As before, it was scholarship with an ethical focus that helped me to make sense of my practical and professional dilemma. Moss, Dahlberg and Pence (2000, p.105) argue that "while the relative and values-based nature of quality cannot be avoided, choices do have to be made and this should be done as democratically as possible." Professionally, I felt that steps needed to be taken to improve quality of early education and care for the young children. After a period of discussion and reflection, I designed a project which involved using the ITERS-R and ECERS-R

frameworks, but in a way which gave the participants some control and agency: the audits would not simply be used as an inspection tool, but instead the nursery managers and staff would be trained to use and understand them, including opportunities to reflect on the pedagogy and approach they take. But, on the basis of my previous research, I also felt convinced that a wider approach to the support, training and professional development of the nursery staff should be offered in a climate which explicitly valued the negotiation of meaning. So I developed a small project with three early years settings, which is the subject of my thesis: a project which would further explore the findings from my IFS. But whereas my IFS was conducted in the small nursery school where I was headteacher, and where two other teachers were in post, this time I would be working with practitioners in three contrasting nursery settings where I had no formal management responsibility, and where there were no qualified teachers. As a result of both of these factors, there was much less ongoing pedagogical support and advice available.

This is a field of study where there has been comparatively little research. Little is known about the best ways to support the professional development of staff working with children up to the age of three years old, and there are serious concerns about the quality of initial training and ongoing professional development (Nutbrown, 2012b). Significantly, the evaluation of the pilot phase of the project to provide free nursery places for two-year olds argues that, because of poor quality, the scheme offered no overall benefits to the cohort of children involved (Smith *et al.*, 2009).

In a sense, this brings me back to the same field where I began to study for my doctorate in education, six years ago. In difficult conditions, I have continued to learn about the importance of listening to practitioners and creating a climate which encourages professional dialogue, in order to enable the development of more

reflective, professional staff teams. Munton *et al.* (2002, p. 73-74) draw a useful contrast between "the idea of the worker as technician with the idea of the worker as co-constructor of knowledge and culture." I have also held in mind Webster and Lunt's (2002) argument for an extended ethical approach to research, focussed on improving practice and offering a better quality of service to users who may experience multiple disadvantages. Throughout the conduct of this research, I have judged it important to remain concerned with the question of whether, taking all the available evidence into account, my work has helped to develop the quality of the early education and care experienced by the children.

Chapter One

"An urgent professional need": the rationale for the study.

1.1. The professional context

My research arose from an urgent professional need. I was working in a London Borough (which I have anonymised as "Eastside") as their senior Early Years officer when the government made an unexpected announcement, via the Chancellor of the Exchequer's 2011 Autumn Statement: it planned to spend £380 million a year by 2014-15 to enable all two-year olds living in economic disadvantage to attend a nursery place for 15 hours per week, at no charge to their families (HM Treasury, 2011).

During this first period of significant cutbacks to local authority services, I had spent a considerable amount of my time in meetings about making cuts and "remodelling" services, and also holding face-to-face discussions with numerous employees whose jobs were at risk. So, on the face of it, the announcement of a significant amount of additional funding for the early years should have felt like tremendous news. Instead, it felt daunting; it felt like a policy had been thought up in Whitehall for implementation in places like Eastside, and no-one had checked the local implications.

Whilst a policy aimed at children living in disadvantage might seem to be targeted at a small, defined group, in Eastside the large majority of two-year olds would be eligible. Geographically, the borough borders the City of London and includes an office complex which has the largest concentration of bankers in the whole of Europe. Even in a time of recession, Eastside is home to some of the most concentrated riches ever known in history. Yet it is also a local authority where the *majority* of children live in poverty (End Child Poverty, 2012).

There were other daunting aspects, too. When the government announcement was made, there were just 175 two-year olds accessing free nursery places (under the pilot phase of the scheme). Eastside has a relatively low number of nursery places for two-year-olds: the last formal survey of nursery places in 2006 found that two wards lacked even a single registered nursery place. The expansion of places needed would be huge. The Early Years team set (and achieved) a highly ambitious target of creating 200 extra free places in the year 2011-2012. But this looked tiny against the projected need for places by September 2014, when an estimated 2500 two-year olds would be eligible for the scheme:
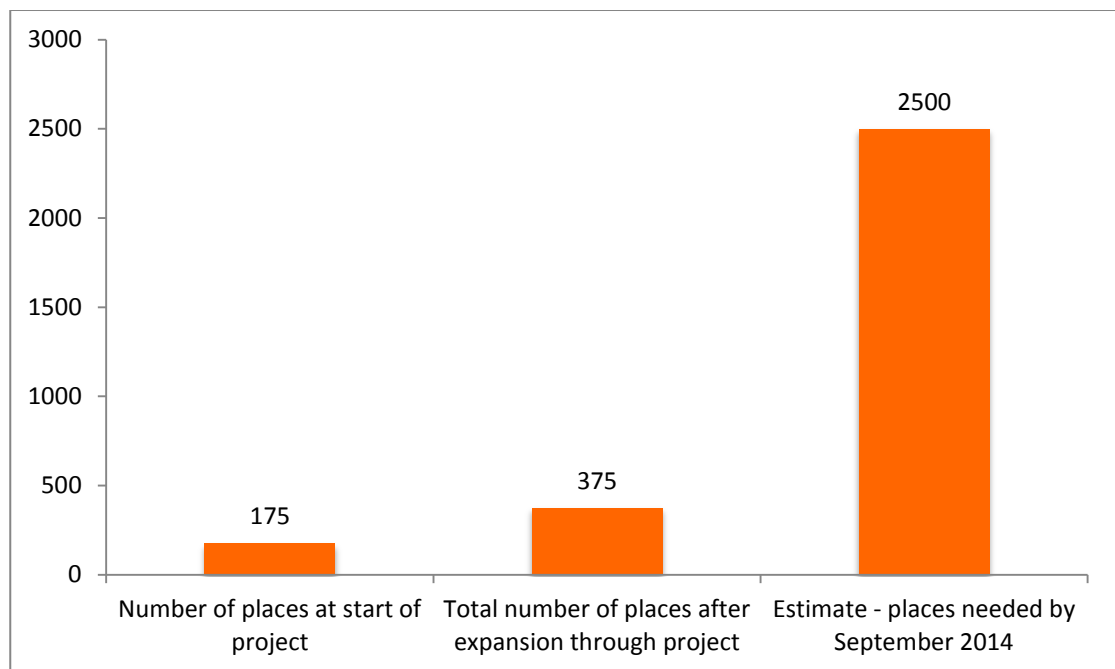
Figure 1.1. Expansion of nursery places needed in Eastside to meet the 2014 target

As well as falling short in numbers, Eastside was also judged to have serious shortcomings in quality. At the time when I was carrying out my research, the

Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) reported that Eastside had some of the poorest quality early years provision in England. The 2011 local authority performance profile showed that 44% of early years and childcare inspections in the area resulted in a rating of just "satisfactory", compared to the national average of 18%. Eastside fits into a general trend in England for the poorest areas to have the poorest quality of early years provision. The data show that whilst early years settings have improved, using Ofsted's own measures, in both deprived and non-deprived areas, there is still a substantial gap between the two, creating multiple disadvantages. Children in poverty, already disadvantaged, are potentially further disadvantaged through attending a poorer quality early years setting.

Ofsted Early Years Inspection Judgements: "How well does the setting meet the needs of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage"

	Most deprived				Least deprived			
	Outstanding (%)	Good (%)	Satisfactory (%)	Inadequate (%)	Outstanding (%)	Good (%)	Satisfactory (%)	Inadequate (%)
As at 31.08.08	7	54	32	7	10	61	26	3
	n=1,168				n=1,644			
As at 31.08.12	12	62	26	1	16	66	18	0
	n=3,646				n=5,388			

Figure 12. Ofsted national statistics indicate that more deprived areas have early years settings that are lower in quality. Source: Ofsted (2013).

The other data which are available in relation to children in the Early Years in Eastside are no more encouraging. The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results in England show the percentage of children achieving a "good level of development" by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (Department for Education, 2012a). According to these data, the proportion of children achieving a "good level of development" by the end of the EYFS in Eastside is considerably lower than the proportion of children in London as a whole. Furthermore, whereas the figures for London and inner London have improved in recent years and are now the same as those for England as a whole, the figures for Eastside remain well below the rest:
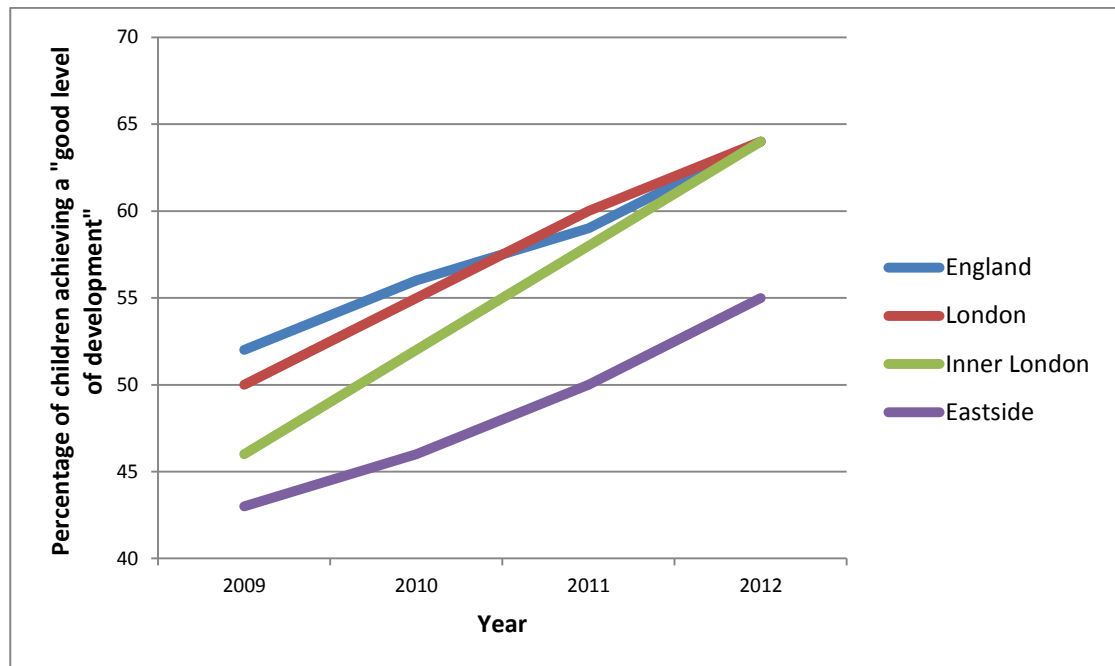
Figure 1.3. Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results (source: Department for Education, 2012a). Please note that the vertical scale does not start at zero to highlight the differences.

Although no direct comparison can be made between the two sets of data – EYFSP results and the Ofsted Early Years Outcomes – it is apparent that both, taken on their own terms, show poorer quality of early years provision and poorer outcomes for the

children in Eastside. The rate of children achieving a "good level of development" by the end of the EYFS in Eastside is 85% of the national rate, whilst the rate of settings achieving a grading of good or better from Ofsted is 70% of the national rate.

The data show potential inequalities in terms of both the quality of provision and the outcomes for children in Eastside

1.2. Why quality matters

It might seem obvious, at a general level, that the quality of early childhood education and care is important. One specific and recent source of evidence to support this view is the Department for Education's evaluation of the pilot phase of the programme to offer free nursery places for two-year olds found that overall there was little demonstrable benefit: "on average the pilot did not significantly improve the cognitive and social development of the children receiving the free childcare relative to a matched comparison group." (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p.4). However, there is some cause for a more optimistic viewpoint: the report continues (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p.4) by noting that "this *overall* lack of a significant impact disguises the fact that for those children who were found places in relatively high quality settings (those that achieved a score of at least 4 on the Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale) there *was* an impact on children, at least in terms of child vocabulary."

At the time of the government announcement, there were no comparable figures for quality in Eastside; the ECERS-R and ITERS-R quality scales (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 1998; Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2003) had not been used systematically in the local authority. However, it is notable that Smith *et al.* (2009) found that attending a setting with an Ofsted grade of "good" or better was also a strong predictor of a beneficial effect for the child. They comment that "if the provision of free places was to be restricted to settings with an Ofsted score of at least 'good' then this ought to be sufficient to ensure a positive impact on two year olds." (Smith *el al.*,

2009, p.110). However, as already stated, Eastside had a relatively low number of settings judged to be "good" or better. It was very troubling for me to consider this depressing evaluation, especially given the costs of the project (at least £3510 per child). To put that sum of money into context, 27% of Eastside children live in "severe poverty", as defined by Save the Children: the highest rate in the country. With a third of families in Eastside living on an income of less than £20,000, £3500 is a lot to spend, especially if it might not benefit the child's development.

In summary, therefore, the apparently welcome announcement of a significant sum of additional money for the early years, presented an acute professional challenge. Would it be possible to improve both the quality and the quantity of the places available for eligible children? At the same time, this gave me an opportunity: here was a chance to develop policy and practice on the basis of the best available research evidence, and to undertake the evaluation of an important project for my doctoral research. I was helped by two further beneficial interventions. Firstly, an application for additional funding from the Department for Education for a small project in Eastside was successful. Secondly, in part because of this additional funding, the local authority supported me in carrying out this research for my EdD and funded my fees. Although in the context of drastically shrinking budgets and a reducing team it was not possible to have additional time for data analysis or writing, I was allowed to spend time gathering data in the field for my project. Furthermore, because the project was sanctioned by the local authority, it was relatively easy to gain access to appropriate staff and settings.

1.3. The Eastside Project to expand Early Learning for Two Year Olds

This research project is nested within a larger project which I led, aiming to increase the number and quality of available places. Before turning specifically to my research, I will outline the nature and the scope of this wider project. This involved

13 early years settings, all categorised by the local authority into one or more of the following groups:

Settings judged to be poor quality

These settings might have places for two-year olds, but it was unlikely that the children overall would benefit from their attendance, according to the findings of Smith *et al*. (2009).

New settings

The additional funding from central government could encourage the opening of new settings. The aim of the project was to ensure that these new settings showed an early and continuing commitment to quality, so that the places would be likely to benefit eligible children.

Settings maintained by the local authority, who could convert some of their full-time places into part-time places for eligible two-year olds

The local authority directly maintained five early years settings. Although there was no capital funding available to expand the existing settings or build more, many of the local authority settings offered full-time places to children in need. These could be converted to part-time places for children who met the criteria for eligibility, enabling more children to benefit from the places. This decision was influenced by the finding in the EPPE research project (Sylva *et al*., 2010) that full-time places offer no more benefit to children's development than part-time. Children at risk of harm would continue to be offered full-time places.

The project began with a week-long training course for the whole of the Eastside early years advisory team and the 13 nursery managers. The participants were trained to use the ITERS-R and ECERS-R audits, the main research tools used in the DFE evaluation of the national pilot (Smith *et al*., 2009). The training included visits to settings which had volunteered to be evaluated so that the participants could practise

using the scales and check inter-rater reliability. By the end of the week, all the course participants were able to carry out reliable and accurate ECERS-R and ITERS-R audits. Subsequently, the managers accessed a further five days of training, spread out across the rest of the year, with a focus on using the audits to develop self-evaluation and planning for improvement.

All 13 settings were evaluated, using ITERS-R and ECERS-R, at the start of the project to provide a baseline measure; after six months; and after twelve months. Throughout the year-long project, the settings had regular visits from the specialist project workers in the early years advisory team to support them in their work of making improvements. The planning of this larger project took account of the finding from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project, that attending an early years setting with high scores in ECERS-R (amongst other measures) has a positive and long term effect on a child's education (Sylva *et al.*, 2010)

1.4. How my research project fitted into the larger project in Eastside

I would argue that the range of challenges faced in Eastside justified an overall approach which included some clear and agreed measures. There had been ongoing disagreements about whether the systems used by the early years team to assess the quality of settings were fair; whilst most early years settings had very positive working relationships with the team, a significant minority would dispute or reject the feedback given to them, on occasion resorting to legal threats or making complaints to more senior council staff. Within the team, there was an overall scepticism about using any sort of common measures, because they were felt to be too crude and to be undermining of the professional autonomy of team members. This led to a situation in which, I would argue, a narrow set of propositions about professionalism and measuring quality might be considered to be over-riding wider ethical considerations about the interests of the children and their families. The best available data indicated

that the approaches taken to date by the local authority early years team had not worked.

However, it is also important to note that questions of quality and measures of whether children have achieved a good level of development are highly contested. As Dahlberg, Moss and Pence argue:

> "The concept of quality is about a search for definitive and universal criteria that will offer certainty and order, and a belief that such transcendental criteria can be found. It asks the question – how far does this product, this service or this activity conform to a universal, objective and predetermined standard? It has no place for complexity, values, diversity, subjectivity, indeterminacy and multiple perspectives."

(Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999, p.108)

The application of a standardised quality measure can lead, as Katz (1993 cited in Moss, Dahlberg and Penn, 2000, p.110) warns, to a situation where it appears that early childhood education and care is being modelled "on the corporate/industrial or factory model so pervasive in the primary and secondary levels of education … Factories are designed to transform raw material into prespecified products by treating it to prespecified standard processes."

Looking specifically at the ITERS-R and ECERS-R quality audit tools (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 1998), Melhuish (2001, p.4) has argued that they prioritise general and observable features of quality over the individual experiences of the children; they "have the disadvantage that the experience of individual children within one setting may vary substantially". Furthermore, it has been argued that they make unwarranted claims for accuracy and universality, with Rosenthal (1999, p. 494) claiming that "they are clearly linked to the beliefs about child development and learning in industrial Western societies."

In the Eastside project, the participants themselves also identified some potential drawbacks of using the ITERS-R and ECERS-R measures, fearing that they might encourage short-term tactical action at the expense of making developments which could be embedded over time. During the initial training, a number of the nursery managers were concerned about the temptation of "game playing" merely to increase their scores. With the possibility that future funding from the local authority might be linked to attaining a score of four or above, it was felt that settings might make superficial changes to the environment, or marshal staff to perform in certain ways on the day of the audit, to make sure that they secured their funding. Practice would then go "back to normal" the next day.

Legitimate objections can be made to all of the measures discussed above. For example, the EYFS Profile data can be challenged for reliability in numerous ways, most obviously the decision about what constitutes "a good level of development". The survey of early years practitioners undertaken on behalf of the Department for Education by Brooker *et al*. (2010, p.90) found that "the requirement to assess children against the EYFS Profile is felt to be increasingly problematic as children reach the reception class, and practitioners attempt to map children's individual developmental trajectories on to a scale which many practitioners regard as ill-founded, illogical or inappropriate." Similarly, the accuracy of Ofsted inspection grades as measures of quality has been challenged, with a 2012 study by the University of Oxford and the Daycare Trust finding that "Ofsted grades, even those awarded for 'provision quality', do not provide a full picture of the quality of settings" (Mathers *et al*., 2012, p.8). The ECERS-R and ITERS-R tools, whilst challenged, are at least widely-used and robust research tools.

Most fundamentally, perhaps, no measurement tool – whether it is ECERS-R, Ofsted grading, or EYFSP results – is capable, in itself, of bringing about changes in quality. My specific interest, within the wider project in Eastside, was in how I might work to bring about changes in the understanding and the practice of early years

practitioners. This focus on understanding would require a different approach: smaller in scale and finer in grain.

1.5. Bringing about changes in understanding and practice

> "In the realm of child care when one is dealing with concerned people, new knowledge about children that comes from outside one's own experience seems to make little headway against received wisdom and 'commonsense' practice. It is only when the research helps one to see with one's own eyes that it gets beneath the skin."

Jerome Bruner

(Bruner 1980, p.211)

In my previous Institution-Focused Study (Grenier, 2011), I showed that early years practitioners, given time and opportunities, would enthusiastically engage in sophisticated examination of their work in order to develop their understanding and their practice. Two of the key features of this project were training the practitioners to observe children's play more systematically, using the Target Child Observation (Sylva, Roy and Painter, 1980), and giving them time to discuss and reflect on their practice, using their own chosen terms. I argued that these features were important, because current understandings about early years education imply that all staff working in early years settings need to be able to make sense of what they observe and experience through reflection and discussion; they need to be able to respond to situations thoughtfully and autonomously; and they need to be able to develop their practice and expertise. As Mitchell and Cubey (2003, p.xii) argue, in their summary of the characteristics of effective professional development in early education and care: "understandable data that reveals "pedagogy in action" and others' views is helpful in these investigations … Professional development is linked to tangible

changes in pedagogical interactions and this in turn is associated with children's learning in early childhood settings. The professional development helps participants to change educational practice, beliefs, understanding, and/or attitudes."

However, it is worth noting that "professional development" is, implicitly, a contentious area in early years education and care in England. Despite the national project being branded as "early learning for two-year-olds", this work is taking place in a field of work which is still generally referred to as "childcare", where there are very few graduates or qualified teachers working, and where staff are, in general, much less qualified than those in the nursery or primary school sector. 70% hold a level three qualification, either a current Level Three in Childcare and Early Education, or a previous equivalent qualification like the National Nursery Education Board award, the NNEB. The Level Three qualifications in England have recently been strongly criticised in Professor Cathy Nutbrown's independent review, commissioned by the government, which found that they were characterised by a "lack of rigour and depth" (Nutbrown, 2012b, p.5). This echoes the findings of Colley (2006, p. 20), who argues that the current training system, and workplace culture, leave little space for reflection and the development of abstract thought, and instead privileges a kind of unthinking "emotional dedication". Likewise, Osgood (2012) is highly critical of what she sees as the current climate that practitioners must work in, driven by targets and performance measures. She proposes an approach to training with more opportunities for critical reflection and argues that the "training of greatest appeal, relevance and effectiveness to early years professionals was that which provided scope for reflexivity leading to heightened professional confidence" (Osgood, 2012, p.143). Overall, Siraj-Blatchford (2010, p.20) argues, the English early years system is blighted by a "muddle in training, with an ever-more diverse workforce".

Serious questions have been raised about whether early years practitioners should be seen as professionals, and whether the standards and consistency of their qualifications are adequate. However, in my role as senior Early Years Adviser, my

primary concern was to bring about changes in practice, not to undertake an investigation into how professionalism in the early years is contested. Whilst the debates about qualifications and the arguments for more graduates and teachers in the early years continue to be urgent and pressing, the field of my work was narrower – it was about working with the staff who were in place at the time of the project, for children who would only be two for a year. Therefore, after careful consideration, I decided to work with the concept of "professional development"; although it is problematic for the reasons outlined above, it has the benefit of being widely understood as a process of learning and development, at both practical and theoretical levels, with a degree of self-direction, ultimately aiming to improve practice. Although Hargreaves and Goodson (1996, p.20) are writing about teachers, I found their definition of professional development relevant: "a self-directed search and struggle for continuous learning related to one's own expertise and standards of practice, rather than compliance with the enervating obligations of endless change demanded by others."

There was another, pragmatic reason for maximising the amount of self-direction in the project. There is a long, and little-documented, history in the early years in England of conflict between teachers and other early years practitioners; between those who speak of "early education" and those who speak of "childcare". Historically, childcare – for children before the age of three, for children spending long hours in nursery whilst their parents worked, and for children considered to be at risk of harm – had been be registered and inspected by social services in Eastside. The council day nurseries were operated and managed as part of the social services department. In the 1990s, Ofsted had taken over the role of inspecting and registering the nurseries, and this had led to the creation of an advisory team for childcare within the education authority. This team sat in the same office as the early education team, overseeing all provision for three and four year olds in nursery and primary schools. There was a single head of early years, overseeing both teams, and relationships were friendly between the two groups of staff.

But even when I arrived in 2009, the two teams still had very distinct identities. The childcare team was mostly made up of staff with level 3 qualifications, with one member holding an early childhood studies degree. They worked with early years settings which were not maintained schools. The advisory teachers' team was made up of qualified teachers whose experience was in primary school nursery and reception classes, and who had no experience working with children before the age of three. However, I came to the post having led and managed an integrated Nursery School and Children's Centre, open for extended hours all year-round, with babies and toddlers making up half the roll. Nevertheless, it was initially assumed in Eastside that I would not get too involved with any work relating to children before the age of three years old. When I did get involved, conflicts would almost inevitably ensue. Despite an overall high level of collegiality, I knew I needed to tread with great care.

The only peer-reviewed research into the role of advisory early years teachers – in this case, the advisory teachers employed by Children's Centres – finds that "democratic" approaches to leadership are most likely to be successful, and cautions very strongly against "pace-setting" or "commanding" styles (Garrick and Morgan, 2009, p.76). This supported my view that my research project should be as participative as possible, and that I should be very aware that anxiety about my role as a teacher might interfere with the conduct of the investigation. And there was one further reason for making the pragmatic choice to work with a participative approach. Garrick and Morgan (2009, p.80) conclude that "children's centre teacher influence is spread too thinly" to have adequate impact; active participation was needed, otherwise my influence would be spread so thinly that it would be undetectable.

Within the wider Eastside project, I designed a smaller research project with these considerations in mind. I approached three contrasting settings within the overall project group of 13, to ask for their participation in a project structured around child observation and group discussion. I did not offer the project to all the settings, because I wanted three contrasting settings (one maintained by the local authority,

one private, and a playgroup from the voluntary sector with paid staff). My intention was firstly to explore the views of a comparatively under-researched group of people. There is almost no research into how early years practitioners go about teaching and caring for children before the age of three in early years settings in England: most of the research into the children's development is concerned with community-based programmes for families, like the Parents Early Education Partnership (PEEP Project) (Evangelou *et al.*, 2008) and Sure Start (Melhuish *et al.*, 2010). My exploratory project intended to help the development of better kinds of training and professional development for this specific group of practitioners, with findings which might provide a starting point for further research in the future. My second intention was to provide an opportunity for the participants to engage in further professional development, through a cycle of structured observation of the children and group discussions about what they had observed.

As I have argued above, there is little research into forms of support and professional development which might be appropriate for this specific group of practitioners, working with children before the age of three. The approach taken in this study draws on Bruner's (1980) argument that, for the development of practice, new knowledge must be contextualised. It must be constructed with and through the experience of the practitioners, and not merely "taught" to them.

1.6. Summary

The study was devised against the backdrop of a larger project in Eastside to respond to the unexpected expansion of the government's "Early Learning for Two Year Olds" initiative, with the pressing need to ensure that more places were made available, and that places must offer an appropriate experience to the very young children involved. According to a range of measures, Eastside is a highly disadvantageous place for children in the early years.

It is widely accepted, however, that quality in early years education and care cannot be easily defined or measured, and the literature on professional development suggests that it is necessary to engage practitioners in processes of review and reflection, taking data and other relevant information into account. Building on my previous study in the Nursery School where I was headteacher (Grenier, 2011), I wished to develop a new project to support this type of professional development amongst a wider group of practitioners and in a more challenging environment.

More detailed consideration of these matters is given in Chapter Two, the literature review, followed by a fuller account of the design of the project and its methodology in Chapter Three. The data from the project are presented in Chapter Four, with a specific focus on the participants' theories about how young children learn in nursery settings, and on their role as educators. In Chapter Five there is a further discussion of the findings, specifically considering the development of the participants' views during the project, and whether there were improvements in quality. Finally, Chapter Six considers the contribution this study has made to knowledge, both as empirical research and theory-building.

Children at two have few options when it comes to expressing a view about attending nursery. Families in poor communities have fewer options than their better-off counterparts when it comes to making a choice on behalf of their child. The likelihood is that there is less provision in their neighbourhoods than in richer areas, and that the provision that is available will be lower in quality. They are also less likely to be able to afford to travel beyond walking distance to widen their choices. Early years practitioners working with children before the age of three are, on average, the least qualified and the lowest paid in the sector in England. The nature of this work with the participants and the question of whether there is evidence that it led to improvements in the provision of early education and care are matters of urgent importance.

Chapter Two

"A membrane of constantly evolving supportive connections": a review of the literature about the pedagogy of working with the youngest children.

As I argued in Chapter One, this research project arises out of an urgent professional need, and is concerned with a pressing issue of social inequality in early childhood. But that urgency should not crowd out a longer view: how has England developed an early years sector which is blighted by a "muddle in training, with an ever-more diverse workforce" (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010, p.20), and what steps might one take to provide appropriate support and professional development for practitioners who are currently working with the children?

2.1. The historical context: early education and childcare for two-year olds

It appears that organised childcare and the education of young infants began, in England, in the seventeenth century: the main rationales for this care were educational, so that children could learn their alphabet before starting instruction in school (Cunningham, 1977), pragmatic, enabling women to work (Burnette, 1998), or moral, either promoting more enlightened ways of bringing up children without force or coercion (Owen, 1824) or imposing hygiene practices (Lown, 1990).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, nursery education and childcare became a significant concern of progressives, notably Christian Socialists like Rachel and Margaret McMillan who observed "children creeping on the filthy pavement, half naked, unwashed and covered with sores" (cited in Cusden, 1938, p.8). In 1914, the McMillan sisters founded an open-air nursery school in Deptford to provide a healthier environment for children aged two and older. They had a radical vision of an early childhood for city infants situated in a beautiful and ordered environment including gardens, greenhouses, art and music, and a strong focus on the child's autonomy. But despite powerful lobbying by the McMillans, who drew notable support from Lady Astor, Stanley Baldwin, George Bernard Shaw and Queen Mary, amongst others (Penn and Moss, 1996, p.63), progress was slow. The 1918 Education Act permitted local authorities to set up nursery schools, but only 47 maintained

nursery schools had been opened by 1938, with a further 47 operated by voluntary agencies.

In the 1930s, the pioneering English child psychoanalyst, Susan Isaacs – working very closely with Melanie Klein – developed a theoretical model for the child's inner development through play and nursery experiences. She argued that toys can be used to represent aspects of the child's inner world and that a "lessening of inner tension through dramatic representation makes it easier for the child to control his real behaviour, and to accept the limitations of the real world. In other words, it furthers the development of the ego, and of the sense of reality" (Isaacs, 1933, p. 210). Isaacs emphasised the benefits of children having space and autonomy in order to develop their thinking and their creativity; Mary-Jane Drummond (2000), commenting on Isaacs's Malting House School for children aged two upwards, concludes that the children could be "more active, more curious, more creative, more exploratory, and more inventive than they could have been in any ordinary school." But, whereas Isaacs was operating a private school on the edge of Cambridge for a mostly affluent and intellectual clientele, the McMillans were offering nursery education as a kind of sanctuary, with Margaret McMillan (cited in Bradburn, 1989, p.179) arguing that "many children from crowded homes today receive no nurture at all … their brain-growth is hindered by the evil of their first years."

The need for women to work in factories and take over other jobs previously held by men during World War Two prompted a significant expansion of nursery childcare for babies and young children. Anna Freud, a nursery teacher in Vienna before she followed her father into psychoanalysis, documented many of the difficulties and complexities she experienced in her work of organising wartime nursery childcare in the Hampstead Nursery. Like McMillan, Freud argued that nursery education for children from the age of two years old could provide "inestimable value as an addition to the opportunities for stimulation and growth which are only too often lacking in individual families" (Freud, 1974, pp. XX-XXI).

However, whilst McMillan emphasised the child's creativity, expressiveness and play in early education, Freud put her main emphasis on the caring relationship between adult and child, proposing a model for the child's development in which there is what she terms an "intimate interchange of affection" between the child and the "maternal figure" (Freud, 1974, p. XIX).

Both Freud and Isaacs expressed concerns about the possible damage that wartime nursery childcare might be doing to children. Freud (1974) concluded that the nursery school was not an appropriate institution for young infants, especially before the age of two years old, and Isaacs (1970, p.218) warned, on the basis of her observations of wartime childcare, that if an infant "is living in an institution, and finds nobody to give him warm human contact because people are either indifferent or too busy, this does not mean to him the mere absence of the good he requires, a merely neutral place; it means the actual presence of positive evil."

2.2. The period after World War Two: the dangers of the nursery

These concerns of Isaacs and Freud found further expression after the war in the work of John Bowlby, the pioneering British psychologist and psychoanalyst. Bowlby was commissioned by the World Health Organisation in 1949 to study the effects of children being separated from their parents, common in wartime Europe. Bowlby (1951) emphasised the reality of the grief and suffering experienced by children when separated from their parents, breaking from the more equivocal theoretical positions of (Sigmund) Freud and Klein. Freud argued that in respect of significant events in childhood, "we have not succeeded in pointing to any difference in the consequences, whether phantasy or reality has had a greater share" (Freud, cited in Ahbel-Rappe, 2006, p. 190). In Britain, Freud's nuanced view was developed by Klein into a position which, to the exasperation of both Bowlby and the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, appeared to be a refusal to engage at all with reality in childhood suffering. Bowlby commented that his "interest in real-life

experiences and situations was … alien to the Kleinian outlook" (cited in Schwartz, 1999, p.225) and Winnicott argued that "Klein claimed to have paid full attention to the environment factor but it is my opinion that she was temperamentally incapable of this" (cited in Schwartz, 1999, p. 195)

Bowlby (1951, p.11) stressed what he argued were the child's real needs: "the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment". Bowlby's main concerns were about long periods of separation between parent and child, as shown in the harrowing film made by his protégés, husband-and-wife team the Robertsons (Robertson and Robertson, 1952) about a two-year old admitted to hospital and deprived of all contact with her parents. On the other hand, Bowlby argued in favour of day nurseries as a form of support for families where mothers needed to work, and concluded that it was better to children to remain in a "bad" home, supplemented with time in a day nursery, than be placed full-time in institutional care (Bowlby, 1953, pp. 76-77). All the same, under the influence of Bowlby's work, the British government closed the wartime nurseries: the expansion of nursery education and childcare came to an end. The first government-sponsored report on education after World War Two, *Children and their Primary Schools* (the "Plowden Report"; Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967) is clearly hostile to the notion of childcare, rather tartly concluding that "some mothers who are not obliged to work may work full-time, regardless of their children's welfare. It is no business of the educational service to encourage these mothers to do so" (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, p.127).

In keeping with the arguments of the McMillans and Anna Freud, discussed above, that nursery education could make up for deficiencies in family life, the Plowden Report approvingly quoted witnesses who argued that "nursery education can compensate for social deprivation and special handicaps" (*ibid,* p119). The report notes the particular argument that "thought is dependent on language and that some

working class children have insufficient encouragement, example and stimulus in the situations of their daily life to build up a language which is rich and wide ranging in vocabulary" (*ibid*, p. 119). The Plowden Report concluded that nursery education should be provided in a very specific form: for children aged between three and five years old, and for just a part of the day, making a distinction between childcare and education: "the day nursery is the proper place for those children who have to be away from their homes before the age of three. An institution with a more directly educational aim is right for children of three and over." (*ibid*, p.122)

Perhaps as a result of this ruling, research and discussion of nursery childcare in England for children up to the age of three in the 1970s and 1980s tended to be concerned with the provision of safe and healthy physical care – not early education or play – with a focus on structure and organisation. There were fewer discussions of how young children's relationships in a group might facilitate their emotional and social development, and less of a concern with the child's inner-life, so strongly represented in the work of Susan Isaacs and Melanie Klein. For example, Jack and Barbara Tizard (1971, p.159) argued that "close relationships should not be allowed to develop" in nursery childcare as emotional detachment was inevitable. In 1980, Peter Moss *et al.* (cited in Barnett and Bain, 1986, p.3) wrote in *Nurseries Now* that "council nurseries certainly offer good standards of care – most maintain high staff:child ratios and pay a lot of attention to health and hygiene".

2.3. The "key person approach"

On the other hand, Goldschmied and Jackson (1994) broadened the discussion beyond just ratios, regulations and hygiene, recognising the complexity inherent in group childcare. They explained (1994, p.10) that their "theoretical position has its origins in Bowlby's seminal work on attachment and loss (Bowlby, 1969/82)"; from this position they developed the "key person approach" to nursery childcare for

children under three. They agreed with Bowlby's proposition that the young child needs a reliable and warm relationship with a special person, but argued that this could be offered in nurseries through a system of care assignment. They explained that the key person approach is an "attempt in the nursery to offer children a person to whom they can relate in a special way during *some* of the often long hours which they spend away from home" (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994, p. 10).

In relation to this study, the particular significance of Goldschmied and Jackson's (1994) highly influential book on working with children before the age of three is its relegation of the importance of play. Earlier researchers, whose work informed the development of the key person approach (Bain and Barnett, 1980; Hopkins, 1988) had drawn on the Kleinian tradition and put a strong emphasis on play and imagination. Bain and Barnett (1980, p.149) argued that "day nurseries can potentially play both a therapeutic and educational role, not in their present form, but in a form which is based on children's developmental needs for care and education." Hopkins (1988, p. 99) regretted what she argued was the avoidance by nursery staff of "personal and playful interaction with the children". Conversely, Goldschmied and Jackson are most influenced by Anna Freud's and Bowlby's emphasis on reliable physical proximity and caretaking routines, arguing that "play is only one element in child development; much more crucial is adult concern and attention" (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994, p.8).

Helen Penn's research into English nursery pedagogy in the 1990s leads her to claim that the only observable pedagogical approach had its entire theoretical underpinning from Bowlby, holding, she argues, "that emotional security, and therefore learning, only takes place in a one-to-one adult-child relationship, and all other situations are irrelevant" (Penn, 1997, p.53). Penn considers that this emphasis on physical proximity and observation undermines the child's autonomy, leading to "the surveillance and monitoring of individual children".

However, the 1980s and 1990s also saw the revival of another tradition in English nurseries, in which play and learning are seen to be important to children before the age of three.

2.4. Seeing the infant and toddler as a learner

Garland and White (1980, pp.121-124) accept that the needs of two-year olds differ greatly from those of children at rising five years old and about to start in a school reception class, but argue "that some form of education, in its very broadest sense, is desirable for both groups." In 1990, the Conservative junior minister in the Department for Education and Science, Angela Rumbold, chaired a committee to enquire into early years education. This produced a report entitled *Starting with Quality* (Rumbold, 1990), usually referred to as the "Rumbold Report". The report noted two of the historical features discussed above. Firstly, that there was a split between nursery care and education, and that structural attempts to get the two groups of professionals to work together had not been successful. Secondly, the report notes that nursery education had long been targeted at those children and families thought to be in need, "in crude terms, as existing to provide what the home could not" (*ibid*, p.5).

The Rumbold Report (*ibid*, p.9) approvingly quotes the finding of the 1988 Parliamentary Report on Educational Provision for the Under Fives from the Education, Science and Arts Select Committee that "care and education for the under fives are complementary and inseparable". Following the report, policy direction continued towards an increasingly integrated view of early education and care, particularly under the Labour government from 1997 onwards, which supported the development of "Early Excellence Centres" in its first year of office, combining early education and care, and employing multi-professional staff teams under the leadership of qualified teachers. In 2003, *Birth to Three Matters* was produced as guidance to "all those with responsibility for the care and education of babies and

children from birth to three years" (Department for Education and Skills, 2003, p.4). Just a few years later, a single framework for early years education and care, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), claimed to have brought about the "ending of the distinction between care and learning and between birth-to-three and three-to-five provision" (Department for Education and Skills, 2007, p.10).

Overall, from the 1990s onwards, one might discern a decisive shift away from the proposition that nursery is a damaging place for a child to be. There is increasing challenge to the notion that one can draw a boundary at age three, with childcare, prioritising appropriate care routines, bodily care and close relationships, on one side; and early education on the other, focused on learning and play. Even so, Dalli *et al.* (2011, p.18) argue that "to see the infant and toddler as a learner still constitutes a challenging paradigmatic shift for many teachers". In the next section, I will explore how this shift has come about in the fields of policy and research in early education over the last three decades.

2.5. A growing consensus about how young children develop and learn: constructivist approaches to early education

The "paradigmatic shift" identified by Dalli *et al.* (2011, p.18) can be understood as resulting from the coming together of increasingly detailed research into babies' and toddlers' learning in the fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience. There is an emerging consensus amongst both researchers and practitioners that young children must no longer be thought of in terms of what they do not know and cannot do, as empty vessels needing to be filled with adult knowledge. Instead they are now lauded as the possessors of a brain which is "the most powerful learning machine in the universe" (Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl, 1999, p.1). In England, this view is reflected in current version of the EYFS, which says in its guidance document that "every child is a unique child who is constantly learning" (Early Education, 2012, p.2).

This constant learning is understood not in terms of the transmission of knowledge from adults to children, but as a process of co-construction by child and adult together. The child co-constructs an understanding of the world, through interactions with adults, peers, and a carefully resourced and arranged environment. Children are also understood to co-construct their identities through interactions with parents and other carers (Schaffer, 1996; Trevarthen, 1998; Woodhead and Moss, 2007; Brooker, 2009).

The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) Project (Sylva *et al.*, 2010), a longitudinal study of 2800 English children from randomly selected pre-school settings and 310 children with no pre-school experience, has produced compelling evidence to support this constructivist approach to early learning. The EPPE case studies (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002) identify a number of features found in the most effective early years settings: children are understood as competent and active learners; learning is recognized as culturally located and constructed; interaction with both educators and parents is understood to play a significant role; and a rich environment for learning and development is seen as important, both at home and in early childhood settings. The EPPE project has concluded that this style of constructivist early childhood education and care leads not only to the best outcomes for the child at five, but also that 'the effects of children's pre-school experience remained until they were age 11, in both cognitive and social-behavioural outcomes' (Sylva, 2010, p.4), with further benefits, albeit weaker, still apparent as the children ended the first phase of secondary education at the age of 14 (Sylva *et al.*, 2012).

However, given the overall consensus in favour of a constructivist approach to early childhood education, a difficult question arises: what is the capacity of any given staff team to implement it? In the first place, such application of "theory" in "practice" cannot be conceived of as simply "implementation". Implicit in

constructivist pedagogy is the view that one of the most powerful ways for practitioners to help children's learning to advance, is to respond in a highly individual and subtle manner to their investigations, discussions and conversations. Wood, McMahon and Cranstoun (1980, p.205) describe this as "when the adult takes the child's interest and ideas as a focus and maintains the interaction contingently rather than programmatically." Conversely, in the "programmatic" style of interaction, the adult attempts to direct the child's attention or conversation, ignoring the child's communication and apparent intention. An extreme example of this is given in the volume from the Oxford Pre-School Project about Day Nurseries (Garland and White, 1980, p. 53), in which a child bursts out with the comment that "my Daddy's dead, but I've got a grandfather and he's going to take me to school", only for the practitioner to reply "is he?" and then continue "asking the children to recite in turn 'it-is-Wednesday-the-thirtieth-of-June-hot-and-sunny'".

In an extension of the practice of contingent interaction, the EPPE Project researchers describe 'Sustained Shared Thinking' (SST), where adults and children "'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, or extend a narrative" (Siraj-Blatchford, 2007, p.11). An episode of SST might be initiated by either adult or child. This contrasts strongly with the approach advocated by Goldschmied and Jackson (1994), who emphasise the child's impulses to explore, and advise the adult not to get involved. Anita Hughes, who worked closely with Elinor Goldschmied, argues that "caregivers regularly fall into the trap of being unwittingly intrusive and interfering, thus hindering children's natural development and creativity" (Hughes, 2010, p. XIV). This approach is consistent with the long-established Hungarian *Loczy* approach to early education and childcare, also widely used in California (Petrie and Owen, 2005), which emphasises the role of the child's exploratory drive, not adult interaction, in early learning.

One might summarise these views as emphasising attachment and the child's impulse to explore, and giving less prominence to joint-attention and co-construction

between adult and child. The first English framework for practice with the youngest children, *Birth to Three Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003), develops this view by seeing care and learning holistically. But that learning is always understood to be initiated by the child, with one exception. In relation to supporting the development of bilingual children, the Literature Review (David *et al.,* 2003) emphasises that nurseries should "provide some language teaching … (plan some interactions with young bilingual children and intervene in play to effect these) rather than simply relying on the *ad hoc* interactions the children may have in the language which is additional for them."

   Overall, David *et al.* (2003) focus much more on babies and younger toddlers, than on children in the third year of life; and whilst they acknowledge co-construction, they almost always exemplify child-initiated play. Conversely, the more recent literature review for the New Zealand government by Dalli *et al.* (2011, p.4), whilst still placing a significant focus on child-initiation, cites the counter argument "that adults have the key role in initiating cognitively stimulating interactions that are attuned to the child (Jaffe, 2007; Warner, 2002)." The difference in focus can, perhaps, most clearly be illustrated by "word cloud" diagrams, which show the most frequently-occurring words in a document, and show the frequency of occurrence through size of the font. In the Birth to Three review (David *et al.*, 2003) the words "children" and "development" are significantly the most prominent; in the review by Dalli *et al.* (2011) these words remain very prominent but are joined by "childhood", perhaps showing an increased emphasis on the socio-cultural construction of childhood. The prominence of "quality" and "education" might illustrate the increasing contemporary emphasis on early learning and the impact of quality in relation to securing the best outcomes for children:

Figure 2.1. A "Word Cloud" made up from the full text of the English _Birth to Three Matters_ Literature Review (David _et al.,_ 2003)

Figure 2.2. A"Word Cloud" made up of the full text of the New Zealand literature review, _Quality early childhood education for under-two-year-olds: what should it look like?_ (Dalli _et al._, 2012)

The increasing emphasis on co-construction, both in terms of learning (Wood, McMahon and Cranstoun, 1980; Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2007) and the construction of the child's identity in relation to other people (Schaffer, 1996; Trevarthen, 1998; Woodhead and Moss, 2007; Brooker, 2009) and to places (Brooker, 2012b) implies, in turn, less emphasis on the account of the child's "natural" development in a facilitating environment. As Smith (1999, p.86) notes, "models of development which emphasise the child's natural and spontaneous development from within or of development as being shaped entirely through learning processes have been strongly criticised." Moss, Dahlberg and Pence (2000, p.109) argue that the child should be viewed as "a co-constructor of knowledge, culture and identity in relationship with other children and adults". Evangelou (2009, p.60) also emphasises relationships and the child's emotional wellbeing, proposing that "individual children do not operate a smoothly progressive learning trajectory. Children use less sophisticated learning strategies even after more sophisticated strategies have been understood. This variable performance is dependent on a range of variables, for example task difficulty, task support and levels of confidence on the day."

An understanding of childhood consisting of sequential stages of development produces a particular understanding of the role of the early years practitioner; a very different image results from the model of co-construction. Munton *et al.* (2002, pp.73-74), drawing on the work of Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999), contrast "the idea of the worker as technician with the idea of the worker as a co-constructor of knowledge and culture. The former is a transmitter of predetermined knowledge and culture to the child, and a facilitator of the child's development. They ensure that each milestone is reached and that the child's activities are appropriate to his or her stage of development. The latter constructs knowledge and culture, both the children's and their own."

Taken together, these arguments imply that there cannot be an actual "programme" for staff to implement in early childhood education and care. Dalli *et al.* (2011, p.69) argue that the "'curriculum' is enacted in the space of children's embodied, everyday experiences, which occur in close relation and interrelation with others." It would seem that what is called for is a style of interaction which depends on considerable knowledge of each individual child, a general understanding of how children develop and think, and adequate subject knowledge. Staff therefore need to able to observe children systematically and make sense of those observations in the light of theories about learning, and theories about each individual child. They need to be able to make decisions based on this knowledge to inform their interactions with individual children and groups of children minute-by-minute, and to inform their choices about longer term planning and resourcing.

This process has been described as "intersubjective attunement" (Dalli *et al.*, 2011, p.3), and appears to have evolved from the concept of "intersubjectivity" found in psychoanalysis (for example, Stern *et al*., 1998). Intersubjectivity, in psychoanalytic theory and practice, involves seeing reality as a joint construction between the analyst and analysand; the technique of the analyst allows for the possibility of a new understanding of past relationships and events, in essence a new reality, to develop within that intersubjective relationship.

In the last two decades, a number of researchers have proposed that children co-construct their identities through interactions with parents and other carers (Schaffer, 1996; Trevarthen, 1998; Woodhead and Moss, 2007; Brooker, 2009), implying that identity is created in a metaphorical "space" between adult and child (or child and child, or child and the wider environment). This develops both the celebrated argument of Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976, p.90), that adults tutor children to solve problems through "scaffolding" or "'controlling' those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner's capacity", and also the claim of Wood, McMahon and

Cranstoun (1980) that "when the adult takes the child's interest and ideas as a focus and maintains the interaction contingently rather than programmatically [the child's] competence may begin to show through".

In both of these instances, the process is essentially seen as one party adapting to the needs or perspective of the other. However, Bruner later argues (1995, p.5) that such notions of joint attention place insufficient stress on the need for *both* parties to have a theory of mind, to imagine how their actions are being understood by another and to modify their actions accordingly in what he terms the "intersubjective encounter". Bruner notes that children "correct their own requests to be better understood, and reinterpret others' misinterpreted requests by appropriate maneuvers, like looking back at the adult to check line of regard or facial expression" (Bruner, 1995, p.5). The argument is developed with a specific pedagogical focus, with Bruner describing how adults use such encounters to "teach" the child to take increasing control or agency "through the provision of affordances and the imposition of constraints" (page 6).

Smith (1999, p. 86) further argues that this pedagogy implies a focus on the physical and emotional care of the child, as well as a focus on the child's thinking: "a close and nurturing adult-child relationship … is necessary for intersubjectivity, which allows the caregiver to judge how much the child already knows and understands, so that she can provide appropriate scaffolding to extend development." Johansson (2004, p.15) considers the "interactive atmosphere", in which the child is understood to have intentions and to be creative, with knowledge understood to be "in part relational, dependent on the context and to some degree created by learning through collaboration" (*ibid*, p.16), creating an atmosphere which is "sensitive, permissive, and mutually intersubjective" (*ibid*, p.23)

Likewise, Dalli *et al.* (2011, p.73) stress the importance of adult recognition and permission of the child's agency. Without agency, there can be no intersubjectivity: "research from within a socio-cultural research framework emphasises the notion of

infant-toddler agency. This refers to the ability of the young child to exercise effect on the world through the expression of mind and body in reciprocal acts; agency makes intersubjectivity possible (e.g., Eriksen Ødegaard, 2006; White, 2009)." Likewise, agency is not simply something which children carry within themselves as an intrinsic personality trait, but something which is produced dynamically through relationships, an idea which is nicely encapsulated by the concept of "autonomy with connectedness" (Sroufe, 1996, p.206 cited by Thomason and La Paro, 2009, p. 285). Finally, it is not just a relationship with one person which matters, but also the ongoing responsiveness and attunement of all the staff and indeed the whole organisation, following Dalli *et al.*'s argument:

> "quality pedagogy is not merely the product of actions by one teacher but rather relies on a membrane of constantly evolving supportive connections between teachers and children, teachers and teachers, structural elements of the organisation of the centre, and the centre's philosophy and leadership style, all of which are located within a broader policy infrastructure"
>
> Dalli *et al.*, 2011, p.3

In summary, research from the perspectives of developmental psychology and early education is converging to give an increasingly clear picture of appropriate ways to care for and educate young children up to three years old in nurseries. This suggests several implications for practice. Practitioners can be understood as needing to develop what Dalli *et al.* (2009) term "keen observation", in order to get to know children as individuals and co-construct learning – as opposed to using a pre-set programme, or merely following fixed care routines. But observational skills are not adequate in themselves, and as Osgood (2012) argues, "doing observations" can become just another chore. In addition to having the opportunities and the skills to observe children closely, practitioners also need opportunities for discussion and for

critical reflection if they are to develop, in Dalli *et al.'s* (2011, p.3) striking phrase, "a membrane of constantly evolving supportive connections".

This necessarily leads to a second set of questions about what the existing research and literature says about appropriate ways to offer support, training and development for early years practitioners, given the overall complexities and subtleties of their roles, and specifically to promote observation and critical reflection. There is growing evidence of the positive effects on children's learning and development of different types of training for practitioners working with children between the ages of three and five in England. The EPPE report (Sylva *et al.*, 2004, p. 4) finds that "having trained teachers working with children in pre-school settings … had the greatest impact on quality and was linked specifically with better outcomes in pre-reading and social development at age 5." Similarly, Mathers *et al*. (2011, p.93) found that "settings which gained a <u>graduate leader with EYPS</u> [Early Years Professional Status] made significant improvements in quality as compared with settings which did not." However, as previously argued, the research in England is inconclusive in respect to the impact of graduate-level qualifications for staff working with children up to the age of three. Mathers *et al.* (2011, p. 10) note that the small numbers of EYPs they encountered who were working with children in this age band made it difficult for them to come to any firm conclusions, and find that there is "little evidence that EYPs improved the quality of provision for younger children (birth to 30 months)." As previously discussed, there are also many concerns about the quality of the main qualification held by staff working with this age group, the Level Three in Childcare and Education. Overall, it is not clear what types of training, support and professional development might be appropriate for practitioners working with the youngest children in the early years, in the context of England's "muddle in training" (Siraj-Blatchford, 2010, p.20).

2.6. Professional development and training for early years practitioners

Nursery work with young children has long been seen as low in status: semi-skilled work suitable for girls leaving school without many formal qualifications. The Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, p. 121) comments that nurseries, like hospitals, "require large numbers of girls with similar educational qualifications"; nearly half a century later, Nutbrown (2012b, p.9) wryly summarises the options for young women leaving school with low levels of qualification as "hair or care". Moss (2006, p. 34) claims that "the early childhood worker as substitute mother produces an image that is both gendered and assumes that little or no education is necessary to undertake the work, which is understood as requiring qualities and competencies that are either innate to women ('maternal instinct') or else are acquired through women's practice of domestic labour ('housework skills')."

As a need for support, training and further professional development for a comparatively poorly-qualified (and poorly paid) group of staff began to be recognised, it was at first suggested that this could be achieved simply, by giving a more qualified practitioner a supervisory role. The Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, p.122) recommended that nursery groups "should always be under the ultimate supervision of a qualified teacher, but that the main day to day work should be taken by two year trained nursery assistants, of whom there should be a minimum of one to every ten children." However, the notion that teachers should oversee the work of day nurseries proved highly contentious. The Rumbold Report (Rumbold, 1990, p.27) notes that whilst the 1980 Education Act enabled local education authorities to make teachers from nursery or primary schools available to support day nurseries, in practice "this is seldom done". Where it was done, the results were often not happy, with Rumbold (*ibid*, p.114) noting that "teachers have felt isolated, and day nursery staff have felt threatened."

More recently, every Children's Centre in England was required from 2004 to employ a qualified teacher to support local nurseries, until the coalition government withdrew the requirement in 2010 in a move which they described as "reducing bureaucracy for professionals in Sure Start children's centres" (Department for Education, 2010). However, the role of Children's Centre teachers has been little-researched, with only Garrick and Morgan (2009) having evaluated the role in a peer-reviewed journal article. Their research focuses on the leadership styles of two Children's Centre teachers, principally drawing on the theories of "emotional intelligence" (Goleman, 2000; 2002 cited in Garrick and Morgan, 2009) and Leithwood and Levin's model of teacher leadership in schools (Leithwood and Levin, 2005, cited in Garrick and Morgan, 2009). The study finds some evidence of improved staff confidence and outcomes for children in some of the settings, but judges that overall the findings were "mixed" (Garrick and Morgan, 2009, p.79). They point out that larger structural issues, such as low levels of qualification and high levels of turnover amongst staff in private and voluntary nursery settings, have an adverse effect on quality, which the Children's Centre teachers cannot compensate for. The study does not make any direct recommendations about models for supporting practitioners, though it upholds Goleman's (2002) view that democratic approaches to leadership, together with coaching, are effective ways of developing a team. Garrick and Morgan (2009, p.80) conclude that "children's centre teacher influence is spread too thinly" to have adequate impact. So, although teachers have held roles to support nursery practitioners for several decades, as supervisors, as advisory teachers in local authority teams, and as Children's Centre teachers, it appears that little is know about the impact of that support. It seems reasonable, however, to conclude that the role has been problematic.

Elfer and Dearnley (2007, p.268) propose an alternative model of support, noting that in English nursery settings, "it is difficult for many nursery staff, particularly those in the private sector, to easily access continuing professional development." They offered a series of ten sessions to a group of nursery managers, each session

beginning with an extended period of group discussion and reflection, followed by a "taught topic" (Elfer and Dearnley, 2007, p.273). The participants' self-evaluation indicated that the project had a positive impact on developing team relationships; the researchers did not find the developments they had hoped for in the quality of the emotional responsiveness of staff to children (*ibid*, p.275), though there were some signs of staff developing an increased capacity to contain children's "'negative' emotion" (*ibid*, p.276). It is important to note that these findings relate to the managers' reports on their staff. The research focuses solely on the emotional dimension of intersubjectivity: there are no references to children's play or learning.

Elfer's subsequent research (Elfer, 2010; 2012; Page and Elfer, 2013) continues to focus on the emotional experiences of staff. His exploration of psychoanalytically-informed "Work Discussion as a model of critical professional reflection" (Elfer, 2012) finds that the managers involved in the discussions tended to focus on staff relationships and dynamics: "of the eighteen issues chosen by the managers for WD [Work Discussion], nearly all concerned problematic or upsetting situations to do with staff rather than issues to do with children directly" (Elfer, 2012, p.134). Page and Elfer (2013, p.2) begin by acknowledging that "infants are capable learners" and note the efforts to bring together early education and care in English Children's Centres. However, the data they report are concerned with staff descriptions of their emotional experiences of teamwork in the centre, and of caring for distressed and tired young children. This type of "Work Discussion" appears to give staff members an opportunity to discuss team dynamics and to think about and manage some of the negative emotions expressed by children; but it does not appear to explore children's learning and development more widely. The argument of Dalli *et al.* (2011, p.57) that the ability to "read" and make sense of children's cues is "a skill essential for intersubjectivity" points to the potential value of Work Discussion in the development of appropriate early education as well as care for young children, but this would need further investigation.

2.7. Early years qualifications

Turning the focus away from ongoing professional development, and towards formal qualifications, the small amount of available research is inconclusive with respect to practitioners working with children up to the age of three. As already noted, Nutbrown (2012b) is concerned that the current level 3 award in England lacks the rigour of the old NNEB qualification. Her finding is based on discussions with practitioners, as there is no research to compare the quality or the effectiveness of the two qualifications. The review by Mathers *et al.* (2011) of the impact of graduate leadership in English early years settings finds that graduate-level Early Years Professionals (EYPs) were, at the time of the study, most likely to be working with older children in the EYFS, and that there was "little evidence that EYPs improved the quality of provision for younger children (birth to 30 months)" (Mathers *et al.*, 2011, p.7). They conclude that current qualifications do not seem to be having any identifiable impact on quality, in respect of this youngest age group of children, and recommend that further research is needed on workforce development. At the time of writing, the EYP qualification has been discontinued and is due to be replaced by Early Years Teacher Status (Department for Education, 2013b) but this successor qualification does not specifically address appropriate care and pedagogy for children before the age of three. It has been strongly criticised by Nutbrown (2013, p.7) who argues that Early Years Teacher Status does not reflect the findings of her independent review of early years qualifications, and asks "why is the title 'teacher' being used to mean something quite different from the commonly understood, established and accepted meaning?"

Dalli *et al.* (2011, p.110), in their review of international research, also find little evidence for the impact of graduates working with the youngest children. Tout *et al.* (2005) note that it is difficult to assess the impact of a degree on practice *per se*, without knowing what the content of that degree has been. Similarly, Thomason *et al.*

(2012, p.297) conclude that the data from their study suggest only a moderate correlation between the level of teacher education and the quality of teacher–child interactions in toddler classrooms, noting that they had little detailed knowledge of the content either of the teacher's initial qualification, or their ongoing training.

2.8. Dialogue and reflection

Whilst the research on the impact of different levels of qualification has been inconclusive, it has been argued that, in general, being able to think in more complex ways about children might lead to developments in practice. Munton *et al*. (2002) argue for the importance of processes to enable practitioners to reflect on their work, drawing a distinction between the early childhood practitioner as technician, merely implementing a programme, and reflective practitioner/researcher. Lee (2006, p.148) also prioritises time for reflection, concluding that policy-makers should "1) provide a professional preparation program that values relationships and emotions; and 2) develop practicum courses that make theory and practice come together and that provide time and opportunities to develop and reflect firm relationships with infants." White's (2005) research into a New Zealand family day care service involved engaging the participants in both formal and informal reflection, which highlighted "a number of paradoxes within the service that impacted on the way children and their families were viewed" (White, 2005, p.97). She concludes that "the opportunity to engage in professional development surrounding quality review enabled caregivers to engage in professional discussion and investigation with a focus on positive and empowering images of the child, and the role that they could play to support children's learning and development" (White, 2005, pp.97-98).

White's finding is that dialogue and reflection are valuable if they help practitioners develop more consistent practice, linked to quality standards, and bring

about a shared view of the child as a capable, competent learner. Dalli *et al.* (2011) also report on Brannock's research in 2004, which found there was incongruence between how early childhood teachers said children learn, and their actual practices at routine times and "speculated that the incongruence could arise out of an inability to articulate how children learn" (Dalli *et al.*, 2011, p. 81)

In summary, the research on appropriate training and development for early years practitioners identifies some promising possibilities. There appears to be an emerging consensus that training and development should promote an image of the child as capable, competent and having agency. It should have a focus on practitioner reciprocity and attunement to the child. There is an important role for practitioner initiation and stimulation. Emotional and cognitive development are understood as interwoven, as are episodes of caregiving and early education. Learning is understood to arise largely in the conditions of the practitioner's contingent responses to the child, creating an overall framework which enables the child to act with some autonomy. There is a diminishing focus on the notion of an actual "programme" for staff to create and deliver for the children. The idea that children progress naturally from one developmental stage to the next, with the support of adults who provide a facilitating environment but stand back to avoid interference, is increasingly contested. Opportunities for practitioner reflection, debate and dialogue are increasingly valued.

This suggests that practitioners' ongoing professional development should be considered dynamically, in the context of particular, local conditions, rather than as a set programme of training in best practice. Shonkoff (2010, p.362) argues for a positioning of "current best practices as a promising starting point, not a final destination", and similarly Mitchell and Cubey's (2003, p.xii) synthesis of the best evidence about professional development calls for opportunities for "participants to question their experiences and views, and not simply validate them".

2.9. Contesting the notions of "quality" and "outcomes"

It might be argued that any study of professional training and development must consider, as part of its evidence, whether there has been any impact on the quality of early education and care, and whether this in turn has led to improved outcomes for the children. For example, Shonkoff (2010, p. 362) argues with a high degree of certainty that the route to quality in early childhood education and care is "well marked – enhanced staff development, increased quality improvement, appropriate measures of accountability, and expanded funding to serve more children and families"

Yet the discourse of measurement has not always been judged appropriate for consideration of early education. For example, in 1974 Lesley Webb wrote, in her influential book *Purpose and Practice in Nursery Education*, that "in simple terms, we cannot and have rarely tried to demonstrate that there are beneficial 'effects' of education. It is a matter of common sense and common faith that there are." (Webb, 1974, p. 25). A few years later, in his role as director of the Oxford Pre-School Project, Jerome Bruner did not seek to identify specific "effects" but he argued for the merits of a deeper description of processes. Bruner called for a discursive approach to the question of quality in early childhood education, rather than an evaluation of effectiveness against any given measures, stating that "change comes by the perspective one gains in observing one's own behaviour *after* the fact and *freed* of its pressures. The shift from *participant* to *spectator* may not inevitably assure fresh perspective, but it surely helps" (Bruner, 1980, p. 80). He also put significant emphasis on process, discussion and debate, arguing that (1980, p.211) "the essence of dissemination was not in disseminating a *product* but a *process*, helping [the practitioners] to see more dispassionately rather than broadcasting what *we* had seen."

Woodhead (1996) argues in favour of multi-dimensional models for the evaluation of quality from different perspectives, and Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999, p.108)

argue that "the concept of quality is about a search for definitive and universal criteria that will offer certainty and order … It has no place for complexity, values, diversity, subjectivity, indeterminacy and multiple perspectives."

However, there is also an influential discourse based around measures of quality, children's outcomes, and an overall attempt to put a value on early childhood education and care. Fox and Rutter (2010, p.36) argue that "by investing early and well in our children's development, we increase the rate of return later in life and in so doing improve not only the lives of individuals but of societies as well." This economic analogy perhaps has its origin in the much-quoted finding from the American Perry Preschool Study that there was "a return to society of more than $16 for every tax dollar invested in the early care and education programme" (HighScope, 2004). More recently, the English Department of Education has stated that there is "extensive evidence that investment in the early stages of children's lives makes sense – socially, morally and financially" (Department for Education, 2011).

Ailwood (2004, p.20) finds this discourse problematic, arguing that such analogies characterise early childhood as a time for "intervention, shaping and moulding 'agents of change for the future'" This is a construction of early childhood which exists in tension with the growing focus in research, outlined above, on the minute-by-minute, intersubjective experiences of children and practitioners in early childhood settings. As Gammage (2003, p.349) argues, "children are too often viewed as economic investments, 'products' for the future. The child must have the opportunity to *be* as well as become".

Other attempts to quantify quality and outcomes can also be seen as problematic. Two of the most widely used measures of quality in early childhood education and care are the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS-R) and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R), both of which rate quality across a range of dimensions including premises, equipment, routines and interaction. Each item is scored from one (inadequate) to seven (excellent), with a total quality score

being calculated by adding up the results from all 37 items across seven subscales (see Appendix One for a summary of the scales).

However, as Melhuish (2001, p.4) argues, measures like ECERS-R and ITERS-R "have the disadvantage that the experience of individual children within one setting may vary substantially". Drawing on the emphasis given to intersubjectivity in the research discussed above, one might argue that this is a substantial drawback. Furthermore, it has been argued that measures such as these make unwarranted claims for universality, with Rosenthal (1999, p. 494) claiming that "they are clearly linked to the beliefs about child development and learning in industrial Western societies."

An alternative to measuring and quantifying quality is to concentrate instead on an attempt to describe the experience of the child, using what Melhuish (2001, p. 4) calls "focal child observational methods". One of the most widely used of these methods is the Target Child Observation (TCO) (Sylva *et al.*, 1980) which was developed for the Oxford Preschool Project and subsequently used in the much larger Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) project (Sylva *et al.*, 1999). The TCO is a structured ten-minute observation of a child, with spaces to record what the child does and says, and the social context, minute-by-minute. After the observation is completed, it is coded to summarise the types of learning that the child has been engaged with each minute, and to show the length of time that the child can sustain her or his attention. Sylva *et al.* (1980, p. 44) describe the tool as an attempt to "sharpen their sights" whilst observing children. They accept that it is not possible to observe or record with objectivity, because the structure of the tool and its coding mean that each observation necessarily incorporates a "process of selecting and interpreting" (*ibid,* 1980, p. 37).

In place of a search for outcome measures, economic impact, and claims for objectivity, it can be argued that tools like the TCO offer a striving towards precision; and what Dalli *et al.* (2009) term "keen observation" can provide a focal point for discussion and debate about how worthwhile the child's experiences appear to be, a

more discursive approach to the evaluation quality than is offered by ECERS-R and ITERS-R.

The other observational tools which are widely-used in England come from the Effective Early Learning Project (Bertram and Pascal, 1997), which arose out of the Exe Project directed by Professor Ferre Laevers in Belgium (Laevers, 1994). Laevers (1994) proposes assessment of the child's involvement in activities using a scale which includes a number of observable signals: concentration, energy, complexity and creativity, facial expression and posture, persistence, precision, reaction time, language and satisfaction. By participating in the Effective Early Learning Project, practitioners learn how to hone their observational skills in order to make "an overall judgment of the child's Involvement. The observer can use the signals to build an image of the child. By trying to establish how the child really feels, and by trying to become that child, the level of Involvement can be ascertained" (Bertram and Pascal, no date, p. 4). Because the observations are brief, involving the sampling of a number of children for just a few minutes at different times in the day, the data are more suited to an overall assessment of the quality of the setting than a consideration of an individual child's experience. However, Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2003, p.33-34) argue that involvement is not a suitable measure to use in early education, as it focuses on affect to the exclusion of cognition. It might also be argued that Bertram and Pascal's (1997) claims that one can "establish how the child really feels" is tendentious. Nevertheless, the data derived from Effective Early Learning projects can promote dialogue about the nature and quality of the children's experience overall.

It can therefore be argued that no single measure can be claimed as an accurate assessment of quality, valid in all contexts; but that some measures are more open to debate and contestation than others. Melhuish (2001) argues, however, for a more complex paradigm which is able to consider how different preschool experiences (and home experiences) impact on child development. This focus on effectiveness

underpinned the design of the EPPE project (Sylva *et al.*, 1999), which sought to identify which nursery settings could be considered "effective" and then investigate those settings for particular characteristics and processes which might in turn be considered "effective pedagogy". Hence the EPPE Project used ECERS-R and its own extension of the scale, the ECERS-E, as well as measures of child development over time, to identify "effective" settings (using statistical analysis), and then used qualitative methods including focus groups, interviews and the Target Child Observation to identify which pedagogical practices might be considered effective (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002).

Interestingly, Melhuish (2001, p.4) raises the possibility that a multilevel research project might call into question the reliability of ECERS-R and ITERS-R, should a setting with low scores "be associated with developmental progress significantly above that to be expected from the characteristics of the intake". Reversing this argument, there is also some evidence that high scores in particular ITERS-R subscales can be associated with poorer developmental outcomes for children. For example, in their evaluation of the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative, Mathers and Sylva (2007, p.9) found that in respect of the older children in the cohort, there was a "negative relationship between the 'personal care routines' subscale of the ITERS-R and children's co-operative behaviour, social skills and confidence. Children in centres which scored highly on this subscale were rated as less co-operative, less sociable and less confident." They speculate that this may come about because the emphasis on handwashing and other hygiene routines meant that there was less time to help the children's social development.

Melhuish (2001) also comments that if educational outcomes in the areas of literacy and numeracy are prioritised, then settings which emphasise those aspects of the curriculum will prove to be effective, even if their chosen approach scores low on ECERS-R. So, Melhuish argues, in the end it must come down to "the issue of values, that is, what values are placed on different development outcomes, and what is the

relevant value of children's experience and their developmental progress." As already noted, measures of child development are themselves contested, both because of the declining influence of linear models of development, and because of concerns that they are culturally biased. For example, the nature of the focus in ITERS-R and ECERS-R on shared adult:child attention is implicitly questioned by Rosenthal (1999, p.479): "although joint engagement of toddlers and caregivers is probably an important aspect of the learning and development of young children in all cultural communities, the characteristics of this interaction vary considerably across cultures." For just such reasons, Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2000, p.112) "sought to introduce a stutter into the narrative of quality … by problematizing the concept and suggesting it is not self-evident but just one way of understanding and evaluating the pedagogical and other projects of the early childhood institution."

In short, as Dalli *et al.* (2011, p.25) appositely note, there are two distinct lines of scholarship concerned with the question of quality in early childhood education, "a discursive philosophical line and an effectiveness/impact measurement line."

2.10. Evaluating the quality and impact of "early education for two-year olds"

In England, the "effectiveness/impact measurement" line of scholarship (Dalli *et al.*, 2011, p. 25) has seriously called into question the effectiveness and quality of provision for children younger than three years old. In the case of the government-funded pilot programme to give free nursery places to two-year olds living in socio-economic disadvantage, Smith *et al.* (2009, p.4) conclude that there was, on average, no benefit to the children involved. This finding is consistent with the report on a similar scheme in Scotland, which concludes that "while the intervention group was indeed progressing well between the two time periods … its progress was not significantly different from that of the comparison group who did not attend the intervention programme" (Woolfson and King, 2008, p.61).

Smith *et al.* (2009, p. 95) also comment that a comparison of data on quality from their study with the data from the evaluation of the Neighbourhood Nursery Initiative suggests that "provision quality for disadvantaged young children has not improved significantly since the NNI data was collected in 2004/5." This is despite the fact that the UK government made a significant investment in training and development for early years practitioners during this period; for example, more than £500m were spent between 2006 and 2011 to enable local authorities to fund two programmes to increase the numbers of graduates working in private and voluntary early years settings (Mathers *et al.*, 2011, p.5). This appears not to have had any measurable effect on quality by 2009.

Returning to the question, discussed earlier, of the historic divide between the care and education of the youngest children, Smith *et al.* (2009, p.93) found that opportunities for learning were generally lacking for two-year olds: "most settings did not offer sufficient opportunities for children's cognitive development and lacked activities and resources that would be intellectually stretching for older children [i.e. those approaching their third birthday]". There were even more worrying findings about the quality of provision being offered to some specific groups of children. Smith *et al.* (2009, p. 103) state that they identified "a worrying link between disadvantage and the quality of provision offered to children, with settings catering for higher proportions of minority groups and children speaking EAL rated as lower quality, in comparison to settings catering for lower proportions of these groups. Settings in more income deprived areas also offered lower quality than settings in more affluent areas."

However, despite this poor picture overall, the *Early Education Pilot for Two Year Old Children Evaluation* (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p.104)) did find that higher-quality settings (those with an ECERS-R and ITERS-R rating of four and above) had some positive effects on children's development: "there is a significant and positive linear association between quality score and child development outcomes, at least in terms

of language development." Given that the research of Roulstone *et al.* (2011) finds that "language development at the age of 2 years predicts children's performance on entry to primary school", this can be regarded as a significant effect.

Smith *et al.* (2009) report an improvement in the children's "naming vocabulary" as measured on a subscale of the British Ability Scales (BAS). The BAS were designed for use by educational psychologists, but they have been widely used in early years research including the EPPE Project (Sylva *et al.*, 2010). Smith *et al.* (2009, pp.111-112) found that the BAS-II naming vocabulary scores amongst children attending the higher quality settings rose "from 45.8 to 49.4 on average…This is equivalent to moving a child from the 34th percentile for language to the 46th percentile. We'd consider this to represent movement from a position of mild risk of having poor language development in the longer term, to a position of no risk". Arguably, Melhuish's (2001) note of caution about child development measures is highly salient here: in a footnote, Smith *et al.* (2009, p. 112) comment that "the bottom 20% of children are typically considered 'at risk' and taking into consideration the relatively large confidence intervals associated with cognitive tests of young children, it seems justifiable to consider being in the bottom 34% as 'at mild risk'. In contrast, being at the 46th percentile is very close to the median." It is also worth noting Hill's (2005, pp.95-96) conclusion, in a largely positive review of the BAS-II tests, that there are questions of reliability when the tests are used with black and ethnic minority children, those not speaking English as their first language, and specifically Pakistani and Bangladeshi pupils. Smith *et al.* (2009, p. 23) note that their data suggest that "a greater proportion of children from minority ethnic groups took up pilot places than are present in the general population – and particularly over represented children from Asian families."

The other assessment of language development used by Smith *et al.* (2009) was the Sure Start Language Measure (SSLM) (Roy *et al.*, 2005) which takes a wider perspective. The SSLM includes a quantitative measure of children's vocabulary:

parents are asked to report the words which their children can say off a list of 100 words, and to rate their children's ability to use words in combination with each other (Roy *et al.*, 2005, p.13). It also includes a shortened version of the Parents Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS) (Glascoe, 1997) measure. PEDS measures "parental concern about language and other aspects of child development" (Roy *et al.*, 2005, p.10). Although the SSLM has been widely tested and standardized, it is important to note that it is intended as a measure of children's language at 2 years of age. Roy *et al.* (2005, p. 12) comment that the SSLM was designed to target children aged between 23-27 months, "but the Standardisation Study was intended to cover the range of potential performance for this group by including children aged 8 months younger and 6 months older than the target age of 24 months." However, the impact of the free nursery places at two was measured at the end of the intervention by Smith *et al.* (2009), in other words when the children had received their full year of nursery and were at least three years old. In summary, as the SSLM's validity has only been demonstrated when it is used to measure the development of children younger than three years old, it can be argued that the outcomes in Smith *et al.* (2009) in respect of this measure should be treated with some caution.

This caution might also be usefully applied with respect to the measure used to assess the children's behaviour, the Adaptive Social Behaviour Inventory (ASBI) (Hogan, Scott and Bauer, 1992). The ASBI was used to measure the children's behaviour in the areas of compliance, confidence, pro- and anti-social behaviour and anxiety, at their starting point on entry to the scheme at two years old, and on exit at three. However, the researcher who devised the ASBI scale comments that although the scale had been adapted by others to use with two year olds, it was specifically designed to assess three years olds and that "the original intent was to assess the outcome of low birth weight children who had been in an intervention study" (Scott, personal communication, 2004).

In any case, it is important to note that even in the highest quality settings, Smith *et al.* (2009, p.105) note that there was much less impact, if any at all, "on other cognitive and social behaviour", apart from language development,

A close examination of the literature suggests that all measures of quality in early years education and care are, to some extent, problematic. However, it can be argued that measures of quality and impact should not be eschewed *per se*, but that a more fruitful approach would be to show some scepticism towards the use of any single measurement tool to define quality. In the course of problematising measures like ECERS-R and ITERS-R, Rosenthal (1999, p.495) makes the important point that "the discussion of these limitations should not be understood as questioning the value of ''developmentally appropriate practice'' or ''sensitive caregiving'' as a conceptual framework for defining quality of care, or as an extreme nihilistic relativism claiming that all criteria for evaluation of quality care are arbitrary." As Moss, Dahlberg and Pence (2000, p.105) argue, "while the relative and values-based nature of quality cannot be avoided, choices do have to be made and this should be done as democratically as possible."

2.11. Summary

This review of the literature presents the argument that to develop an appropriate education and care for children before the age of three, practitioners need to consider certain features. Firstly, accepting the account that education consists of episodes of co-construction involving the adult, child, and the wider environment and cultural climate, practitioners need to find processes for the development of "intersubjective attunement" (Dalli *et al.*, 2011, p.3). This points to the need for practitioners to have appropriate tools for child observation, and to have time and the opportunity to review the data from those observations and interpret them. That in turn raises several questions: could practitioners be trained in formal observation techniques, and

if so, could they be supported in engaging in processes of critical reflection in respect of the data collected? White (2005) further argues that these processes of critical reflection need contextualising within an overall view that the child is a competent learner, essential to the constructivist account of child development. This can be discordant with the view that early education and care is about "rescuing" children from inadequate backgrounds, or that the child must be transformed into a suitable "product" for the future.

Secondly, the development of appropriate pedagogies might be aided, or hindered, by ongoing support and training; yet the research in this area is largely inconclusive about which specific approaches might be suitable. It can be argued that children's development, and indeed every aspect of life in nursery, are characterised by co-construction. Each practitioner's theories about children overall, and about individual children, will play a part in those episodes of co-construction. So making these theories visible might be a fruitful way to develop best practices. Theories which are unseen and unexamined cannot be open to conscious processes of change or refinement. Training cannot, therefore, be understood as the "delivery" of key facts and skills, but needs to be understood as a co-constructive process.

Finally, as Melhuish (2001) argues, consideration needs to be given to the effect on the children of the pedagogical choices which are made. This is particularly complex, as the research is uncertain, inconclusive, and will necessarily continue to be disputed over time. Yet on the other hand, I would argue that by becoming deeply involved in such controversies, one might possibly lose sight of the children. They are not two-years old for long; they cannot themselves choose where they access early education and childcare, and nor can they influence its quality. The research suggesting that children in the poorest neighbourhoods experience the lowest quality should not simply be discounted during the process of problematising quality measures. As Moss *et al.* (2000) argue, there are ethical and political choices to make; the ethical imperative is to make those choices as well, and as transparently, as

possible, leaving space for discussion and the negotiation of meaning. As Shonkoff (2010, p.362) argues, current notions of best practices should be seen "as a promising starting point, not a final destination". Appropriate pedagogy cannot be reified; as Dalli *et al.* (2011, p.3) argue it is, by its nature, produced with and through inter-actions and takes the form of a "membrane of constantly evolving supportive connections".

Insider research is necessarily hand-in-hand with action. The research choices which I make are also actions which will affect, for good or ill, the participants who are working with the children in Eastside, and the children themselves. Those choices and the attendant ethical implications are considered in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

"The decay of belief in the idea of objectivity": a discussion of methodology, ethics and data collection.

"I am trying to avoid the problem of the decay of belief in the idea of objectivity by slipstreaming towards the safer, ideologically unloaded idea of precision."

A.S Byatt, *The Biographer's Tale*

(Byatt, 2000, p.250)

3.1. Introduction

This chapter describes the thinking, practical organisation and planning which informed the conduct of the study. It is concerned with methodological and ethical choices, in the context of an insider-researcher position underpinned by a concern to address urgent matters of social justice. The design, conduct and timetable of the study are set out, and examples of how the data were first reduced and then interpreted are presented.

This thesis offers an evaluation of the qualitative research evidence from a small project over a three-month timescale involving eight participants. This small project was nested inside a larger one, described in Chapter One, which aimed to improve the quality of 13 early years settings and increase the number of nursery places for two-year olds in "Eastside", an inner-London authority. The research is directly concerned with exploring how the participants talked about the children's development and learning during the project. This includes exploration of how the participants brought forward data from their observations of children's play, using the Target Child Observation (TCO) (Sylva, Roy and Painter, 1980), how they used this data to increase their understanding of the children, how they acted on their findings, and how they felt the project contributed overall to their professional development. These wider aims were broken down into four specific research questions:

To what extent can the use of a structured observational tool develop the "keen observation" (Dalli et al., 2009) of early years practioners?

In what ways can critical reflection and group discussion support the professional development of early years practitioners?

Can opportunities for early years practitioners to explore and develop their own theories of how children learn help them to develop their understanding of their role as educators?

Is there evidence to suggest that participation in professional development of this kind supports the provision of improved early education and care?

As previously argued, there is very little evidence about what constitutes an appropriate initial qualification, or ongoing professional development and training, for practitioners working with children younger than three. This is the main rationale for undertaking a qualitative study to explore how the eight early years practitioners understood their role in the care and early education of the children; by increasing knowledge in this under-researched area, it is hoped that appropriate forms of support, training and professional development can be developed. Mitchell and Cubey (2003) and Shonkoff (2010) argue for professional support and training for early years practitioners which emphasises dialogue over the validation of "best practice". These approaches value the processes of data collection and critical interrogation of that data over the attainment of pre-determined goals in a training programme. They engage with and build on the theories of the staff concerned, rather than treating them as a kind of *tabula rasa*. Furthermore, this is a model which is consistent with the constructivist account of learning, as outlined above. As argued in Chapter Two, I consider that this can appropriately be termed a "dynamic" approach to practitioner support and professional development, as opposed to a "static" approach of delivering a pre-determined training programme.

Additionally, it was assumed that the larger project, focussed on auditing and action-planning for improvement, would have a strong initial effect of changing the settings. However, longer-lasting processes of quality development might depend on practitioners developing their capacity to reflect and to think (together, and individually) about the children, about their work, and about the theoretical and practical accounts of how children learn which are contained in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

These aims require a research methodology which is appropriate for exploring the participants' views and thinking about the children. Exploration is difficult in a context where there are numerous power imbalances between my position as a researcher and their position as early years practitioners, explored in detail below, not to mention the historic tensions between teachers and other early years practitioners in England discussed in Chapter Two. Therefore, it was important for me to avoid approaches which might be experienced as having an inspectorial quality. For this reason, I did not want to undertake direct observations of the participants working with the children. I also needed to build enthusiasm for the project; early years practitioners generally work three hours or more with the children before having a break, without time to meet together until the end of the day when they are tired (and often unpaid). Potential participants would need to feel that the project would be beneficial and enjoyable to them.

These considerations led to a series of decisions about the design and methodology. Kvale (1996, p.116) argues that there should be "reciprocity in what the subjects give and what they receive from participation in a study". The project began with a training session for the participants in using a structured observation tool, the TCO. This meant that the practitioners immediately gained a new technique through their participation. It also meant that they could make choices about when to observe children, and how to bring forward the data from their observations. I did not have any script for the groups, and the discussion was informed by the participants' own data from the TCOs, creating a "working group" culture which was dialogical, as

opposed to a "focus group" culture where there might be a stronger feeling that one is being "interviewed" or "researched into". This was intended to be what Lather (1991, p.164) describes as a research space "where those directly involved can act and speak on their own behalf".

In summary, in order to explore how the participants understood their role, a design was needed which encouraged them to talk freely and in detail about their work, which gave them sufficient benefits to compensate for the extra work they would need to do, and which gave them a high degree of control and choice. The study overall can be conceived of as an investigation into how particular groups of people construct meaning together, in specific workplace contexts – a typical field for a Grounded Theory study (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

3.2. Methodology: drawing on Grounded Theory and Constructivist Grounded Theory

Any discussion of the literature on Grounded Theory will recognise the existence of several different versions, each with a particular position on the role of the researcher, the recommended process, and the nature of the findings which are likely to be generated (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2000; Glaser, 2000a and 2000b; Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz and Bryant, 2011). Adding the role of doctoral research student to the other demands of my job, at a very difficult time for local education authorities, I needed a methodology which was fit for the task, robust, and philosophically coherent. So whilst this section perhaps abbreviates what could have been a fuller exploration of the different schools of Grounded Theory, it aims to set out the choices which I have made, and how these can be justified with reference to the overall rationale for the project. In the sections below, I will set out my arguments for using a qualitative research methodology which draws on Grounded Theory and Constructivist Grounded Theory, and illustrate how these choices appear to have led to the project's success.

Grounded Theory is not concerned with going out into the field to prove or disprove an existing theory. Nor is it concerned with merely summarising or organising data; instead, Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 30) propose that the researcher's job is "not to provide a perfect description on an area, but to develop a theory that accounts for much of the relevant behaviour". Charmaz and Bryant (2011, p.292) usefully expand on this in their description of Grounded Theory as "a method of qualitative inquiry in which researchers develop inductive theoretical analyses from their collected data and subsequently gather further data to check these analyses. The purpose of grounded theory is theory construction, rather than description or application of existing theories." In other words, Grounded Theory is concerned with building theory from a phenomenological starting point, by the careful noting of actions and words, followed by the discovery of categories which can then be grouped together as concepts pertaining to the same observed phenomena (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.65). These moves are illustrated in action in Section 3.9, which sets out how the data were interpreted and reduced. The question of whether the categories are best understood as discovered (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1999) or as constructed by the researcher (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz and Bryant, 2011) is further considered below.

Glaser and Strauss (1967, p.3) argue that Grounded Theory is a *practical* research methodology: the theory, which is discovered in the data, "is suited to its supposed uses" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.3). Like Silverman (2006, p.284), they advocate taking an *emic* approach, working with the conceptual frameworks of the research participants, with the understanding that "social phenomena derive their meaning from how they are defined by participants" (Silverman, 2006, p.24). As such, the distance between "data" and "theory" is, to some extent, collapsed. Theory is understood primarily as a way of organising data; Glaser and Strauss (1967, p.3) argue that "theory…is a strategy for handling data in research, providing modes of conceptualisation for describing and explaining." This in turn implies taking an interactionist position in relation to reality; hence Corbin and Strauss (1990, p. 22)

explain that "building theory, by its very nature, implies interpreting data, for the data must be conceptualized and the concepts related to form a theoretical rendition of reality (a reality that cannot be known, but is always interpreted)". This is in contrast to the romantic approach to research which, as Silverman argues, makes the unwarranted assumption that one can "tap directly the perceptions of individuals" (Silverman, 2006, p.45).

Iterative processes of data collection and interpretation, actively involving the participants and valuing their ideas and the terms they use, are appropriate to the collegial approach which would be needed in order to make the study a success. As a researcher, I was occupying something of an "insider" perspective, but was also located formally outside all three settings, and in a position with some authority over them. My methodological choice is influenced by Bourdieu's (1990, p.27) critique of researchers who take up a "sovereign position" *vis à vis* the people they study, wittily exemplified by Gibson's (2010, p. 439) discussion of Althusser's "scholasticism in producing a theory about peasants without so much as speaking to a peasant."

3.3 The reflexive position

> "Even when I am dealing with empirical data, I am necessarily speaking about myself."

> Carl Jung, cited in Haynes (2007, p. 81)

Bourdieu (1993, p.23) proposes an alternative, *reflexive* standpoint which, instead of merely objectifying the participants, can make the "scientific gaze" available to them, "a gaze that is at once objectifying and understanding, and which, when turned back on oneself, makes it possible to accept oneself and even, so to speak, lay claim to oneself, claim the right to be what one is." In this project, the decision to train the participants to use a research tool (the TCO) and to direct that part of the enquiry

themselves was specifically made with Bourdieu's articulation of reflexivity in mind. The participants could decide for themselves which children to observe, and when. They were encouraged to make their own decisions about coding their observations, and on a number of occasions I explicitly acknowledged that final decisions about codes were much less significant than the processes of analysis and careful thought about the child's main focus of learning, minute-by-minute. This discursive approach was intended to emphasise the point that the data in the TCOs were *their* data; as the researcher, I did not assume the right to make a final interpretation, but encouraged discussion and debate, valuing both process and the conclusion. This was intended to contrast with the type of methodology in which the TCOs are used by researcher, unseen by participants; as, for example, in the Oxford Pre-School Project (Bruner, 1980) and the EPPE Project (Sylva *et al.*, 2010). This, one might argue, imposes interpretations on the participants' actions without any scope for the negotiation of meaning. Indeed, it is interesting to note that one team of researchers from the Oxford Pre-School Project commented that their "observations left one vital perspective unexplored – the perceptions and intentions of the adults actually working with the children" (Wood, McMahon and Cranstoun, 1980, p. 16).

However, it can be argued that there are aspects of Bourdieu's problematisation of the researcher's position in the field which do not sit easily with Grounded Theory, and which can be read as an implicit critique. In particular, Bourdieu (1990, p. 287) argues that the researcher needs to "objectify" her or his position: "a producer of discourse on the objects of the social world who fails to objectify the viewpoint from which he produces this discourse is very likely to convey nothing more than this very viewpoint". By contrast, whilst Glaser and Strauss (1967, p.3) accept that the researcher must inevitably have a particular perspective, they argue that she or he should work hard to overcome that perspective, to dismiss "any preconceived theory that dictates, prior to the research, 'relevancies' in concepts and hypotheses" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.33). In the absence of this work on the self, the researcher is

described as being at risk of being "contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p.37), a turn of phrase which suggests the possibility of purity and naturalness in the field of study. The approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967) is taken further by Glaser's (2002a) description of grounded theory interviewing as "very passive listening and then later during theoretical sampling focused questions to other participants".

In contrast to the implied possibility of passivity on the part of the researcher and purity in the field of study, "constructivist grounded theorists view research as occurring within specific social conditions and thus attempt to learn how these conditions influence their studies" (Charmaz and Bryant, 2011, p. 169). For example, as an advisory teacher working with early years settings in Eastside, I bring a certain amount of accumulated knowledge and professional experience about early education to the sites of research. I am motivated by the identification of a particular problem, shortcomings overall in the quality of early education and care offered to young children in Eastside. The classic approach to grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1966) and its subsequent development, particularly by Glaser (2002a, 2002b), argues that taking up such positions before one begins data collection is dangerous. For example, writing on "the official Grounded Theory site of Dr Barney Glaser and classic Grounded Theory", Simmons (no date) summarises the researcher's preparation thus: "Minimizing preconceptions. No preliminary literature review. General research topic, but no predetermined research 'problem.'"

By planning to combine my researcher's role as "listener" with my professional role as early years adviser, it could fairly be argued that I might "force" the data, influenced by my pre-existing professional knowledge, something which Glaser and Strauss (1966) and Glaser (2002a, 2002b) warn firmly against. However, I would concur with Wuest's (2000, p.55) argument, that pre-existing knowledge (including that which is drawn from prior experience and from a review of the literature) can usefully be seen as another field of data, so "if concepts in the literature fit the emerging theory, use them to tell your story; if they are not relevant and do not really

fit or work, leave them out. Otherwise the data can be forced in the wrong direction." Wuest's (2005) concept of "emergent fit" and Charmaz's constructivist remodelling of Grounded Theory (2006) offer strategies for managing a tension at the centre of the project: taking an open stance towards the participants, without disowning my professional knowledge and role, or ignoring the impact of my position.

The quotation from Jung which opens this section is a disarming admission of the extent to which qualitative research might slip from an embrace of the subjective to mere self-centredness. The question is not whether one is speaking about oneself; but the extent to which one is also speaking about others, too.

3.4. A qualitative research methodology, drawing on Grounded Theory and Constructivist Grounded Theory

From within the overall structure of grounded theory, I am seeking to develop a methodology which understands my position as a researcher as being problematic and needing investigation and consideration on its own terms. Charmaz and Bryant's emphasis on "alertness" is useful in this context, as a reminder that grounded theory depends greatly on the researcher's skills in relating to others: "both data and data collection [are] located in temporal, spatial, social and situational conditions. Constructivists also take into account both researchers' and research participants' starting points and standpoints, and remain alert to how and when these shift during inquiry"(Charmaz and Bryant, 2011, p.298)

Glaser (1992, p.49) proposes that grounded theory must solely attempt to uncover "the subject's perspective". Methodologically, I am arguing that this is not possible: there is no "pure" perspective of the subject, but rather a perspective that is constructed by researcher and participants together. My methodology aims to build explicitly on this position, by actively drawing attention to and encouraging these processes of co-construction by researcher and participants. This is an approach

which Glaser (2002a, p.3) considers to be something other than Grounded Theory: "the remodelling by Charmaz of GT is clearly just not correct."

However, Charmaz (2006, p.127) argues that the original exposition of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1966) has *both* objectivist and interpretivist elements. So, rather than pursuing the question of correctness – is Glaser right, is Charmaz wrong? – one might remodel the question as one of emphasis and inclination. Methodologically, I lean more towards interpretivist elements. Charmaz (2006, p. 129) treats "grounded theory methods and theorising as *social actions* that researchers construct in concert with others in particular places and times". In the study, the particularity of place and time are strong features: the research takes place within the context of a year-long, local project to improve the quality of early education and care. The initial data, the TCOs completed by the participants, are interpreted together in the discussion sessions. In my transcription, as discussed above, I use techniques drawn from Conversation Analysis to present some of the interactions between researcher and participants. This is in contrast to the more objectivist position which Charmaz (2006, p. 131) describes thus: "the data exist in the world; the researcher finds them and 'discovers' theory from them". I have also sought to foreground theorising at different stages of the project: for example, the decision to use the TCO as the tool for structured observation meant that most of the data related to children's learning, and not, for example, to care routines. In turn, the data reduction techniques I use exclude a significant proportion of data. So the findings from the data might better be thought of as theoretical assemblage, involving selection, rather than being considered a comprehensive theory. In turn, this assemblage is constructed with conscious interpretive moves, where I draw on my own professional experience and knowledge to focus on inferred meanings of some of the practitioners' discussions. Those meanings which are resonant are then, in turn, presented to the reader with a conscious rhetoric in order to be persuasive.

On the other hand, there are also some aspects of my methodology which lean more towards the objectivist form of Grounded Theory, in particular the influence of

Corbin and Strauss (1990) and Corbin (1993). The decision to look for categories with a dimensional range, and then to organise the resulting data into four quadrants, modelled on Corbin's (1993) research, leads, in Section 3.9 below where the data are presented, to a comparatively less contextualised presentation of what was said, with less emphasis on the interactions. In my professional role, working across numbers of settings, I judged that it was important to have *analytic* processes which would allow a degree of integration, relating different categories to each other, following the direction of Corbin and Strauss (1990, p.112) that "**your final theory is limited to those categories, their properties and dimensions, and statements of relationships that exist in the actual data collected** – not what you think might be out there but haven't come across." However, the data were not entirely taken out of their living context, sterilised and processed into an analytic story. I returned to the participants so test out my initial propositions, and iterative processes throughout the project continuously re-animated the data.

My intentions are pragmatic, to use the tools from Grounded Theory and its constructivist remodelling which suit my purposes. Grounded Theory approaches have a useful focus on the detail of what the participants say, searching for patterns in the way that they talk about their work caring for and educating the children, and analysing the processes which lead to changes in their understanding. The project offers an opportunity to me, and to the participants, to work together using a dialogic method and co-construct a developing understanding of the children. I am concerned with the views of the participants in action, and changes in their stance that result from their critical reflection about the data from the TCOs. Although my aims are different to those of Blenkin and Hutchin (1998, p.62), who use an action research model, I have a similar focus on the dynamic relationships which they identify as the "interdependence between the practitioner's ability to observe children closely, the practitioner's response to child observations which challenge her/his assumptions about what the child is experiencing, the practitioner's disposition to change, and support from within the institution or outside."

In summary, my methodology has a more limited focus on theory development than a Grounded Theory study would; I did not have the option to go back into the field to gather further data to check my initial analysis and theory construction, although I was able to discuss my initial findings with the participants several months after the conclusion of data collection in the field. Without having a formal action research methodology, there was a dynamic element to the project through its focus on bringing about developments in practice, rather than the more "passive" stance advocated in classic Grounded Theory. The study draws on interpretive techniques from the constructivist remodelling of Grounded Theory, using transcription techniques to present episodes from discussions in detail, aiming to preserve something of the voice of each participant. It also draws on more objectivist aspects of Grounded Theory through its meta-analysis of the data and the proposition that a central phenomenon can be identified (see section 3.12, below).

Finally, it is important to consider briefly the design of the larger project in Eastside, which was on-going throughout this study. This larger project involved 13 early years settings in total, including the three settings in this study. It was structured around the use of the ECERS-R and ITERS-R quality audits, and a cycle of action planning to bring about improvements as measured by the audit scores. This acted as a constant reminder that the purpose of all the interventions in the settings, whether as part of my research project or as part of my wider professional role, needed to focus on the wider aim of ensuring that the children experienced appropriate forms of early education and care. I could not solely take an interest in exploring the views of the practitioners: I needed to be mindful that the children would only have one chance to experience this nursery place. Exploration therefore had to be combined with making the best possible attempt to develop practice, in the context of supporting the participants' professional development. As Bruner (1980, p. 211) argues, research can only support only professional development through a dialogic approach, when it "helps one to see with one's own eyes".

3.5. Ethical considerations

The account of my methodological approach highlights a number of ways in which ethical considerations were woven into the research design, in particular my stance of interest in, and respect for, the views and theories of the participants.

At a basic level, the research included a range of ethical features. All the participants were volunteers and they were asked for their informed consent (see Appendix Two). Participants could withdraw from the research at any stage, without needing to give a reason, and there was an option of taking part in the training sessions and the discussions without needing to agree to be included in the research. This was intended to ensure that any practitioner who did not wish to participate in the research did not feel they had to miss out on a professional development opportunity. All the participants and all the data have been anonymised. At each training session on using the TCO, I emphasised that the request to gather observational data was secondary to the children's entitlement to a safe and enjoyable experience in nursery, so participants should cease any observations if children became distressed or preoccupied about being observed, or if they needed help or attention.

The research followed the BERA guidelines (2011), which were given to each participant. In the event, all the participants remained engaged in the project for its duration, and there were no discussions about withdrawal.

The use of techniques from Grounded Theory has an additional ethical dimension, which is that the interpretation of the data consists of the identification of categories and overarching concepts in order to build theory, as opposed to testing out the extent to which the participants could be said to understand or reproduce contemporary theory or versions of "best practice". This is intended firstly as a respectful stance towards the participants, acknowledging and celebrating their accounts of their work and their theories. Unfortunately, the wider climate is much more hostile to nursery nurses and early years practitioners, as suggested by the responses to the initial

findings of the Nutbrown Review (Nutbrown, 2012a) which included the *Daily Telegraph* reporting about nursery nurses "so illiterate they struggle to read stories aloud" and on-line comments like "child care is an excellent option for not so bright young people" or "a profession that bases its recruitment on teenage girls with no qualifications who don't know what else to do with their lives" (Grenier, 2012). These are not merely a few random examples picked from the right-wing press and the wilder frontiers of the internet – similar views are held within the early years field. When I was conducting a focus group for the Nutbrown Review, nursery nurses were described by one member of the group as "white working class women with poor qualifications" and "girls who are good with children". No one disagreed. Listening respectfully to the participants and training them to use a research tool was an ethical stance, working towards Kvale's (1996, p.116) proposal that there should be "reciprocity" between the different parties in research, and an attempt to problematise the researcher's "sovereign position" (Bourdieu, 1990, p.27).

All the same, questions linger in the area which Brooker (2003, p. 120) terms propriety: "whites researching blacks, males researching females, the middle classes researching the poor".   Despite the formal structures of informed consent, it would be possible for a participant to feel obliged to participate because of my position within the local authority, overseeing all the early years settings and making judgements about quality and decisions about funding. Such an obligation might lead to a participant giving up the privacy of their thoughts and opinions for public discussion and display.

Pascal and Bertram (2012, p.4) take an opposite position, arguing that a "praxeological" approach to research can act against the structures of power, describing the "continuing struggle to operate authentically within a participatory worldview in the belief that early childhood research should and could be more democratic, participatory, empowering and should also be deeply ethical and political in its orientation." This is a stirring call to action, but one might argue that some difficult concepts are left somewhat unexplored. In the context of the methodological

approach I have chosen, the call for "authenticity" does not sit easily with an interactionist perspective on reality; as Silverman (2006, p.6) argues "it is problematic to justify research in terms of its 'authentic' representation of 'experience' when what is 'authentic' is culturally defined."

Expanding on what might be meant by "authenticity" in research, Pascal (2013) refers to "having a very good awareness of how people respond to you emotionally", "being self-aware" and "reflecting on yourself". These are all highly-contestable notions which raise difficult questions about ethics and validity in qualitative research. Yet they also serve a very useful function of implicitly posing some key ethical questions: however much one might contest the terminology at a theoretical level, it is easy enough to imagine situations in which a lack of self-awareness and emotional attunement on the part of the researcher might lead to participants having a hurtful or damaging experience. For me, this is not simply a theoretical problem. I have indications – from reflecting on experiences in my professional life and from the results of cognitive testing – that my capacity to "read" emotion through facial expression is very poor. Does this make it unethical for me to carry out qualitative, face-to-face research? Or can I fall back on my ability to listen very attentively to save me from the pitfalls of poor visual acuity? Likewise, is it ethical for a white, male, middle-class local authority lead officer to conduct research of this kind when all of the participants are low-paid and could be considered to fit into the following three categories: from black and ethnic minority groups, recent immigrants from eastern Europe, and from white working-class backgrounds?

I want, therefore, to leave some ethical questions open and accept that there is a degree of uncertainty, rather than simply falling back on a narrow judgement that ethical criteria have been met. In the section below where the findings are discussed, I draw attention to and discuss some uncomfortable exchanges and suggest that the participants, in those instances at least, may have been experiencing and responding to an imbalance of power, weighted against them.

Research cannot be made risk-free; but this should not be read as a cavalier disregard for risk. In this study, there were no structured interview scripts. The participants themselves contributed to part of the structure of each session, by choosing which TCO to talk about and which elements to bring forward. The subsequent discussions were facilitated by me. I attempted to achieve a balance of probing for further explanation of the participants' views, whilst aiming to speak as little as possible so they could develop their views for themselves. In such cases, to a large degree the research "tool" is, in essence, the researcher her or himself and the ethical basis of the research rests in part on interpersonal qualities which cannot definitely be regulated for, like tact, sensitivity, and open-ness. Any "measures" in these areas must necessarily be subjective. Such measures might include consideration of whether the participants appeared to talk freely and confidently stated their thoughts and opinions; whether they chose to remain engaged with the project or dropped out; and how they evaluated the impact of the project at the end, where there was an opportunity to do this through a final discussion group and completion of a questionnaire (see Appendix Three). I planned for involvement in the project to be a positive and useful experience for the participants, and there is no available data to contradict this. However, in stating that, I acknowledge that the responses of the participants cannot be either transparent, or fully accessible to me, and that none of us could control for culturally produced and regulated thought and belief systems, which may be held unconsciously (Brooker, 2008, p.71). As Sachs (2003, p.148) argues, "ethical practice relates to how people interact, how they communicate information and how they use information. It recognizes the needs, interests and sensitivities of various parties. In particular is the practice of cultural sensitivity and the acknowledgment that no researcher or activist is culturally neutral."

3.6. An extended approach to ethics

Finally, I would argue that my approach to this study fits well with some extended ethical considerations. The dynamic design of the project, aiming not just to explore the thinking and the views of the participants, but also to develop their professional skills (e.g. in using the TCO), fits well with Webster and Lunt's (2002, p.99) argument that ethical research promotes the development of "complexity professionals ... working strategically and innovatively to develop policy, resources and practice at organisational level". This is an argument which they explicitly set against an understanding of ethics as mere "risk management", leading to an ethical position which "neglects the broader collegial function of improving … practice as a whole" (Webster and Lunt, 2009, p.104). In turn, this focus on the usefulness of research is consistent with Glaser and Strauss's (1967, p.3) proposal that "generating grounded theory is a way of arriving at theory suited to its supposed uses". The other extended ethical consideration in relation to this research concerns the children on roll in the nurseries. As already outlined, many of the children in Eastside faced multiple disadvantages. This research project was nested inside a larger project, with the over-arching aim of increasing the number of places and developing appropriate practice; both aims were intended to be in the wider interests of the children and their families. In particular, the project's focus on closely observing the children was intended to support the practitioners in getting to know the children better so that their opportunities to find things of interest, to make choices and to play would be enhanced. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) and Moss and Petrie (2002) argue that when early years practitioners come together for discussion and critical reflection they are creating a forum for participation and civic dialogue in the area of early childhood. This contrasts with the view that nursery places for two year olds are merely instrumental, providing childcare in a context where "children are the private responsibility of parents; children are passive dependents of parents and recipients of services; and parents are consumers of marketised services" (Moss and Petrie, 2002, p.5).

3.7. The design and conduct of the study

The study was conducted over a brief, three-month period. The eight participants came from three contrasting early years settings in Eastside: two practitioners from Lyle House Playgroup, and three practitioners from both Aneurin Bevan Day Nursery and Samuda Community Nursery. They were all female. The youngest practitioners were the two nursery nurses at Lyle House Playgroup, aged 23 and 24. The oldest practitioners were employed by Aneurin Bevan Day Nursery, with an average age of 45 and an average of 20 years of experience working with children under five. Five of the practitioners had a level 3 qualification in childcare and education, with one practitioner at Lyle House still working towards this, and two of the practitioners at Samuda Community Nursery holding degree-level early years qualifications from Eastern Europe which are not recognised in England.

I met with each group of practitioners fortnightly; the dates of all the meetings are given in Appendix Four, together with the other major milestones.

I began by visiting the settings at the end of the working day, to introduce myself to the participants, outline the nature of the project, share written material and request their informed consent. The participants completed a questionnaire about themselves, their views about children's learning, and asking them what they hoped to gain through taking part in the project (see Appendix Three). These initial meetings were followed by a training session in each setting on how to use an adapted version of the Target Child Observation Tool (TCO); this adapted TCO proforma is reproduced in Appendix Five, together with the guide to coding the TCO. Again, these meetings were held at the end of the working day and in the participants' settings.

I then met the participants every fortnight for an hour. All those meetings, except for the initial ones, began with a review of what we had talked about during the previous session, based on a memo which I circulated in advance. During the rest of the hour, each participant was able to choose one of their TCOs to talk through with

the group. Between meetings, the task of each group member was to complete at least one further TCO. This type of organisation has been described as a "reference group" (Brooker, 2012a) involving a smaller number of people (two or three) than would be usual in a focus group, having tasks to work on between meetings, and organised around discussion concerned with the task, making it function like a dialogic seminar.

The two practitioners at Lyle House met me in a room in the Children's Centre which accommodated their setting, which I was able to book as a local authority officer. The three participants from Samuda asked if we could meet away from their setting, where the only available room would have been the staffroom where we would have been interrupted; so I booked a meeting room in the Town Hall, which was close to where they worked. The meetings with the practitioners from Aneurin Bevan were the most varied. On four occasions we met in the Training Room which was part of the Centre. On the first and the final occasions, only Jasmin was available to meet me, and the only free space was a galleried area above the staffroom, where we were able to hear other staff, albeit muted, and there was a chance that we could have been overheard. The participants from Aneurin Bevan were the only ones who cancelled and rearranged several sessions; it was never clear why they had more difficulties with fixing arrangements than the others.

Six months after the end of the project, I met with all the participants in a single group for an hour to explore some of the initial findings. During this meeting, they also completed the same questionnaire which they had been given at the beginning of the project. The questionnaire was repeated in order to produce data about the participants' views at the very start and after the end of the project, in order to inform a discussion of how the project might have brought about changes in thinking and attitudes, as discussed in section 5.3 below.

Each meeting was audio-recorded using two devices, a digital recorder with a boundary microphone, and an iPhone. This was intended to ensure that all contributions would be picked up, and to allow for any technical failures. All of the

discussions were recorded in full, and the use of two devices meant that no contributions were missed. The meetings were selectively transcribed. I decided against full transcription because of the pressure of time – there were six sessions to transcribe every month, and each transcription had to be completed before the next meeting of the group. Although my employers supported the research project, no time was made available in the working day for listening and transcription.

When listening back to the recordings, I coded each minute by theme, and transcribed what was said in full where this made the content or the development of the discussion clearer. My transcription technique attempted to capture as much of the detail of the chosen selections on paper as possible, using a range of transcription symbols drawing on Silverman's (2006, pp. 398-399) system for simplified conversation analysis (see Appendix Six).

Minute	Summary and coding (code highlighted in yellow)	Transcription
7	Adult role Julian – what did you make of the 10 minute TCO?	**Agatha** "What struck me is how she started saying, 'I'm making cakes.' It wasn't adult-led. She initiated the same like the pretend play with the practitioner. ((Agatha turns to Silvia)) And then at the (.) umm end did you not get when she screamed? Because you weren't giving her attention, you were talking to everyone. And then she ran off. (1). **Silvia** "She took the book (.) yeah because she was trying to take the book from someone and I said, we need to share

8	Theory of the child's personality	That's why she took another book."
		Agatha
		"But (0.2) two-year-olds (.) DO (.) NOT (.) SHARE (1)."
	Argument between views — typical of 2 year old development or this child has a specific problem with sharing?	
		Silvia
		".hhh (.) She just wanted to grab this book for herself. And that book was singing book. That's why everyone was looking at that. That's why I said we need to share, because (.) then she grabbed another book and sat beside us."

Extract from the first meeting with the Samuda Community Nursery team, 27.2.2012

The use of transcription symbols is intended to give a fuller representation of the nature of the discussions, showing interruptions, assents and other features. It is not just the content of what is said that is important, but also the way that speakers go about agreeing or disagreeing with each other. Attempting a rich transcription of significant sections of dialogue was one of my ways of showing respect to the research participants and the ways they constructed meanings (Riessman, 2002). But I do not mean to argue that this style of transcription is somehow transparent, allowing the reader direct access to the conversation. As Kvale (1996, p.165) argues, transcription is a part of the process of analysis, an "interpretative construction". Likewise, Riessman (2002, p.226) comments that "transcribing discourse, like photographing reality, is an interpretative practice".

The extract above also shows how I coded each minute of the transcribed discussion – the codes ("adult role" and "theory of the child's personality") are

highlighted in yellow. There is further discussion of the approach used for interpretation and analysis in section 3.9, below.

For most of the time, the participants talked freely and fluently about their observations and I limited my role to one of facilitation – encouraging participants who had been silent to give their views, ensuring that everyone who wished to discuss a TCO had the time and opportunity to do so, and sometimes checking when I was unsure of meanings. If the participants strayed for more than a few minutes from the concerns of the project, I would encourage them to return to the discussion of the TCO – this happened particularly in the case of Aneurin Bevan Day Nursery where there was a tendency to discuss wider concerns about families to the exclusion of maintaining a focus on the child's actions in nursery. Generally, the more I questioned or challenged the participants, the more this inhibited their confidence and the fluency of their discussions. An example of this can be seen during discussions with the practitioners at Lyle House about their responses to the Batman-play of one of the children, where the long and awkward pause perhaps indicates discomfort, and is followed by a change of emphasis from the practitioner's role promoting play, to the role of maintaining order and safety:

Minute	Transcription
7	**Researcher** It feels like the Batman play never quite takes off somehow. I wonder what stopped it? **Julie** He gets distracted. **Researcher** The adult interaction doesn't seem to help him to play. (5) **Frances** It's like a warning really, he's going to hurt someone
Extract from the second meeting with the Lyle House Playgroup team, 8.3.2012	

3.8. Memos

I met monthly with my supervisor during this phase of the project and maintained regular email contact with her. This supported early analysis of the data, and helped me to make decisions about the content and format of the memos which were given to the participants within a few days of each group discussion.

The memos consisted of a summary of the discussion, followed by a very brief analysis of themes in the discussion, either using everyday language ("noticing and enjoying children's development"), or using concepts from the literature about child development like "social referencing". An example memo is reproduced in Appendix Seven.

The memos proved to be a useful way of sharing some of the content of the discussions with my supervisor, and the participants used them to remind themselves

about what we had been talking about previously. This would often encourage them to talk about what had happened to the child since we last met. However, the short analytic section at the end was never discussed by participants. When I included references to concepts like "social referencing" in relation to the children's observed behaviour, those terms were never taken up or used by the participants.

In summary, therefore, the design of the project appeared largely to have achieved its aim of encouraging the participants to talk; but any clear direction from me in my role as the researcher, either through verbal challenges, or through the introduction of terms to describe child development, was not found useful or ever elaborated.

3.9. The processes used for coding, data reduction and data analysis

As explained earlier, this is a study which draws on Grounded Theory; but for both pragmatic and philosophical reasons, it is not a "pure" Grounded Theory study.

Following the example of the EPPE researchers (Siraj-Blatchford *et al*., 2002, p.21) I began by modelling my first ideas, which were drawn from my initial review of the literature, into index categories. Each index category had a set of components; for example, "pedagogy" included the components of wider policy and practice (for example, nursery policies and borough guidelines), pedagogical framing (planning and the organisation of resources in order to promote learning) and face-to-face interactions (staff talking with children, explaining things to them, and playing alongside them):
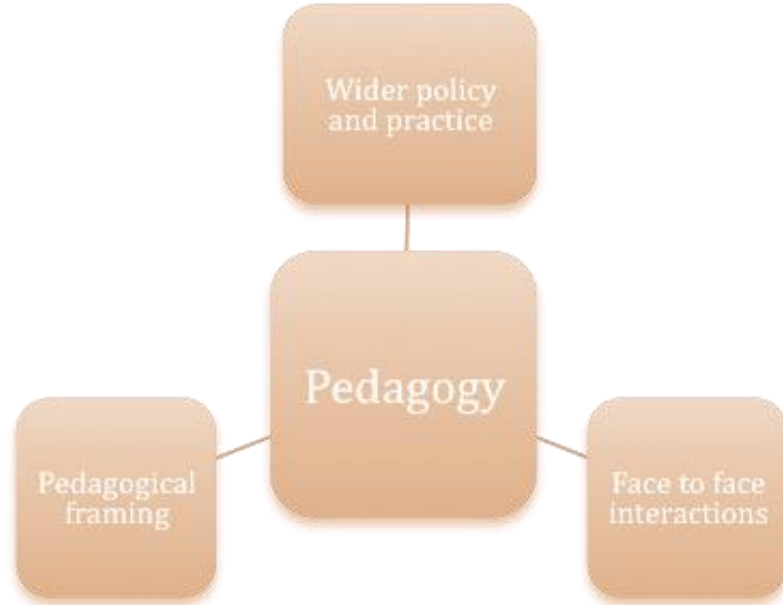
Figure 3.1. An example of an index category (pedagogy) and its components

I chose to begin with a framework, rather than coding inductively from the data, for pragmatic and also philosophical reasons. Philosophically, as outlined in the discussion above about methodology, I took the position that I could not go into the field somehow "untainted" by my prior knowledge and experience. My job role entailed offering my pedagogical expertise to the early years settings in Eastside; I could not simply switch mode and become a researcher free of all such initial knowledge and experience. Drawing on constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz and Bryant, 2011, I chose to acknowledge and work with my initial knowledge and aimed to remain alert to the ways in which research is a production of meaning, within the structures of existing social and professional relationships.

Pragmatically, I did not have time to code the data line by line inductively, and nor did I have an opportunity to return to the field to collect more data to check my coding decisions. Because the design of the project is dynamic, seeking both to explore the views and thinking of the participants *and* contribute to the development

of practice, it made sense to begin with a set of index categories drawn from the literature on early years pedagogy. This reflects my assumption that to contribute to the development of practice, it would be necessary to build on existing theories and practices from robust, international research into early education and care. Whilst a classic Grounded Theory study would have undoubted interest, it might function more as a snapshot of the views of a small group of people, and have a lesser role in terms of wider relevance and practice development.

I coded the data using NVivo 10, a qualitative data analysis computer software package. My coding scheme, drawn from my literature review, included the following categories ("nodes" in NVivo):

- Pedagogy
- Adult role
- Play
- Care
- Behaviour
- Theory of the child's personality
- Theory of how children learn

3.10. Data reduction

It was possible to merge two of these nodes: there were so many overlaps between the coding for *adult role* and for *pedagogy* that I made the decision to merge them together. The graph below shows the number of times that data were coded to each index category:
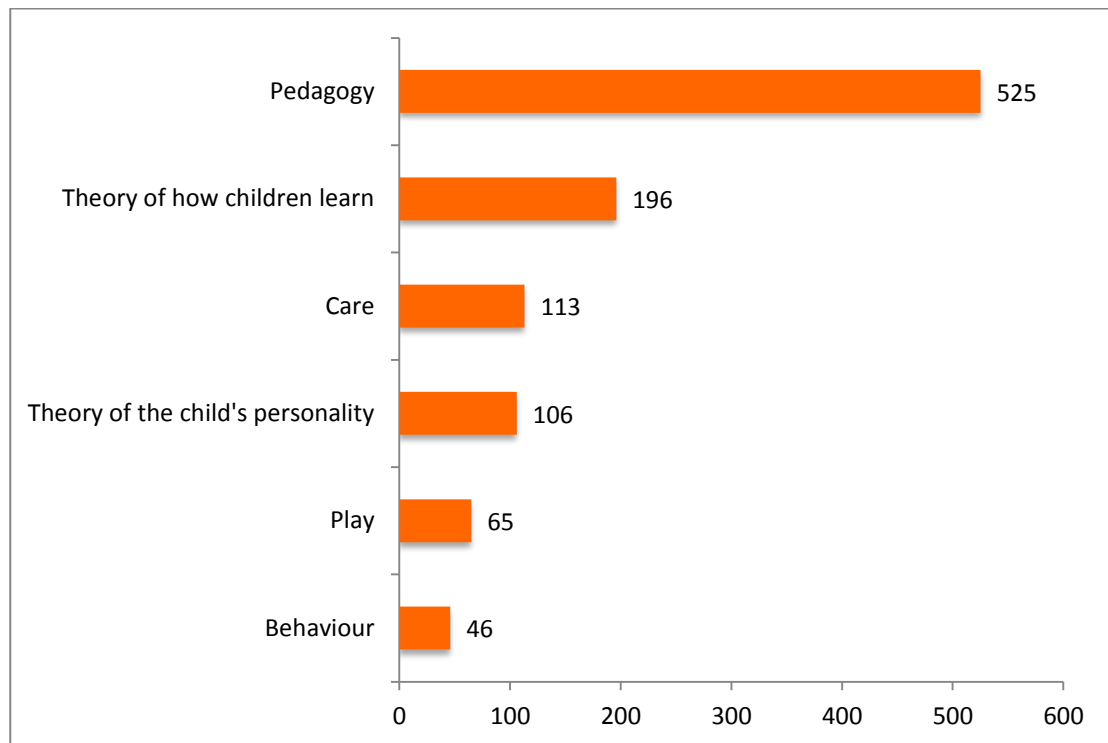
Figure 3.2. Graph showing the number of times that data were coded to each index category

I then narrowed my focus to the two index categories which were most represented in my coding of the data. They were about pedagogy, and theories of how children learn. This might be expected, given that the discussions were structured around the TCO which focuses on learning. In other words, this focus in my findings – reported in the next chapter, below – arises from two aspects of the research design. Firstly, although the group discussions were not structured with a script on my part, they were structured by the format in which participants discussed the data from their TCOs. Secondly, some categories were excluded early on in my data analysis and

reduction. This is consistent with the argument of my methodology, above, that this study cannot be understood in "romantic" terms as tapping into "true" views and feelings of the participants (Silverman, 2006). Instead, the meanings are understood to have been "produced" by the nature of the relationships between researcher and the participants, and by design and analytic tactics which, in the act of focussing on some areas, necessarily involve the blurring and loss of others. Charmaz (2000, p.510) argues that "constructivism … recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims towards interpretive understanding of subjects' meaning." Although the final responsibility for decisions about interpretation lies with me, my aim has been to make the process as open as possible. This approach is also intended to enable the reader to make a judgement on the quality of my own processes of interpretation, mindful of Miles and Huberman's (2002: xi) general observation that many researchers "leave behind too few footprints to allow others to judge the utility of their work." As Kvale (1996, p.212) argues, there is an important distinction between "perspectival subjectivity", where the researcher attempts to leave footprints visible, and mere "biased subjectivity", poor research-craft.

3.11. Generating theory

Once I had a manageable amount of data, representing the main (but not all) areas talked about, I re-read it and re-coded it *in vivo* using grounded theory techniques (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This is in keeping with the design of the study, which is intended to explore the thinking and theories of the participants through dialogic group discussion; the study is concerned with processes and with the construction of meaning. It is not concerned with trying to take a snapshot of what participants did and did not seem to know. It considers how the participants build meanings over time, dialogically, working with their own theories. The production of a theory, grounded in the data, would also enable further investigations to be undertaken in the future to

extend and modify the theory in pursuit of a fuller picture of how early years practitioners talk and theorise about two-year olds.

The data analysis proceeded with a move away from the use of the index categories (as shown above) and towards conceptualisation more clearly drawn from a detailed consideration of the data. This is in contrast to the interpretative moves used within the EPPE Project (Siraj-Blatchford *et al*., 2002, p.21), which the researchers describe as "the iterative process of coding the documents and refining the node definitions and structures ('trees') as we sift through the data (back and forth), adding new nodes as well as taking away those which are not evident in the data." Instead, I sought to group together concepts which seemed to relate to the same phenomena in order to create a structure of categories which was grounded in the reduced set of data, with each category having a set of properties and a dimensional range (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 65). The choices of wording and terminology made by the participants were often used as helpful guides. For example, there was a great deal of data which concerned observation. The participants talked about what they had formally observed, using the TCOs, and they often linked this to what they had seen informally but not written down on other occasions, or things parents had told them about the children. All of these different events in the discussions related to similar phenomena and could therefore be grouped together into the category of "observation". In attempting to tell the story *analytically* through the data from three different sites and eight different people, I am drawing on the more objectivist elements of Strauss and Corbin's (1990) and Corbin's (1993) modelling of Grounded Theory. One might conceptualise this more as an act of assemblage, than one of re-presentation. Charmaz (2000, p. 125) warns that this type of objectivist approach, producing "neutral tones of analytic discourse" can erase "the interpretative acts that produced them and, moreover, eradicate ambiguities in both the studied scenes and their analytic treatment." I have attempted to guard against such erasure through the approach I have taken to transcription, yet it is unarguable that the decision to identify and name concepts and identify a "central phenomenon", and provide illustrations

from the data, tends to put more emphasis on the "neutral tone" and takes away some of the liveliness of the individual voices and the specific discussions. Such a methodological decision must inevitably create losses, as well as the intended gains that arise from the production of an analytic story. With no analytic story, there might be little grounded theory to disseminate as a finding, or to investigate with other practitioners and through other studies in the future.

As the project proceeded, the participants began to talk more about "noticing" or "watching" rather than "observation", with the apparent distinction that "observation" was something you were required to do (managers would check up on the numbers of observations completed each week) whilst "noticing" meant that something seen was understood to be important, worth talking about and thinking about. Implicitly, "noticing" or "watching" entails a more active stance whilst "observation" seems just to involve meeting the requirements for the job. An example of this comes when Julie discusses what she sees as the merits of the TCO as opposed to the previous approach the setting had used to writing observations (writing onto blank A4 paper without using any formatting or coding):

Minute	Transcription
34	**Julie** I think they've been good for watching their language because you've got the box that just talks about the language rather than having to read full paragraphs of what you've written about their observations and having to look back to work out what they said and things like that (1). Both of our children didn't speak too much, did they, and then we've noticed a lot of speech. **Frances** In the big one [their previous format for writing long observations of children] you don't see the full effect of who's around them, if they're by theirself or if they're playing parallel. **Julie** It'll be interesting to keep watching these two children.
Extract from the final meeting at Lyle House, March 29th, 2012	

This shift in the participants' terminology as the project proceeded helped my analysis of the data, by leading me back through the transcripts to find examples where I could infer the act of "noticing". For example, in the final, whole-group discussion Agatha and Julie talk about making materials accessible to two-year olds. Julie makes a comment which I coded as an example of "noticing" – she notices that, whilst in theory children might be able to access play materials from a big basket on the floor, this is not always the case:

Minute	Transcription
14	**Agatha** They will go into the basket. We have worked hard to make everything accessible. Took a long time. We have put big symbols and pictures on baskets. **Julie** That's true for the majority, but some young 2 year olds don't.
Extract from the final whole group discussion, October 5th, 2012	

Extract from the final whole group discussion, October 5th, 2012

Similarly, when Frances talked about Nataya's exploration of an ink-stamping set, putting her hands on the ink pad rather than the stamp, I coded this as an example of noticing how what might at first seem like exploratory, sensory play is also a kind of early scientific experiment into the properties of the materials (how wet is the pad; how much of that wetness will transfer to her hands?):

Minute	Transcription
49	**Frances**
	When she put her hands in it, she was exploring different ways of doing the stamping. No-one round her had put their hands in it, so she's just sort of put her hands in it but she was, then she was looking at her hands (.) And looking at the ink on her hands, so she was exploring it and things like that. I think she was trying to link that to it as well, if I put my hand in it can I make a pic – but by the time she put her hand in there wasn't much ink so she was sort of just looking at it as if to say will it work and things like that and then she got the stamp and carried on doing it with the stamp (.) So I'm not sure if she was trying to see if she could do a hand print but nothing much come onto her hand or whether she was just seeing what it felt like.
Extract from the third meeting at Lyle House, 22nd March 2012	

"Noticing" as a category was, therefore, often inferred from the data. In my coding, it had a set of properties, and each property had a dimensional range:

Category	Properties	Dimensional range
Noticing	Significance	High to low
	Consistency with other observations	Expected to unexpected
	Consistency with what other staff observed about the child	Readily accepted by the team to conflictual
	Actionable	Staff follow up with specific responses to child to no apparent actions taken in response.

For example, what Frances noticed about Nataya's exploration of the ink pad would be scaled as "high" in significance and "unexpected" in respect of its consistency with other observations (she had not previously been involved in this kind of sustained exploratory play). However, because Julie has noticed the way that Nataya is exploring each area of the playgroup in turn, she readily accepts what Frances has seen, and how she interprets it. There was no discussion in the subsequent, final meeting of following up on Nataya's interest in using her hands to print and paint.

The data were coded into the following categories, following the approach outlined above:

- Noticing

- Choosing (children making choices)

- Responding (adults responding to children's play, communication and ideas)

- Maintaining (nursery tidiness, safety, routines and policies)

- Encouraging autonomy (adults encouraging children)

3.12. Moving further from description and towards conceptualization: telling the story analytically

"Grounded theory is an *action/interactional oriented method of theory building* and that action/interaction has certain properties …First, it is **processual**, evolving in nature. Thus it can be studied in terms of sequences, or in terms of movement, or change over time … Second, the action/interaction about which we speak is **purposeful, goal oriented**, done for some reason."

Strauss and Corbin (1990, p. 104).

The final steps of data analysis consisted of making connections between categories, following the action/interactional orientation proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The movement within the group discussions was that the children were seen to be making more choices, acting with increased independence. The central phenomenon in the data was the actions which the participants took, in order to enable this to happen. I gave this phenomenon the name "enabling autonomy", intended to describe the range of actions which the practitioners took in order to

develop the agency of the children they were working with. This move is described by Strauss and Corbin (1990, p.121) as telling the story "analytically", giving the central phenomenon a name and identifying its properties and dimensions "Enabling autonomy" consists of four categories:

- Making a judgement about the child's capacity to make choices and decisions (the extent of the child's autonomy in the nursery);
- Helping the child to be autonomous (e.g. through encouragement, or arranging resources so that the child can access them);
- Responding to the child's needs and interests (and balancing this with the demands of other requirements, e.g. the needs of the other children, routine events etc.);
- Creating particular opportunities for play and learning for the child, either during face-to-face interactions, or by arranging resources which the child can then play with autonomously.

These actions could lead to the practitioner engaging directly with the child (a high level of intersubjectivity) or they could lead to the practitioner creating a framework where the child can play and act independently (a low level of intersubjectivity). Therefore, a dimensional range can be given to autonomy and intersubjectivity:
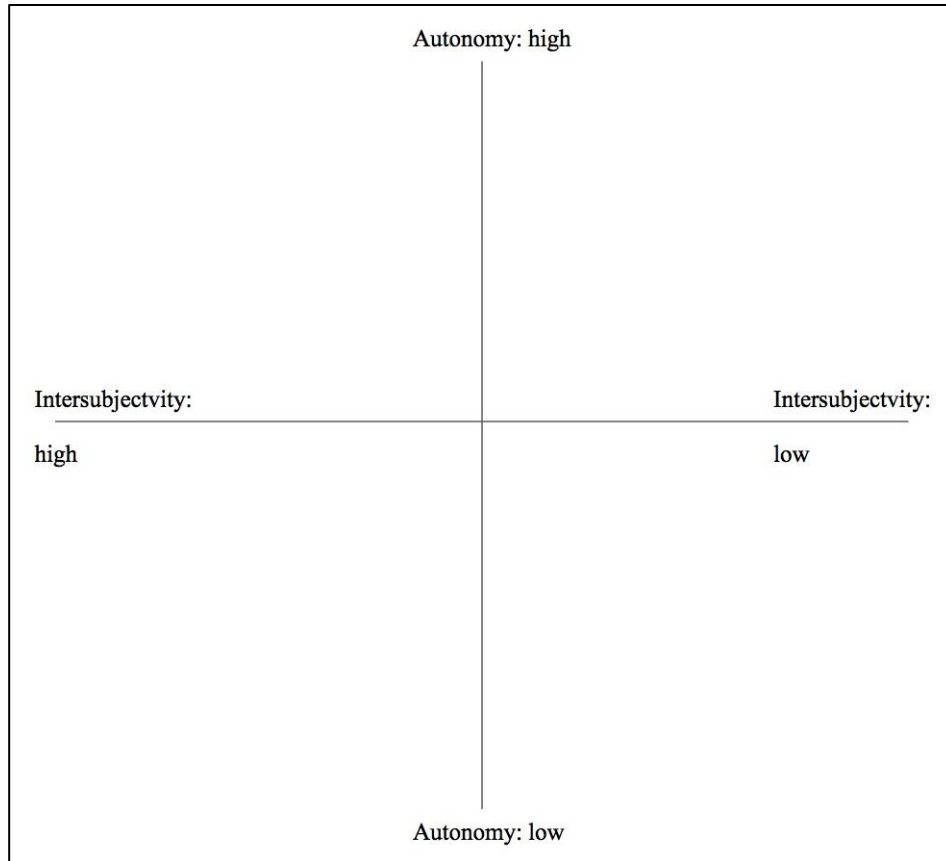
Autonomy: high

Intersubjectvity: high

Intersubjectvity: low

Autonomy: low

Figure 3.3. Illustration of the dimensional range of "enabling autonomy"

The findings which stem from this analysis of the data are reported in Chapter Five.

3.13. Validity: "I don't think this tactic quite works"

This is a piece of qualitative research which is concerned with what the participants said and wrote, explicitly acknowledging the subjectivity of the data. As a matter of consistency with the methodology, therefore, there is no role for triangulation in making a judgement about validity.

In the background of this study is the wider project in "Eastside" to measure quality improvement in the settings using the ITERS-R and ECERS-R scales. However the validity of this study does not rest on those external measurements, as there are too many variables involved. If, for example, all three settings were to improve their scores to a statistically significant degree during the project, this might illustrate the positive effect of the group discussions and use of the TCO; but equally, the changes may have come about through any one of a range of other interventions happening concurrently (for example, training the managers to use the audits and to devise action plans for improvement). This is not to say that the background data, which is discussed in the next chapter, has no relevance at all – it would be a matter for potential concern if, for example, the three settings in this project regressed or made poorer progress than the others, as this might suggest that the process of TCOs and discussions might have been a time-consuming distraction to the participants.

Kvale (1996, p.32) argues that, in qualitative research "precision in description and stringency in meaning interpretation correspond ... to exactness in quantitative measurements." Following this argument, the validity of the data analysis and interpretation rest on the extent to which the recording and transcription demonstrated that precision, and the interpretative moves outlined, both deductive and inductive, can be regarded as stringent. Throughout the data analysis, I have attempted to take steps to organise and reduce the data, in as transparent as way as possible, whilst guarding against what Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe as "forcing" the data to fit to a particular theory. In the end, I aim to have demonstrated that the phenomenon which I have named "enabling autonomy" is supported by the data, and that it has not

come about through a process whereby the data are "filtered through and squared with pre-exisiting hypotheses and biases" (Glaser, cited in Wuest, 2000, p. 56). As Lather (1991, p.67) argues, from an ethical and political standpoint, the researcher is obliged to be involved in a "ceaseless confrontation with and respect for the experiences of people in their daily lives to guard against theoretical imposition".

Much of the validity of the project rests on my own skills, or lack of skill, in the interpersonal work of the researcher. As discussed above, I have attempted to adopt a reflexive stance, and my data analysis indicates two key areas where my positioning and interventions got in the way of the production of rich data.

Firstly, the attempts at abstraction included in the conclusions of each memo do not appear to have been found helpful by the participants. In my thesis proposal, I explained that "by writing a memo, summarising some of the key points of discussion from each meeting, I am aiming to make the processes of condensing and finding patterns in the data explicit, enabling the participants to disagree and challenge my thinking." However, in the research data there is not a single example of the participants adopting, querying, challenging or otherwise following up the references to the developmental theories mentioned like "social referencing". On the other hand, there are indications that the opening summaries of what we had talked about in the last session did help the participants to pick up the threads of their earlier discussion and thinking.

Secondly, the times when I challenged the views of the participants were not experienced by them as dialogic, but were instead received as criticisms, arguably from what Bourdieu (1990, p.27) calls the "sovereign position".

In these two respects, I am aware that my actions as the researcher did not help in the production of rich data. On the whole, however, the many indications that the participants talked fluently and enthusiastically support the view that the findings have a high degree of validity. Lather (1991, p.68) has also developed the intriguing concept of "catalytic validity" to describe a kind of validity that exists by means of its

"reality altering impact". In their final evaluations, the participants judged that the project had changed their understanding of the children, and their roles as early years practitioners. All their comments about the impact of the project were positive. The final evaluation is explored in more detail in Chapters Four and Five.

However, in the end there is little that can be said with certainty about the validity of the research. It is impossible to identify, yet alone control for, the impact of socially and culturally regulated theories and beliefs; neither mine, nor the participants. Even moment-by-moment the data are subjected to interpretation, as my responses to what was said in the groups would have been based on my interpretation, and that would in turn shape the further discussions. As Riessman (2002) argues, the subsequent process of transcription is another process of interpretation. There can be no clear distinction drawn, therefore, between data and the interpretation of data. To quote more fully from A.S Byatt's fictional biographer: "I am trying to avoid the problem of the decay of belief in the idea of objectivity by slipstreaming towards the safer, ideologically unloaded idea of precision. I don't think this tactic quite works" (Byatt, 2000, p. 250).

Charmaz (2000, p.510) argues that constructivist grounded theory "takes a middle ground between postmodernism and positivism": a search for meaning is not impossible. I am understanding meaning as something which was negotiated systematically, from different perspectives, in the realtime discussions between researcher and participants. After the groups were concluded, I am seeing meaning as being produced through systematic interpretative and analytic moves, as described above.

Bourdieu (1993, p.23) argues that processes of systematic observation, data collection and analysis can be seen positively as what he call the "scientific gaze": "a gaze that is at once objectifying and understanding, and which, when turned back on oneself, makes it possible to accept oneself and even, so to speak, lay claim to oneself, claim the right to be what one is."

I am pausing on the biographer's *quite* … these tactics might work enough, even if not entirely.

Chapter Four

Presenting and analysing the data: "Enabling autonomy", an overarching concept to explain early years practice.

4.1. Introduction

As I argued in the previous chapter, this is a study which seeks to explore the
question of what type of ongoing support and training might be appropriate for
practitioners working with two-year olds, a comparatively unexplored topic. Taking
place in a context where there is an urgent need to make progress towards the
development of appropriate styles of early education and care for very young children,
and in the light of longstanding tensions between qualified teachers and early years
practitioners, the methodological choices discussed in the previous chapter can be
understood as both pragmatic, and suited to the aims of the study. Pragmatically, I
judged it necessary to engage the practitioners as participants, allowing them a great
deal of agency in the choices around which children to observe and when, and which
data to bring forward for discussion.

These methodological decisions are consistent with major themes from the
literature review. Of these, perhaps the most significant is the importance of offering
practitioners a place, time and space for critical reflection which is informed by data,
where the child is seen as a competent learner, and where there is a focus on the
adult's role in supporting the child's learning (Munton *et al*., 2002; White, 2005; Lee,
2006; Dalli *et al.*, 2011). The active participation of the practitioners, researching
their own workplaces and collecting data, shows sensitivity to the historic tensions
between teachers and other early years practitioners, tensions which could become
impediments to research (Rumbold, 1990). It also recognises that an appropriate
pedagogy for such young children is not a "programme" which staff can be trained to
deliver; pedagogy can, instead, be thought of as arising from processes of co-
construction by practitioners and children, in an atmosphere where practitioners'
close observation of the children supports contingent styles of interaction (Dalli *et al.*,
2011). The largely unstructured approach to the group discussions, in which the
participants selected which TCOs they wanted to discuss, reflects Shonkoff's (2010)

argument that best practices are catalysts for further investigation, not products to be re-created, and is consistent with Mitchell and Cubey's (2003) emphasis on reflection and questioning of practice.

The data from the group discussions themselves can be used to make visible the practitioners' own theories about their role in educating and caring for the children, using approaches drawn from Grounded Theory. The theories of early years practitioners are also little-explored in educational research, and this opens up future possibilities for research and further development. In the light of a lack of knowledge overall about the support and training of early years practitioners working with two-year-olds, the intention that the participants themselves would judge the project useful, that there would be "reciprocity in what the subjects give and what they receive from participation" (Kvale, 1996, p.116), was also an important consideration.

Training practitioners in "keen observation" (Dalli *et al.*, 2009), and making the opportunity available for critical reflection on the observation data, are together intended to support the development of relationships between adults and children characterised by attunement, intersubjectivity, and a contingent style of adult response to the child. The literature suggests that it is important for practitioners to understand their role as being concerned with early education as well as childcare, and to see the child as an actor with agency, not merely a subject for socialisation into group care; as White (2005, p. 97) argues, professional investigation and dialogue with practitioners needs to "focus on positive and empowering images of the child, and the role they could play to support children's learning and development."

Finally, there is the important practical and ethical consideration of acting to improve early education and care for a highly disadvantaged group of young children. Mitchell and Cubey argue that support and development for early years practitioners should include opportunities for data collection and analysis, and for critical reflection. These processes should, in turn, lead to "tangible changes in pedagogical interactions", with participants becoming more aware of "the power of their role as

educators" (Mitchell and Cubey, 2003, p.xii). The project was designed so that data from the Target Child Observations and the critical reflection on that data would support the professional development of the participants, including the development of their practice. In addition, the wider project in Eastside used the ITERS-R and ECERS-R quality audits as indicators of quality, drawing on the research showing that children's attendance at settings which score highly in these audits is strongly associated with benefits throughout early and primary education (Sylva *et al.*, 2012). The participating nurseries were all trained in the use of these audits. There is some discordance between this highly structured approach to assessing quality and the more discursive approaches outlined above, but as Moss, Dahlberg and Pence (2000, p.105) argue, "while the relative and values-based nature of quality cannot be avoided, choices do have to be made and this should be done as democratically as possible."

Therefore, my final methodological choice was to consider the independently-gathered data from the ITERS-R and ECERS-R audits from the start of the whole project (in October/November 2011), and at the point of the conclusion of this smaller project involving the three settings (April 2012). There are too many other factors involved to use that data to assess the impact of this project, but it acts as a useful guard against the possibility that the project might appear to have been successful because it was enjoyed by the participants and produced rich research data; but that ultimately it might not have been beneficial to the children.

In the first part of this chapter, using techniques drawn from Grounded Theory, I will present the findings about how the participants themselves theorised their role, with particular attention to the children's development and early education. This is followed by a discussion of how the project supported the practitioners' professional development, drawing on the data from the evaluation workshop and the questionnaire at the end of the project. Finally, the ITERS-R and ECERS-R data from the wider project in Eastside are briefly considered, alongside the data pertaining to the practitioners' own discussions and observation, in order to address the question of

whether the changes in practice that occurred during the project might have led to improved early education and care for the children.

4.2. How did the participants talk about and theorise their role as early years practitioners?

In this section, I will outline the participants' theory that their role was to enable the children to develop their autonomy in nursery. When they describe this work, they also outline the conditions which they find enabling, which are discussed below. In addition, there are also some conditions which inhibit their work, and these are considered briefly at the end of this section. Finally, as outlined in the previous chapters, the data can be scaled according to dimensional ranges with respect to autonomy and intersubjectivity.

4.3. "Enabling autonomy": an overarching concept to explain nursery work

The application of techniques drawn from Grounded Theory, taking a relatively objectivist stance *vis à vis* the data, enables me to move from description, coding, and data reduction towards conceptualisation, and an attempt to present the story of the participants' work analytically. This analytic story is the production of an overview of the whole project, as opposed to the production of multiple stories from many voices.

"Enabling autonomy" is a broad term for the description of three specific strategies used by the early years practitioners in this study in their work with the two-year old children at nursery. Enabling autonomy consists of: assessing the child; responding to the child; and developing a close, reciprocal relationship with the child which encourages and values the child's growing independence in the nursery setting. Encouraging children's autonomy at nursery was a common aim for all of the participants.

The *strategy of assessment* refers to making a judgement about the child's independence and agency in their early years setting. The level of a child's agency indicates the degree to which the child can make choices about their social interaction, play and learning. The level of agency can vary from high to low, depending on whether the child seeks out particular adults, friends and activities, in order to take the initiative or join in with them, or whether the child is generally inactive, follows the direction or suggestions of others, or appears withdrawn and dis-engaged. In line with the earlier discussion about constructivism, agency should not be understood as resulting simply from the child's personality. Agency depends both on the child having the drive to do something, and being in an environment where the expression of that drive is possible and permitted, where the child can be thought of as "ready, willing and able to participate" (Carr, 2001, p.21). A child could not have much agency in an environment where there was little chance to move around freely and choose equipment, or where they had to wait to be spoken to, before they could speak. Equally, the autonomy, independence and free play of the children are not pure or absolute characteristics, but they are instead produced by the structures and power relations within the nursery. For example, freely accessing toys from a cupboard is allowed, encouraged even. But seeking to express freedom and independence by refusing to part from your mother at the nursery door and wanting to return home would be seen as problematic by the practitioners, a choice that was neither legitimate nor permitted.

Responding to the child refers to the practitioner's actions in respect of the child's choices or wishes. Responses can be made face-to-face, for example responding to a child's interests by joining in with their play or a particular activity, or engaging in a conversation. Responses can also consist of work in the background: thinking about the child's interests and then planning for particular experiences or equipment to be made available for the child.

Developing a close, reciprocal relationship refers to the practitioner's actions to respond "contingently" to the child, in an "attuned" way (Wood, McMahon and

Cranstoun, 1980). A child and an adult will each have their own, individual, subjective experiences and understandings of any given event in the nursery; through the process of "intersubjective attunement" (Dalli, 2011, p.3) a third space can be created between adult and child, belonging entirely to neither, where meaning is negotiated and produced. The term intersubjectivity here is used with a specific focus on a pedagogical encounter (Johannson, 2004), and not in a wider, more psychoanalytically-oriented way (for example, Stern *et al.*, 1998). As the adult has more knowledge and experience, the encounter is necessarily unequal; but it is understood by the participants as a process of giving more agency to the child, rather in the manner that Bruner (1995, p.6) describes – "adults treating the child as an agent and bent on 'teaching' him to be more so."

These processes – developing an intersubjective relationship and enabling autonomy – depend on certain conditions. The adult needs to be interested and involved in the child's activities and play, rather than seeing them as part of a separate realm (Brooker, 2008, p.74). The adult also needs to have the opportunities to spend enough time to get to know the child, with adequate support from other staff and the management of the early years setting overall. Where there is no interest in the child's play (for example, if practitioners were to understand their role in terms of feeding, nappy changing and keeping the environment safe and clean), or no possibility of spending time with the child, there could be little intersubjectivity. This would also be the case if practitioners judged that they should focus on teaching particular skills regardless of the child's interests.

4.4. The importance of accessibility … "what we set out, how we set out, how it looks from their point of view"

An important part of the wider project, within which this study is set, was a focus on developing the quality, range and accessibility of resources in the nurseries. These aspects make up a significant proportion of the items in the ITERS-R and ECERS-R audits. Commenting on the audit of her nursery, Milada remarked that "it highlighted importance of accessibility … what we set out, how we set it out, how it looks from their point of view". Julie found that the emphasis in ITERS-R on actually observing children getting resources independently helped her to challenge whether the dolls really were accessible to the two-year olds:

Minute	Transcription
11	**Julie**
	So we realized that it was the way we had set up the home corner (.) We used to have a big basket so three and four year olds can easily get in and get them but now we've got a smaller basket that they just sit up in so they're just one doll high rather than all the dolls just chucked in together (0.2) And now it's more visible for her to see them, she goes into the home corner and they're just there.
	Extract from the final review meeting with all the participants, 5.10.2012

Enabling autonomy was, therefore, supported by the work the practitioners did in all three settings to organise the environments so that children could find and access play materials and equipment independently, without needing adult help to reach into large containers or take resources down from shelves.

4.5. Enabling autonomy: four variants

In the following sections, the findings from the project will be presented through a discussion of enabling autonomy in four contrasting contexts. The two main aspects

of enabling autonomy are the child's agency, and the development of an intersubjective relationship between the child and the practitioner. These can both be scaled high to low, as illustrated by the quadrant graphic in the previous chapter. Selecting some of the actual terms used by the participants gives a fuller impression of how the scales represent the ways in which they thought about the children:

Child's agency: high

*Children who do not need an adult
present to play independently:
"I don't have to be there"*

**Intersubjectivity in the
adult/child relationship:**

high

*Children who are observed co-constructing
their learning with adults: "We go and we
search things together, we go and work it
out together"*

low

*Children who are thought of as being
difficult to "get to grips with"*

low

*Children who are not observed to make and carry
out choices, described as "wanderers" or "all over
the place"*

Figure 4.1. Illustration of the dimensional range of "enabling autonomy" including the practitioners' own descriptive terms

The resulting quadrants represent in an analytic way the episodes that the participants talked about; in other words they are not properties of individual children or practitioners, but arise from the dynamic relationships between children, adults, and the nursery setting overall. This means that the same child may be talked about on some occasions as showing a low level of agency, whilst on other occasions as showing a high level. The same is true of the degree of intersubjectivity in the relationships between adults and children. However, in respect of the children discussed, the trend was that as the adults noticed and thought more about the child, the child's agency was thought to increase.

4.6. Low intersubjectivity, low agency

"Wanderers", children who are "all over the place" and children who are hard to "get to grips with"

In this quadrant, the observations and discussions presented children and adults who were not conversing or playing together; adults who did not appear to be attuned to the child; and children who did not make choices and follow them through.

For example, the practitioners from Aneurin Bevan Nursery described a child who would cry and not engage in play for some time every morning. The child was described as withdrawn, and the one communication he offered (crying) was not given any meaning by the staff:

Minute	Transcription
16	**Researcher** Does it mean he isn't happy to be left in nursery, when he's crying? **Anne** I wouldn't say so. **Mia** It's not that. **Jasmin** Testing, isn't it? (0.2) **Anne** It's just testing of the water.
Extract from the second meeting at Aneurin Bevan, 1.3.2012	

Similarly, Silvia at Samuda Community Nursery described how a child "makes a face like he is about to cry. I think he is just looking for attention … He didn't cry, but I think he knows, if he cries he gets attention. So he does this on purpose." Here again, the practitioner rejects the apparent meaning of the child's communication, and therefore intersubjectivity is low.

Other instances of the child's communication being at cross-purposes to the adults included Anne's touching description of a child expressing sadness about leaving nursery: "it was hard for me to get to grips with that particular child as well, because we were quite close and it's no matter what you say, the child had to go anyway, and they're talking to you and saying 'I don't want to go', and you're saying 'you've got

to go, you're a big boy now'". It did not seem to be possible for Anne to accept the child's communication of feeling sad, and reply contingently; instead, she chose to be clear with the child about his lack of choice in the situation. In a similar vein, Anne described a group of children singing a "happy" song as part of a ritual around leaving, even though they (and their parents) were feeling sad: "when it actually hits them that they're actually going, when you're singing to them "Happy Leaving" it's like "no, I don't want to go." Even the parents are crying."

At Aneurin Bevan Day Nursery, the participants worried about children who were struggling to manage in the setting, because they lacked relationships with others and did not appear interested in the opportunities for play. Jasmin describes one child whose key person had to leave the nursery unexpectedly, and who did not seem to have managed to develop a relationship with her new key person. Other staff in the room had also had time off for various reasons, and Jasmin was beginning to feel that she needed to take the initiative and establish a relationship with the child:

Minute	Transcription
19	**Jasmin** ((speaking very quietly)) Her key worker got another job at Updale, she was very good with the children, very good, on task and all that, excellent and umm (1) .hhh I'm not the key worker, I'm down the other end, but I can see when I look I can see oh my goodness we need to pick her up and Anne had time off because she had a grandchild then umm Gill had some time off because her roof blew off her house so the room was left bereft of people so I started to build a relationship, say "hello, how are you?"
Extract from the first meeting at Aneurin Bevan, 21.2.2012	

Finally, it is notable that episodes in this quadrant often relate to new children who had completed the phase of settling in where they had a parent to support them, so

they were now in nursery for a full session, but did not yet have strong relationships with others. These children might have appeared to have agency because they moved around and played with a range of different equipment, but the practitioners described their movements as lacking in purpose. Frances and Anne, in separate groups, described children who were new to nursery and not yet showing signs of making choices:

Minute	Transcription
32	**Frances** He's like where he's settling everything is new to him, like your one, he's running from one thing to the other exploring everything
Extract from the first meeting at Lyle House, 23.2.2012	

Minute	Transcription
13	**Anne** They are going to want to run from place to place until they understand that they come in here, they're happy in here, that's when they begin to fizzle out and calm [down **Mia** [yes **Anne** and understand what's going on, but beforehand there's no way of knowing that.
Extract from the second meeting at Aneurin Bevan, 1.3.2012	

Likewise, Silvia described a newly-settled child as being "all over the place" and Julie said that one of her key children was "a wanderer, she would wander and hold things rather than play."

Occasionally, the practitioners talked about children making impulsive choices which were in conflict with the implied relationships and social structures of the nursery (I have used the term "agency" to mean a deliberate, intentional action by a child). In a rare instance of open conflict between participants, as Silvia discussed her observation of a child grabbing a book and then screaming, Agatha, the child's key person, interrupted. She argued with Silvia about why this had happened, saying that it resulted from Silvia's failure to pay enough attention to the child: "and at the umm end did you not get when she screamed? Because you weren't giving her attention, you were talking to everyone. And then she ran off." Here, there is a low level of intersubjectivity and agency, and at the same time a breakdown of the normal web of connections between staff.

4.7. Low intersubjectivity, high agency

"I don't have to be there"

In this quadrant, the practitioners talk about episodes where children were making choices and engaging in play and activity very independently, without referring back to an adult. The children were not observed to be wanting to attract an adult's attention or engage in conversation, or seeking out help. As a result, the child is not playing and acting in a "third space" which has been co-constructed with an adult, but is defining and creating her or his own space for play within the structures of the nursery. Children between the ages of two and three years old have an oft-noticed drive to be independent and do things for themselves, and participants often commented positively on their observations of this independent play as a sign of

appropriate development and a particularly beneficial effect of nursery. In contrast to the "wandering" and "all over the place" children, the children in this quadrant would choose and then sustain their play, often ignoring other distractions as in this account:

Minute	Transcription
59	**Anne** It was nice to see him go from different things in that space of time umm because often the children as soon as they hear the garden they would often like to run out and just drop what they are doing and go but he didn't (0.1). **Mia** He carried on. **Anne** That's right he carried on. (1) When he was satisfied, then he went outside.
Extract from the third meeting at Aneurin Bevan, 23.3.2012	

The practitioners often felt pleasure in observing and recounting this independent play. An example of this was when Milada observed a child experimenting with the magnets over a period of time, puzzled by the way that sometimes they attract and sometimes they repel:

Minute	Transcription
40	**Milada** That was lovely to watch, her face was so puzzled, the expression – what's going on? Why're they not joining? Especially some of them do join some don't. It was interesting her problem solving was – well obviously this one's wrong for this so I need to go pick up the other one. At her level it was still not the fact – maybe I

	need to move it to the other side and this is how it's going to work. So she wasn't trying to move it different ways.
Extract from the fourth meeting with the Samuda Community Nursery team, 3.4.2012	

Milada does not see this as an example of a time when she might have introduced the child to the concept of repelling and attracting, or otherwise have guided her exploration; she does not suggest that there would have been any role for her involvement at all. Rather, she places the most value on process – the way that the child sustains her investigation. Later in the same meeting, she discusses her observation of a child trying lots of different ways to join the pieces in a construction kit without success, and comments that "yes fair enough she has not learnt that if you twist the link it will join, but she learnt something different. I think it is sometimes quite important to leave them to it and allow them time to learn and to develop their own knowledge…she was taking time, she was repeating the actions."

There are examples from all three settings of practitioners noticing, and valuing, the children's sustained involvement and precision in play and exploration which they had independently chosen. For example, Silvia commented on an observation of one of her key children drawing and sticking:

Minute	Transcription
27	**Silvia** She was really really precise (1) it was quite interesting actually because she's not that old, and how she was playing (0.1) she was really able to concentrate (.) this age I think (.) she's doing really really well because normally children aren't able to do that.
Extract from the second meeting with the Samuda Community Nursery team, 5.3.2012	

Similarly, Jasmin comments that "it was fantastic" when she observed a child cutting off bits of paper and sticking them on top of each other in layers. The child is then observed to go into the home corner:

Minute	Transcription
4	**Jasmin** She did something which was absolutely fascinating. She took all the utensils, put them into the sink, found a washing up liquid bottle, poured in the washing up liquid just imitating the adult again, and then she put it down and she put her hands in the – in the sink – and was just like waving them about to make the bubbles. ((laughs)) That's really good."
	Extract from the first meeting at Anuerin Bevan, 21.2.2012

Later during the same meeting, discussing another child, Jasmin expressed particular pleasure in observing the child's increasing independence and ability to play without her being present: "it's really nice now I don't have to be there, so when I do another one on her I don't have to be there, she's either there with other children, following others, or there's a nice observation which needs to go into her folder where she is initiating, she is watching what other children are doing. She is confident enough to do it herself, following others, I don't have to be there."

These reflections by the practitioners about their actions to promote agency without considering any specific child, and therefore outside the notion of intersubjectivity, are best understood with reference to the focus in the wider Eastside project on improving the accessibility of play materials, which is discussed in more

detail in Chapter Five. As Silvia comments in the third meeting involving the Samuda Community Nursery team (19.3.2012) "this means if the children do not like one activity they can access other toys etc. We have set up activities but also they can choose. Also they mix things." Here, "children" are considered generically as beneficiaries when the environment is changed, not any particular child.

As outlined above, practitioners from all three settings regarded independent play without reference back to them very positively. It was a sign that the child was settled in nursery; whereas, to use Julie's terms, the culture of home often meant that children waited for "permission" before accessing the things they wanted, the culture of nursery explicitly valued children's confidence to get hold of resources, choose how to play with them, and mix things up. In the data, there are just two exceptions to the positive interpretation in this quadrant. Anne talked about a child who played independently, but whose intentions and desires were unknown to the staff: "he has quiet imagination, where he hasn't said much, it's all going on in his head and it's for us to work out" (third meeting at Aneurin Bevan Day Nursery, 15.3.2012). This sense of not knowing was also noted by Jasmin, commenting on another child during the fourth meeting at Aneurin Bevan (11.4.2012): "she is lovely, but I long to hear her speak her own words. Because then it shows us her ideas and how she feels inside and what she wants."

4.8. High intersubjectivity, low agency

"Copying the play of others"

There are significantly fewer data in this quadrant than in the other three, reflecting the fact that in general an intersubjective relationship requires agency on the part of the child. However, it is possible for a child to show enough agency in her or his communication to establish an intersubjective relationship, without yet showing agency in play. For example, Julie is sufficiently attuned to one of her key children, a two-year old girl called Nataya, to observe her closely and make some

assumptions about her lack of independence. In the first meeting at Lyle House (23.2.2012) she describes how she notices that Nataya is hanging around children playing with dolls, but not actually playing, and judges that "if she had a doll, maybe that would help her to copy the play of others?"

Sometimes children would appear to have a relationship with an adult through identification and copying. For example, Mia, one of the practitioners at Aneurin Bevan, wore a Hijab in nursery; she commented in the third meeting (15.3.2012) that one of the children often sought her out because she wears "the same scarf as his mum." Milada discussed a child in the third meeting with the Samuda team (19.3.2012) who would seek proximity with different adults and would copy what they were doing, saying "whatever the practitioners do, she likes to do that herself, in all the different activities." When the child saw a practitioner wiping chalk off her trousers, she copied the same actions even though she had not been playing with chalk herself. In these examples, the child appears to be developing the early stages of a relationship with an adult, but is not observed to be making choices or communicating their own ideas.

4.9. High intersubjectivity, high agency

"We go and we search things together, we go and work it out together"

"She's come out of herself"

This is the position which would seem to offer the most potential for the child's learning and development (Smith, 1999; Bruner, 1995; Wood, McMahon and Cranstoun, 1980) and where the adult role in helping the child's learning would seem to be most apparent. However, there were relatively few instances discussed of an adult and child working together, following the model of Sustained Shared Thinking (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2003) or scaffolding (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976). During this working together, involving joint-attention, the adult guides the child's learning,

carefully judging the points where the child needs help, and the points where the child is able to undertake parts of the task independently. After discussing first the small number of instances where there was this kind of joint-activity, I will turn to a larger number of instances where the approach to enabling autonomy was somewhat different.

It is worth noting that the pedagogical research into Sustained Shared Thinking and scaffolding has involved children aged three and over. At two, children may have less capacity to direct and sustain their attention, so it would be expected that some of the instances of a child and an adult sharing the same focus would be fleeting. Despite their short duration, they could nevertheless be seen as significant by the practitioners, perhaps as early, promising indications of the child's development and learning in nursery. For example, as we read the memo of the previous discussion, Anne offered an update on one of the children we had talked about the previous time:

Minute	Transcription
4	**Anne** Yes then he surprised me yesterday, he was very very verbal yesterday (.) yeah yeah totally different child (.) and that was the day I didn't get a chance (.) He was singing away, he went into the home corner and he umm went into the wooden cot and he was doing Row Row Row [the Boat **Jasmin** [(((very strong assent)) **Anne** and then he came out and went into the home corner and he was looking in the mirror, he called me and said 'look, look'. He was very jolly with it as well, compared to, you know, how he normally is. Which was great to see, yeah.
	Extract from the third meeting at Anuerin Bevan, 15.3.2012

In the second meeting at Lyle House (8.3.2012) Julie also noted a fleeting episode of a child initiating contact with an adult in order to draw her attention to what she wanted – to be lifted up as part of pretending to be a fairy in flight. Reading from her observation, Julie said: "the adult straightens her wings – she is wearing fairy wings. She runs with her arms up – says "higher, bigger". As the adult lifts her up she says 'bigger', as if she's trying to say now she's bigger."

The practitioners discussed some of the different strategies they might use in order to enable the children's autonomy. One was to observe the child's play, finding out about their interests, and then to plan an activity in which the child and adult would

play and learn together with similar materials. In the final review meeting of the whole group (5.10.2012), Milada described how this "evaluative" observation of children was acted on by the team at Samuda Nursery: "we use those deep evaluations for better planning, next steps to support the children in question, their learning and development." In practice, although the practitioners talked about doing this, there were no discussed examples of them actually carrying out their ideas. In the second meeting at Lyle House (8.3.2012) Julie and Frances talked about noticing that Andrew, just settling-in, had a particular interest in Batman. They discussed some ways they could plan for him to develop his play using props, material, and by themselves finding out more about Batman. But if they did this work in the weeks following, they did not talk about it in the sessions, and my attempts to steer conversation back to this episode were generally experienced by them as criticisms of their practice. Rather than planning further resourcing and adult involvement in the play, it seems as if their aims were to make the play safer and, if possible, move it outside. In a sense, the play was therefore tolerated but not really celebrated. In the third meeting (22.3.2012) Julie noted that "he's been doing the play but without the things that could harm people … he's just been doing it himself, him and the other children have been playing with it fine … we just let them sort of use their imaginations and get on with it."

In another instance where it seemed to be difficult for adults to plan "next steps" for a child from their observations, Agatha discussed in the first meeting with the Samuda Nursery team (27.2.2012) how she had noticed a child's fascination whilst playing with dried pasta, bowls and spoons. He had sustained the play for more than 15 minutes, pouring, stirring and mixing the pasta. Agatha had heard him say to another adult, during the play, "I'm cooking pasta" and she had decided to plan a real cooking activity for him to follow up his interest in measuring, pouring and mixing.

However, in subsequent discussions, this cooking activity was never mentioned and when I asked about it again in the fourth meeting (3.4.2012), Agatha said that they had decided to plan a cake-making activity as part of their Mother's Day

celebrations. However, there had not been enough time in the end to make the cakes, so they had gone to the supermarket and bought plain cupcakes and then decorated them with icing. It seemed as if the original thought about how the different aspects of cooking might be a context for the child's learning and development got forgotten, and all the was remembered was the outcome, the cupcakes.

On the other hand, there were several examples discussed of adults working together with children to solve everyday problems, where there was a high level of intersubjectivity and the adult was working to enable the child's autonomy through a scaffolded learning approach. Jasmin describes how she helped a child with her coat:

Minute	Transcription
5	**Jasmin** So I said to her, are you going to push your arms in? You know. Push your arms in yourself. Because I'm trying to get her you know a bit more independent (.) and she said to me, umm 'I can't do it' (.) Because she's not used to doing it. ((laughs)) So I thought oh dear, so anyway I put the coat around her shoulders you know encouraged her again and she pushed her arms in and once she pushed her arms in she ran out into the garden
Extract from the fourth meeting at Anuerin Bevan, 11.4.2012	

A similar example of "working together" to solve a practical problem – in this case a lost bag – was related by Julie:

Minute	Transcription
27	**Julie** Yesterday she come up to us and said 'where's my bag?' She went to the coat area and couldn't see it and come up to me and tapped me and I asked her if she was ok and she said 'where's my bag?' And I said 'I don't know where did you have it?' And she pointed to the coats and she said 'gone'. And I said 'OK shall we help you find it?' She went 'yes, where's my bag?' ((laughs)) She's really (1) she knows what she wants and she's sort of really expressing it now so it's and it's a lot clearer to understand what she's trying to get across to us.
	Extract from the fourth meeting at Lyle House, 27.3.2012

Jasmin felt that one of her key children was used to having her demands met straight away at home, and that this meant she was not very independent. She described her response to the child as being to resist doing things immediately, and instead making the child more active in the processes of making a choice and solving a problem:

Minute	Transcription
30	**Jasmin** For me, I feel like everything she's ever wanted it's sort of like 'let's react to it straight away.' But in this environment we do react to her requests but we're very calm about it, we don't sort of – 'ooh she needs this' – 'ooh she needs that'. It's kind of like 'okay, if you need that, shall we go and see?'
	Extract from the third meeting at Aneurin Bevan, 15.3.2012

One of the barriers to developing a close relationship with the children was that a number were at an early stage of understanding and speaking English. Although there were bilingual practitioners involved in the project, none described using the child's home language in nursery. But one of the strategies the practitioners did talk about using, in order to enable the children to become autonomous, was giving them English words for the things they wanted. In the third meeting at Lyle House (22.3.2012) Julie described this as a process of "making it more clear to her instead of her just sort of wondering what it is and things like that. By giving her words I think we're just making it a bit clearer for her. But she has been saying a lot more words and things like that, she's been more chatty." In the first meeting at Aneurin Bevan (21.2.2012), Jasmin gave a striking description of this process whereby words give children a set of reference points for understanding the day and for expressing their choices: "I think she needs something to kind of hook onto and to sort of she's got her own language in her head but if I start using English and sign that will give her a sort of dictionary in her head, you know, get your coat, little things that will help give her markers."

Julie and Frances described how the process of helping a child learn some key English words enabled her to have more agency in the nursery:

Minute	Transcription
59	**Julie** In the space of two weeks she's gone to playing (.) and she's saying a lot more one word things. Interacting with the adults. **Frances** You can definitely see she's come out of herself a bit, where before she used to stand back now she's more involved and making decisions or trying to get help. **Julie** If you ask her something she'll say 'no' now. No – yes. She knows exactly what she wants. Which is good.
	Extract from the second meeting at Lyle House, 8.3.2012

In the examples cited above, the practitioners worked directly with the children, face-to-face, in episodes which both developed the intersubjectivity in the relationships, and worked to enable the children to have more autonomy in the nursery. However, in addition to this immediate work, there were also many examples of work in the background. In these examples, although the child is not physically present, there is nevertheless an intersubjectivity because the child is being thought about or "held in mind" by the practitioner. And this distal work with the child can also, as the examples below show, enable the child to act with more agency and autonomy in the nursery.

The use of the TCO sharpened the practitioners' observational skills; they would subsequently analyse and reflect on what they had observed, often using the

discussion groups for this purpose, and then plan a response to the child. In these processes, there was what might be thought of as an imaginative projection of the child's presence.

In the first meeting at Lyle House (23.2.2012), Julie discussed her observation of Nataya pushing wooden pegs into the keyhole of the playhouse. She also observed her hanging around other children playing with dolls. Julie said: "I think using the pegs to open the door, she's seen other children do it, so I think it's sort of she's repeating and copying what the other children are doing to sort of investigate it for herself before she starts to play." As discussed earlier, this type of copying appears to show little agency on the child's part, and little intersubjectivity. On the other hand it does, perhaps, show a child's desire to make a connection with others and with the play opportunities on offer. Julie considers strategies for enabling Nataya to become more autonomous and decides that she should rearrange the home corner in the nursery so that Nataya can easily find the dolls that she wants, and that she should then specifically draw Nataya's attention to this change:

Minute	Transcription
10	**Julie** She watched the older children with dolls and going into the house but she wouldn't get a doll or anything like that. So then we changed where the dolls were and one session I took her over and I showed her where the dolls were and from then she was getting dolls, going into the house, playing mums and dads.
	Extract from the final review meeting with all the participants, 5.10.2012

However, Julie's aim is not to engage in doll play with Nataya, but rather create the conditions in which Nataya can develop that play herself, autonomously.

Referring to this episode later in the meeting, she described her aims overall for the children as "free play and them just making their own decisions and us just supporting them" and later; "free play, but we are with them to support, if they need something they can come to us." As a result of Julie's intervention, this is what had happened –Julie reports that a few weeks later, "she's found the baby … last time she was just watching the other children … now she's actually got the baby."

Linked to this is a second aim shared by some of the practitioners, which is to encourage the children to develop connections with each other, to turn to each other for help when needed rather than always seeking to develop dyadic adult-child episodes of problem-solving, play and learning. During the fourth and final meeting at Lyle House (27.3.12), Frances comments positively on how the children "go to each other, then if each other can't deal with the situation or another child come to us and tell us another child is struggling or something." Milada and Silvia also valued children's developing capacity to help each other and sort out difficulties for themselves:

Minute	Transcription
7	**Milada** She resolves the problems that other children might have. If they argue over the toy she will go in and she will say 'sharing' (1) she gets so serious when she does it. **Silvia** It's quite interesting (.) they are small children, they manage sometimes to resolve their problems. **Milada** It does take quite confident practitioners I think to deal in a good way to support that of not letting this to become something big and negative as part of the learning and I think stepping back and seeing how they dealing with these problems and how they solve them themselves it is important.
	Extract from the fourth meeting with the Samuda staff team, 3.4.2012

In the final meeting at Lyle House, Julie described her conception of the settling-in process as being the process of the new child making a connection with one of the established children: "you know they are settled, they go off and do something on their own. Also it changes the way the other children see them – they will call them over or get involved in their play." In other words, it seems as if the existing children notice the transition from settling-in, when a new child is not really initiating or sustaining play, to the new position where the child is playing independently; and consequently the children will involve the new child in their play. The first part of

this process is described by Frances, several times, as the child coming out of herself or himself; Julie describes the second part in terms of joining and being accepted, going from being "visitors" to "joining in": "the one child that comes up to the new child is that link into the setting if that makes sense … a little chain that goes along." Frances added to this by using the family as her metaphor: "their little family, they become protective of each other as well"

4.10. What inhibits the work of "Enabling Autonomy"?

In this study, the major conditions which worked against the strategies involved in enabling autonomy are: a lack of shared understanding between practitioners and parents about the importance and desirability of children being able to make choices, direct their own play, and be independent; barriers to communication with the child, particularly where children are at very early stages of speaking English; and when the child's play interests or general temperament are experienced by the practitioners are difficult, so they find it hard to respond in a warm, "attuned" way

4.11. Waiting for permission

For some of the children, the nursery context – where it is not only allowed, but expected that they will access toys and equipment freely, open drawers and cupboards, and move freely from room to room and from inside to outdoors in a group – was alien and hard to adjust to. In the final meeting review meeting for all the participants (5.10.2012), Anne described how a child "seemed to be checking, am I allowed to go outside? Although the door is open. Then he seems to find the outside – but there are too many children so he comes back in." At the same meeting, Julie said that she felt that some children needed adult mediation to feel confident about exploring and playing: "we have to encourage them, you can get anything out, they're always waiting for permission." She had home visited a number of the new children, and

reflected on how the expectation at home was that children would stick to a prescribed area for play: "at home they have their toys that are set out for them but they never have the chance to investigate other toys and things like that, they've always got their set area for their toys."

Where children are daunted by the scale of the early years setting, or where they expect to have to wait for permission to access equipment, their level of autonomy is consequently low.

4.12. "Stop doing this", and that finishes his game

Conversely, there were some children who needed no encouragement to play, but whose play choices were found difficult by the practitioners. For example, the team at Lyle House found one of the children's desire to play at being Batman difficult to respond to. In the first meeting at Lyle House (23.2.2012), Frances described one sequence, in which the child says "Me Batman" whilst swinging around a length of lace with a plastic threading bear attached to the end. The adult replies "be careful". Then the child says "I'm Batman" and the adult responds, "what have you got?" In this short exchange, the adult is (understandably) concerned about an accident arising from the child's play. As a result, she does not engage with the play or encourage it, and her responses to the child's communication are determinedly not contingent. Commenting on this, Frances noted that the responses to the child were "like a warning really. Otherwise he's going to hurt someone, he's getting close to the other children." Julie then adds, "but we could have said 'use this to be Batman' or something, then give him a different idea. Instead it seems like, 'stop doing this', and that finishes his game. Instead of trying to extend it by giving him something else to do."

In these cases, although the child's autonomy is high, the adults' work tends to restrict rather than enable it, to "finish the game". Therefore, the level of

intersubjectivity can be thought of as low: adult and child are working at cross-purposes.

4.13. Parents seen as problems

Parental attitudes and behaviour were sometimes talked about in terms of helping children to be settled in nursery so they could play independently, but more often in terms of causing problems and clashing with nursery values. There were several general complaints about parents who were thought to see their two-year olds more like babies, and thought to be preventing them from growing and developing. For example, in the first meeting at Aneurin Bevan (21.2.2012) Jasmin commented: "I told her mummy to – er – take the dummy out of her mouth. She come in with it one day I thought, oh my goodness…." She then spoke with an imagined child's voice, adding: "look, you know, I'm getting older now, I need to come to a certain kind of a standard, I can't just you know lie down and be a baby all my life, I need to move on."

Some participants felt that they had to do a lot of work with the parents to make sure that they interpreted their children's communications in what was seen as an appropriate way. Anne felt that some children "try their luck" with their parents by crying:

Minute	Transcription
14	**Anne** But it's just going through that stage, if I cry before she goes, maybe she will take me back home. That's what mum used to do. So now he's got to get used to the fact that mum's not going to do that any more. **Mia** And especially his mum is one of those parents that can't tolerate children crying.
	Extract from the second meeting at Aneurin Bevan, 1.3,2012

However the participants' interpretations of such events are viewed, it is clear that these conditions get in the way of the development of an intersubjective relationship; there is no attuned or contingent response to the child's communication (crying) but instead a programmatic response based on the idea that the child will stop the communication if it is ignored, and then be able to settle into nursery.

4.14. External pressures

It is, perhaps, an unexpected finding that the practitioners did not talk about sensing any external pressures, like targets based on the age-band descriptions of development in the Early Years Foundation Stage, or any sort of targets or expectations from their managers or from parents. One might speculate that this because there is a sort of invisibility about work with children before the age of three, consistent with the finding of Smith *et al.* (2010) that there was little involvement by graduate-level managers with children of this age. There was just one reference to a manager during the whole project, when Milada commented:

Minute	Transcription
56	**Milada** Even when the manager comes into the room, we tend to say, this is what we're doing, this is what they're doing now, because we do understand that them looking – 'what is it actually they're doing?' **Silvia and Agatha** ((laughter)) **Milada** And you're in the middle of something and not necessarily it's visible to the outside."
	Extract from the second meeting with the Samuda Community Nursery team, 5.3.2012

However, in the final meeting at Aneurin Bevan (11.4.2012) Jasmin did describe feeling under pressure to get the two-year olds ready to start in school nursery classes at three; this led her to feel that knowledge had to be poured into the two-year olds,

and that there was not time for her to join in with the children's play, respond contingently to them, or allow them self-directed exploration: "we don't want things falling out of their ears, we've got to [laughs] squash it in as much as we can with the time we have. That's how I feel with my part time children. We've only got a little gap of time, we haven't got the whole day."

In summary, apart from the single comment from Jasmin cited above, the data indicates that any pressure experienced by the practitioners came from the immediate circumstances of their work – challenges in settling in new children and difficulties relating to parents, for example. In contrast, Brooker *et al*. (2010, p.90) found widespread dissatisfaction because "the pressures on practitioners to produce 'outcomes' and 'evidence' for external scrutiny are felt to be in direct conflict with the early years ethos of the framework [the EYFS]". It appears that these pressures intensify as children enter the reception year in school, particularly towards the end of that year with the requirement to evidence their attainment through the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile. There are no examples of participants in this project expressing the view that the "early years ethos" of the EYFS was under threat in relation to children aged between two and three years old.

4.15. Concluding thoughts

In Chapter 2, I argued that there is a broadly accepted understanding that early childhood education consists of processes of co-construction involving the adult and child. Therefore, practitioners need to find ways of developing an attuned and intersubjective relationship with each child. This could involve learning and using techniques for "keen observation" (Dalli *et al.,* 2011), and participating in critical reflection in order to review and interpret the data from their observations. The findings, presented above, show that the TCO was found useful by the participants. There are no instances of critical or otherwise negative comments about the process of observing children using the TCO. In Silvia's striking phrase, the TCO helped

them "to notice more things in children's actions." By noticing more, they could in theory become more attuned, and could therefore create the sorts of learning episodes which are variously described by researchers as "scaffolding" (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976), "contingent responses" (Wood, McMahon and Cranstoun, 1980), or "Sustained Shared Thinking (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2003). These approaches to enabling young children's learning imply both attunement to the child, and acts of initiating cognitively stimulating play or conversation – in other words, seeing oneself as an early educator as well as a carer, going beyond just responding to the child and meeting her or his care needs.

By and large, as argued above, the practitioners did – in the course of the research – develop more extended concepts about how children learn, and their role in promoting the children's learning. However, it has also been shown that the practitioners in general found it difficult to plan cognitively stimulating activities based on their observations, though they did use scaffolding techniques to help children in their minute-by-minute work, like helping them with coats or encouraging them to find resources for play. In general, the practitioners talked most about the value of children being able to play autonomously, rather than describing rich pedagogical face-to-face episodes. However, their work can be understood as a distal and reflective approach to the state of "intersubjective attunement" (Dalli *et al.*, 2011, p.3), rather than just being seen in negative terms as lacking in rich joint-learning episodes. The sharpness of their observations, the extent of their critical reflection about what they observed, and their careful work in the background to promote children's agency and encourage their autonomy are striking features of the project.

To borrow a literary analogy, one might recall that Wordsworth's deep response to the Lake District daffodils did not take place as he walked amongst them; rather, when he lay upon his couch "they flash upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude" (Wordsworth, 1807, p. 49). In the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* this is described as "emotion recollected in tranquillity" (Wordsworth, 1800, p. 10). One might, perhaps, conceive of much of the work to enable autonomy as work

undertaken in "tranquillity", during periods of reflection and review; and also one might note that the TCO both encouraged the participants to look more closely at the children, and also to work at interpreting what they saw – to use an inward eye.

Where the approach of working reflectively and behind the scenes was understood to be less successful was in the case of supporting children learning English as an additional language. Julie and Frances's discussion of Nataya shows how a discussion, focussed on data about a child, enables a process of professional development. This is a type of professional development which is characterised by a growing confidence in one's ability to recognise and work on shortcomings in practice. It is not characterised by an overwhelming sense of not knowing and being incapable. Julie and Frances become increasingly aware that just helping Nataya to play independently is not enough, that they need to intervene face-to-face to help her to learn the English words she needs:

Minute	Transcription
53	**Julie** If she doesn't have the language she normally just grabs our hand. **Frances** Or taps us **Julie** If another child has got something that she wants or she wants to know where to get it from or something like that she'll sort of just tap you or hold your hand and lead you and point to what they've got and then we sort of say to her 'do

	you want one of them?' and she says 'yes' so we say 'ok we'll show you where they are.'
Extract from the fourth meeting with Lyle House, 27.3.2012	

Overall, even within the timescales of a very brief project, the movement of participants in all three settings towards the development of suitable practice for their setting is visible. As the research on scaffolding (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) and on Sustained Shared Thinking (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2003) was carried out with children older than 2 years old, it might be that the participants' own emphasis on agency and autonomous play is appropriate for the age-group they are working with, though there is a notable exception to this in respect of the importance of developing children's communication, especially when English is being learnt as an additional language.

Finally, White argues (2005) that the child must be seen as a competent learner; and in the data, there are numerous instances of participants using their observations as way of appreciating just how competent the children are, summed up perhaps by Milada's comment that her team now had "much clearer ideas of the ways that children learn through play". However, there were also, as noted above, numerous instances in the data from Aneurin Bevan of a more negative view of the child and family. This needs to be understood in the context that the practitioners at Aneurin Bevan clearly wished to act in the best interests of the children, and did not "write children off". But there were many times when they found it difficult to sustain a focus on the child's learning and instead seemed to talk about social and family problems in a way which might be seen as simply re-describing and re-inforcing those difficulties.

Chapter Five

"Shifts in standpoints": relating the findings to the initial theories discussed and to the methodology.

5.1. Introduction

In Chapter Four, the data were presented and analysed, drawing on Grounded Theory, to show how the practitioners theorised that their role was concerned with "enabling autonomy" for the two-year olds they worked with. This conception of their role differs from the conception advanced in much of the literature discussed in Chapter Two, but as that research relates mostly to children over the age of three, it was argued that the practitioners' theories should not simply be found wanting. There is much to be said for their "distal" approaches to supporting young children's learning, and their working theories merit further investigation. However, as the project developed the Lyle House practitioners became increasingly aware that children learning English as an additional language *did* need the support of face-to-face pedagogical encounters to promote the (English) vocabulary-building which would enable them to interact and play with their peers and with the adults. The capacity of the Lyle House practitioners to articulate their pedagogy and to identify instances when it needed rethinking, shows the rich potential of working with the practitioners' own theories through cycles of observation and reflection, rather than "training them" to carry out specific programmes or practices. This is an example of the movement in the project between the more objectivist emphasis of Grounded Theory and the more interpretivist emphasis of Constructivist Grounded Theory. In respect of the former, the data was abstracted into an analytic story of how the participants theorised their work; and in respect of the latter, that somewhat neutralised story was reanimated in the specific context of the playgroup by Julie and Frances, leading to a change in how they articulated their work, and to a change in their practice.

The data discussed in Chapter Four also suggest that the project was successful in helping participants to develop "keen observation" (Dalli *et al.*, 2011), described by Silvia as "helping me to notice more things in children's actions". This marks an important contrast to Osgood's (2012, p.127) finding that practitioners can experience

observation as just another stressful chore in their work. Overall, the data also suggest that the practitioners found the project and its approach useful in supporting their work.

In this chapter, I will be discussing the findings in relation to whether the project's methodology, critical reflection in group discussions, supported the professional development of the participants, particularly in relation to their role as early educators. As I argued in Chapter Two, this necessarily includes an evaluation of the reflexive approach adopted, in the context of longstanding tensions between teachers (particularly advisory teachers) and other early years practitioners. Finally, returning to the initial, urgent professional concern which inspired the whole project in the first place, I will consider whether the available evidence might suggest that participation in this kind of professional development supports the provision of improved early education and care for young children living in poverty and social disadvantage.

5.2. Research that "gets beneath the skin" (Bruner, 1980, p.211): critical reflection and group discussion as an approach to the professional development of early years practitioners

As I have argued in Chapter Two, the existing research in England is inconclusive about the best approaches to training and professional development in respect of early years practitioners working with children before the age of three (Mathers *et al.*, 2011; Sylva *et al.*, 2013). However, there is general agreement that current approaches are inadequate (Nutbrown, 2012b; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010) and there is a specific concern that the role of the early years practitioner is undervalued. It appears to be seen as a good career choice for girls who have not done well in school, not requiring much in the way of skill or intelligence (Nutbrown, 2012b; Osgood, 2012; Moss, 2006). Yet in England, the dominant political discourse about children before the age of three is that this is a highly sensitive phase of development, and that high quality early years provision can make a decisive difference to the life-chances of those children born into social disadvantage (Field, 2010; Allen, 2011). High quality early education and

care is widely understood as complex, requiring sophisticated pedagogical and childcare strategies like scaffolding (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976), contingent interaction (Wood, McMahon and Cranstoun, 1980), Sustained Shared Thinking (Siraj-Blatchford, 2007) and "intersubjective attunement" (Dalli *et al.*, 2011, p.3).

In my discussion of the "professional development" of the participants, I am concerned with the type of approach described by Hargreaves and Goodson (1996, p.20) in relation to teachers, which prioritises self-direction and "continuous learning related to one's own expertise and standards of practice, rather than compliance with the enervating obligations of endless change demanded by others". In the context of the wider Eastside Project, this focus on professional development reflects my concern that the exclusive use of audit tools (like ITERS-R and ECERS-R, or other schedules) might lead to superficial changes to practice, focussed on what is easily measured and ignoring the inherent complexities associated with interactions and relationships. Appropriate practice depends on the capacity of practitioners to respond to specific and local conditions – the needs of a specific child and family, for example – as well as on the provision of a suitable learning environment.

Finally, Dalli *et al.* (2011, p.3) argue that quality pedagogy "relies on a membrane of constantly evolving supportive connections between teachers and children, teachers and teachers, structural elements of the organisation of the centre, and the centre's philosophy and leadership style." Those supportive connections depend, I would argue, on being able to articulate, share and debate theories about the learning and care of young children. They are frayed or severed when practitioners work physically alongside each other but in intellectual isolation, acting as if their approach is merely a normal or natural way of being with young children. In addition, as Brooker (2003) argues, unexamined approaches to early childhood education and care can lead to poor outcomes for black and minority ethnic children, because there is an assumption that children will "naturally" engage with a pedagogy that is, in fact, specific and culturally constructed. As Griffiths and Tann (1991, p.100) claim, in relation to teaching, reflective practice "requires that public theories are translated

into personal ones and vice versa". Problems appear to have arisen, as a result of the lack of a "public" theory, in the classroom studied by Brooker (2003): difficulties amongst the parents in understanding the nature of the early education on offer, and difficulties amongst the children because no-one explained or demonstrated what was expected of them, or engaged with the many strengths and competencies they derived from their early home experiences.

The question of "professional development" is, in respect of this study, concerned with reflection *on* practice which leads to development *of* practice. It is about having a capacity for and an openness to further reflection and development. It is not concerned with the important, more sociologically oriented and questions posed by Osgood (2012) and Colley (2006) about the nature of professionalism in early childhood education and care, and its contestation.

During the project, the participants reflected on their own practice, theories and professional development on several occasions. There were a number of times when they commented on the changes they made to the organisation of the learning environment which followed on from the completion of the ITERS-R and ECERS-R audits, together with insights from what they had noticed. For example, Mia at Aneurin Bevan commented that "the ITERS audit showed that accessibility was a problem in the room, so we removed cupboards. There is enough space for children to move around now." ITERS-R emphasises children being able to access materials for themselves, and Julie had observed that although the dolls were put in an open box for the children at Lyle House, her two-year old key child Nataya could not easily see them and did not realise she could freely get them herself. As a result, Julie said that the team had "moved the dolls around so they are easier to get to. They were in a sort of upwards container to it was harder for them to get them out, now they're in a lower box and all open so they see them easier."

There were also a number of features in the Target Child Observation (TCO) system which encouraged the participants to reflect critically on their practice. Milada

found the TCOs useful for identifying when children spent more sustained time engaged in particular activities, which the TCO coding guide calls "bouts" and which are shown by drawing a double-line. As expected, many of the two-year olds spent quite short periods of time engaged in particular activities, but the TCO did enable the participants to identify easily those activities which were sustained for longer periods of time:

Minute	Transcription
28	**Milada** If they move from one thing to another, it is very difficult to evaluate what their interests are, what is it that they really want to do and how we can support that, because it doesn't really show us a very clear picture of what it is that we could in theory support. (1) So if we see them being really interested in one activity, like (0.1) aaaah REALLY loving it, so let's go and do something about it and it does give a little bit of a challenge to the practitioners to go and think about it, what can we actually do.
	Extract from the third meeting with the Samuda Community Nursery team, 22.3.2012

Similarly, the participants found it useful that the TCO required them to use a "task code" to indicate the main learning behaviour observed each minute. At first there was some worry about choosing the "wrong" code, but this gave way to an appreciation that the act of coding made them think about what the observation might be showing about the child's learning, rather than just recording the child's "doing", and there was also value in the debates and disagreements between participants about coding choice – I encouraged them to consider that having a professional dialogue focussed on learning was valuable in itself, notwithstanding what the eventual agreement was. As Julie commented, reflecting on the uniqueness of the two children

she and Frances were observing, "it wasn't what was on paper, it was the actual discussion behind it, or after it, that helped us to get the final sort of evaluation that they are two completely different children." This led Anne to reflect on the general system of writing up observations which was in place at Aneurin Bevan Nursery:

Minute	Transcription
39	**Anne** We all write the observations, we all do them very well, then that's it, it's done, it's gone in the folder, you don't ever look at it again. You know apart from when you're doing the child's folder. (0.2) It's just there. But it would be nice to come together as a group and pick a child and say, you know, what the observations are about and (0.1) so you have a better understanding of the child (0.1) to have a discussion as well.
	Extract from the final meeting involving all the participants , 5.10.2012

The other requirements of the TCO were also valued by the participants. Frances found it useful that the child's language was recorded in a distinct column; she felt that previously, when she simply wrote down her observations of children on post-its, "language gets overlooked. You can see it more clearly on these observations." Similarly, Julie found the social code column useful because it helped her to recognise "that they're actually interacting with their peers more. So it's good for observations of children who are settling, to see them develop."

CHILD'S INITIALS: A. N. SEX: boy AGE: 4/11 DATE AND TIME OBSERVED: 18/11 10·50 am
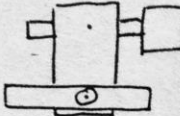
ACTIVITY RECORD	LANGUAGE RECORD	TASK	SOCIAL
1 TC at woodwork table, hammers nail into wood. Goes round table & looks at small metal pieces. Offers nail to A.	TC → A: Will you bang this? A → TC (bangs nail in)		
2 Watches A carefully. Gives A a bottle cap to hammer on for him	A → TC (about hammering) TC → A (asks her to hammer on cap)		
3 Watches A hammering his bottle cap & milk bottle top into wood with nail. A finishes – hands TC his wood. (Looks like →			
4 Carries woodwork outside, back indoors. Takes it to paint. Paints it blue, with brush			
5 Paints his woodwork. Paints, wipes thumb on paper, on wood.			
5 Paints his woodwork.			
7 Takes coat off – gets apron and puts it on. Continues to paint	A → TC: Not with your coat on, you'll get it all over		
8 Paints woodwork	A → TC: Now finish that and come and have your milk. TC → A: No! A → TC: We'll save some then		
9 Looks at hands – goes to washbowl in corner (leaves woodwork on paint table). Washes with 1 C	TC ⟷ C TC ⟷ C A → TC + C (about washing)		
10 Washes hands, dries them Goes to sit at milk table, next to twin brother Helper gives him cup	TC → A: Where's mine? I haven't got a cup. TC → C: I got a blue one		

Figure 5.1. An example of a TCO (Sylva, Roy and Painter, 1980, p. 235). Note the double line between minutes 8 and 9 to indicate a single "bout" of activity

Overall, the systematic nature of the TCO appeared to help participants to see themes and patterns in children's actions, and to notice more about their communication and their social interactions. Taken together, this produced a view of the child as a competent and unique learner, or as Jasmin expressed it: "they're not just doing things for the sake of going things, it means something to them, their personality is developing." Reviewing her TCOs, Julie also noticed a pattern in respect of one of her children: she would first watch other children doing activities, and then some time later she would take part in those activities herself. This led Julie to question her initial assumption that the child was inactive, and instead see the child as an observer and a thinker: "they were watching and then they were doing the same activity a couple of days later. You see them thinking about things and stuff even though they look like they're doing nothing (.) their minds are working."

In summary, it can be argued that through their use of the TCO, the participants in this project were enabled to take part in the sort of effective professional investigation and discussion which White (2005, pp.97-98) characterizes as having "a focus on positive and empowering images of the child, and the role that they [practitioners] could play to support children's learning and development". The data suggests on a number of occasions that the participants' attitudes are consistent with what Dalli *et al.* (2011, p18) term the "paradigmatic shift" of seeing the "infant and toddler as a learner".

Additionally, Mitchell and Cubey (2003, p. xii) argue that for professional development to be linked effectively to improvements in pedagogy and children's learning, a "key process in contributing to revision of assumptions and understanding" derives from "creating surprise through exposure to discrepant data from the participant's own early childhood service". This is consistent with the model proposed by Blenkin and Hutchin (1998, p.62), from their research into early education in England, of an interdependent relationship between "the practitioner's

ability to observe children closely, the practitioner's response to child observations which challenge her/his assumptions about what the child is experiencing [and] the practitioner's disposition to change."

Therefore, the data from the project suggest that the participants successfully engaged in a type of professional development which is consistent with the definitions offered at the beginning of this section, and that furthermore this was consistent with the findings of White (2005) and Blenkin and Hutchin (1998), and the research synthesis undertaken by Mitchell and Cubey (2003) about appropriate and effective training for early years practitioners. It is reasonable to assume that this style of reflective practice might lead to continued changes and adaptations to engage with individual children and families, and specific local situations, in the future. This would depend, in part, on the practitioners' views about the usefulness of the approach, and the extent to which they found structured observation and critical reflection useful, professionally rewarding, and enjoyable. These aspects are discussed in the following section, which considers what they wrote in the questionnaires which they completed at the beginning and the end of the project.

5.3. The participants' own evaluation of the project

The participants were all asked to complete a questionnaire at the start and end of the project, as outlined in Section 3.7. The use of a "before and after" measure was the specific element in the design which was planned to enable evaluation of the participants' views about how involvement in the project might have changed their theories about how children learn. The questionnaire, which is reproduced in Appendix Three, is a shortened version of the one used in the EPPE Project (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2003). This was widely trialled and used by the EPPE researchers and can, therefore, be considered to be robust. The version completed at the very end of the project during the evaluation workshop (the first time that all the participants came together as a single group) omitted a small number of narrowly factual

questions – for example, about age, gender, and number of years working with children.

In the initial questionnaire, I also added one item to the EPPE questionnaire: *What do you hope to gain out of taking part in this project?* In the final questionnaire, this was replaced with *What do you think you have gained out of taking part in this project?* This item was included in order to consider whether the participants found involvement in the project useful. At the very end, there was also an opportunity for participants to add any further comment they chose.

In the sub-sections below, I consider the participants' responses to each question, comparing what they said at the beginning with what they said at the end. The very last meeting was held in October 2012, six months after the conclusion of the reference group meetings. It was intended that this six-month gap would help participants to look back on the whole project, with the benefit of some hindsight.

What do you hope the children learn from your setting?

The first question asked, "If you could prioritise 3 things you hope the children learn from your setting (e.g. in terms of areas of knowledge, attitudes, dispositions, skills) what would these be?" At the start of the project, the most common responses prioritised children's social development and their dispositions to learn. Five specifically mentioned "confidence", and there were other similar responses, for example "learning to see the world positively" and a "sense of security". Social development was prioritised in six of the responses, for example "self-help skills" and "to be a social being". Just two responses mentioned knowledge and skills, with one of these (Agatha at Samuda Community Nursery) taking a long view of the children's education: "areas of knowledge – maths, English and knowledge and understanding of the world e.g. to have the best career suited to them."

At the end of the project, "confidence" remained the top priority, with three responses stating "confidence and self-esteem". However, there was now a significant cluster of answers which focussed on communication, interaction and relationships with others, cited in six responses. For example, Milada at Samuda Community Nursery prioritised "attitudes: children can learn how to create relationships between each other, as well as towards practitioners." At the same nursery, Agatha stated the importance of "time spent in smaller groups with key person. (Discussion, small group activities. Build confidence, problem solving)". At Lyle House, both Julie and Frances chose the same three priorities: "independence, confidence and communication" – previously neither had chosen communication. At Aneurin Bevan, Mia prioritised "to be able to deal with new situations" and "to be able to express thoughts and feelings", with Anne prioritising "learning to socialise and deal with new situations" and "learning through play". In summary, it appears that the practitioners' concept of "confidence" changed from a view in which the child is, to a degree, understood as undergoing a process of socialisation in the group in order to function more confidently and independently, towards a more extended conception in which the child is seen as more active in making and developing relationships, and having a greater degree of agency through the ability to express their thoughts and feelings.

What kinds of resources help children to learn?

A similar shift can be seen in the participants' answers to the question "What kinds of resources help children to learn and why?" At the beginning, the children were largely seen as learning in a rather individualised way through exploring the environment. At the conclusion of the project, they were more often described as being connected to their peers and to the adults, as communicators and participants in play – and the practitioners interpreted the question in a very broad sense, with little focus on resources as such.

At first, the outdoors was most frequently rated as the most important resource (six times). This was followed by opportunities to explore freely (five times), with Milada from Samuda Community Nursery citing "open ended resources (e.g. boxes, materials) – they allow children to make their learning their own" and the "ability to explore their environment without hesitation". In a somewhat similar vein, Julie at Lyle House listed in bullet points:

- adults – to support
- outdoor area – to explore
- space – to move around

These themes remained important after the conclusion of the project, with outdoor learning and an exploratory approach still cited on many occasions. But in addition, the participants gave much more emphasis to play, and to making relationships. For example, Anne from Aneurin Bevan wrote that "all areas of play help children to learn [and] … help them find themselves and their friendships whether it be adult or child." Mia, also from Aneurin Bevan, continued to advocate an environment that children can explore freely, but now added "understanding adults to give explanations when asked". Frances from Lyle House named the same three areas – construction, home-corner and outdoors – at the beginning and the end, but added comments about language and communication in her final questionnaire, commenting on "language used when playing" in the construction area, and additionally adding language when she referred to playing with sand and water. Julie, also from Lyle House, whose first list was reproduced above, adds several new ideas including the importance of creative activities so that children "can express themselves", and "vocabulary used in play" in the construction area. Agatha at Samuda Community Nursery had focussed almost entirely on children's developing physical skills in her first answers, and whilst this continued as the main focus of her thinking in the second questionnaire, she added at the end: "reading, construction materials, use of language, sharing, being aware of one another's needs, making bonds." Silvia, also from Samuda Community

Nursery, prioritised relationships and communication throughout her second response to the question:

> "Outdoor area, a garden, helps children to develop a knowledge about their environment. Also they learn how to interact with other children (that helps them to develop socially – enables them to form first close relationships, friends, etc)
>
> Construction materials – support their physical and mental (cognitive) development; allow children to express themselves and investigate their space. Also helps to build their imagination."

What did you gain from the project?

Finally, the participants were asked at the start about what they hoped to gain from taking part in the project; and at the end, they were asked what they thought they had gained. At the beginning of the project, there was much agreement amongst the participants about what they hoped to gain, with eight references to both improving observational technique and developing their practice. At the end, there were again eight references to this, with the participants saying that they thought they had made improvements in both areas. Within this broader, positive finding, there are some elements which may be of particular significance.

There were three references to the project helping practitioners to work in a more collaborative way. Julie at Lyle House wrote that "we now discuss our observations more to get other people's opinions (i.e. coding etc.)". During the project, the requirement within the TCO to 'code' each minute to show the child's main activity prompted much debate in all three groups. Milada, the lead practitioner in the two-year old room at Samuda Community Nursery, found that the project helped the team to develop "much clearer ideas of the ways that children learn through play", and this clarity helped them develop better teamwork – "it gave us aims that we are now working towards". Mia at Aneurin Bevan, commented on the usefulness of the

project, which "turned out to be much better than I thought. This method will help me in my work."

Five participants, from all three settings, commented that the structured, close observation of one or more of their key children helped them to get to know and understand the children better. Agatha at Samuda Community Nursery wrote that she had "gained a higher understanding of my target children, I have seen them individually and what they like, their interests, and what they do not like." Anne at Aneurin Bevan found that she had "gained a closer connection with my target child". Finally, there were several references to the way that the project made participants more observant in general, with Silvia at Samuda Community Nursery noting that the requirement to observe closely using the structured format of the TCO was "helping me to notice more things in children's actions."

Is there anything else which you would like to add?

At the beginning of the project, only Agatha made an additional comment, that she hoped to gain "more confidence and just generally have more knowledge and understanding." In her final questionnaire, asked about what she had gained from being in the project, she wrote that she had gained more understanding of her key children (as discussed above) and that she had found the project "very useful and interesting to be a part of."

Other additional comments at the end included Jasmin writing that "this has turned out to be much better than I thought" and Agatha writing "I really enjoyed being part of the project and look forward to carrying on with the TCOs."

In summary, the participants' own evaluations suggest that they found the training in carrying out the TCO, and their subsequent use of the tool, sharpened their observational skills. The combined use of the TCO and opportunities for critical reflection also enabled them to consider the young children as learners, and think about their role in further promoting the children's learning. Finally, the processes of

observation, analysis and critical reflection enabled the participants to see themselves as people engaged in a successful cycle of professional development. They saw themselves becoming more professionally skilled, developing their understanding of the children they worked, and finding our more about how young children learn.

5.4. Findings in relation to methodological choices

The positive evaluations of the participants at the end of the project are also relevant to the evaluation of the methodological choices which I made, principally the approaches to data collection and reduction which draw on Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2006 ; Charmaz and Bryant, 2011), together with my striving to take a *reflexive* position as a researcher (Bourdieu, 1989; 1993).

5.5. How participation in the project may have supported the provision of improved early education and care

In my professional role as senior early years adviser, this was a highly important question. A great deal of time, money and work was put into both the wider project involving all 13 settings, and my smaller research project. The time I spent with the practitioners in the reference groups and all the other work the research involved was time which was not available for other aspects of my role. So the question of whether this research project may have supported the provision of improved early education and care is an important one. This question cannot be answered definitively because of the small size of the sample and the lack of a control group. There were also other ways in which settings were supported by the early years team during the project, through visits from the specialist project workers and through attending training courses, for example. So, any arguments that might claim either causality or association between this research project and improvements in quality in the settings

would not be valid. On the other hand, it is reasonable to look for signs of change, and to reflect on whether these changes may have been fostered by the project.

Methodologically, Grounded Theory – unlike, for example, Action Research – is not especially well-suited to an exploration of the impact of a project. However, Charmaz and Bryant (2011, p.298) usefully propose that researchers using constructivist grounded theory "take into account both researchers' and research participants' starting points and standpoints, and remain alert to how and when these shift during inquiry". This focus on how things shift can enable some valid reflection on the impact of the project which is methodologically consistent.

There were two particularly significant shifts during this enquiry as the participants talked about their roles. Firstly, it became clear that "autonomy" meant much more than just standing back and giving the child scope to follow his or her impulses to explore. The individual child's autonomy is produced in a socio-cultural context: at a basic level, ensuring that children could see and access resources made them more autonomous, and at a more complex level the "distal" work the practitioners carried out was seen to enable, or inhibit, children's choice-making. Secondly, several participants – particularly Julie and Frances – became aware that for one specific group of children at least, those at early stages of learning English, the "distal" approach was inadequate. As Ogilvy *et al.* (1990, p.11) argue, "letting well alone" is not an appropriate language policy for children in nursery learning English, especially if it leads to them experiencing less interaction than other children. The evidence from the data that the participants began to shift their position is outlined in the Chapter Four, particularly through the detailed discussion of how Frances and Julie developed their understanding of how best to support Nataya's acquisition of English as an additional language.

Bruner (1980, p. 80) argues that "change comes by the perspective one gains in observing one's own behaviour *after* the fact and *freed* of its pressures. The shift from *participant* to *spectator* may not inevitably assure fresh perspective, but it

surely helps". His notion of a change in *perspective* is somewhat analogous to the shift in *standpoint* discussed above, with reference to Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz and Bryant, 2011, p.298). But I would argue that there is not such a clear distinction between the roles of *participant* and *spectator* in this project. When the practitioners were engaged in critical reflection, and when they were working "behind the scenes" with individual children in mind, they were still very much participants, interacting and not spectating. This dynamic relationship between ideas, theories and practices can be conceptualised as a process of working to overcome the divide which Brannock (cited by Dalli *et al.,* 2011, p.81) noted: the incongruence between what practitioners say about how children learn, and their actual practices.

If, as Griffiths and Tann (1991, p.100) claim, reflective practice "requires that public theories are translated into personal ones and vice versa", two features of reflective practice are particularly apparent. In the first place, the public theories concerned with offering individualised support for children, mediating to help them access the learning environment, and taking steps to help their developing language, are in the process of becoming the personal theories of the participants. On the other hand, the personal theories the participants held in relation to their role, which emphasised the child's self-chosen and initiated play much more than the joint-attention and working together described as "scaffolding" (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976) or "sustained shared thinking" (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2003) are in the process of becoming public theories which they articulate and lay claim to. As the theories of Wood, McMahon and Cranstoun (1980) and Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2003) were developed largely with reference to the learning of children older than three years old, this could be an example of Shonkoff's (2010, p. 362) argument that current "best practices" should be understood as a "promising starting point, not a final destination".

5.6. Reflexivity

Kvale (1996, p.116) proposes that there should be "reciprocity in what the subjects give and what they receive from participation in a study". Whilst Rumbold (1990, p.114) reported that many nursery nurses found it threatening to have a teacher involved in their work, the positive nature of these evaluations suggests that the project was not experienced by the practitioners as merely the unwanted interference in their work by a teacher. The methodology of the project focussed on giving the participants as much agency as possible, training them to use the research tool (the TCO) themselves and enabling them to choose which children to observe and which children to discuss. The participants were enthusiastic about the use of the TCO and, as shown above, several planned to continue to use it because of the opportunities it offered them to reflect on and analyse the data within their observations. This is in keeping with Bourdieu's (1993, p.23) suggestion that in "reflexive" research, the "scientific gaze" could be made available to the participants, "a gaze that is at once objectifying and understanding, and which, when turned back on oneself, makes it possible to accept oneself and even, so to speak, lay claim to oneself, claim the right to be what one is."

One might also draw an ethical and philosophical contrast between this study, and the style of research conducted by Ogilvy *et al.* (1990) discussed above. To use Kvale's (1996) metaphor, Ogilvy *et al.* (1990) operated as miners, going into the nurseries to "dig out" the information about staff attitudes and practices towards bilingual children. This produced findings of great significance and value to the field of early education; but one might also speculate on how bruising an experience it might have been for the teachers and nursery nurses to participate in such research. Their practice was not only exposed and judged to be ineffective, but it was also argued that it could create the foundations for racial prejudice. One need not defend their pedagogy, to notice that the power of the researchers imposes a set of meanings onto the behaviours of a group of people who occupy a lower position in the social field. Drawing on the conceptual framework and the words of Webster and Lunt

(2002), one might argue that "poor practice" has indeed been challenged, in an important area. But it has been done in a way which might be more likely to create ill-feeling and defensiveness than support "the broader collegial function of improving ... practice as a whole" (Webster and Lunt, 2002, p. 104).

5.7. Another source of data: scores in ITERS-R and ECERS-R

In the background of the project, there are notable changes in the ECERS-R and ITERS-R audit scores between Autumn 2011 and April 2012. In this section, I will briefly consider the audit scores, bearing in mind throughout that these are "background" data. They cannot be used for the purpose of triangulation, because the data for this project is concerned with the participants' discussions of their work and the changes observed in these discussions over time. Conversely, the ECERS and ITERS data is concerned with organisation and interaction in the settings. In addition, there were numerous other factors involved in this project which will have affected the ITERS and ECERS scores, most notably the project workers' regular support visits. However, as argued above, the data have significance because if the scores of the project settings had declined, or had improved more slowly than the scores of the rest of the settings in the project, that might have raised the concern that involving the participants in regular observation and work coding and discussing those observations had distracted them from other tasks and therefore had a negative impact on quality.

In the larger project, all of the ITERS-R items were used except for the "Parents and Staff" scale, where many scores depend on the availability of rooms and facilities. The settings would not, in a time-limited project, be able to make differences in these areas. ITERS-R is designed for children up to the age of 30 months, and ECERS-R for children between 30-50 months; as the children in the project were aged between 24-36 months, they overlapped the two age-bands. Therefore the decision was taken, in line with the national evaluation of the project (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p. 85) to use the

language-reasoning and interaction subscales from ECERS-R in order to assess whether the settings were "adequately challenging the older and more able two year olds in these areas."

Arguably, the first particularly relevant set of data relates to children's observed use of language. The importance of this data is that firstly, Smith *et al.* (2009, p. 104) make the case that improvements in the vocabulary of the sample group of children show the only positive effect of attending nursery provision from the age of two. Secondly, the data from the participants' discussion suggests, as discussed above, a growing awareness of the importance of supporting children's language development.

There were substantial improvements in language-related scales between the beginning and the end of the project, and the three settings in this small project also improved more than the twelve settings in the Eastside project overall.

In their evaluation of the national pilot, Smith *et al.* (2009) found that:

> "The settings generally provide good support for young children (i.e. children under 2.5 years) to develop their verbal communication. The sample settings achieved mean scores of above 5 on both the ITERS-R language items ("helping children use language" and "helping children understand language")."

(Smith *et al.*, 2009, p.93)

The data show that the Eastside settings began some way below the national average, and improved between the project's start in the autumn of 2011 (baseline audits were conducted during November and October) and the mid-way point (April 2012, which is also when the project with the three settings came to an end). There is no baseline score for Lyle House, because they had no two-year olds on roll in the Autumn of 2012, so the baseline scores for the project settings have not been included . However, the data show that the scores of the three project settings had reached a higher level by April 2012 than the average level attained by all 13 settings:
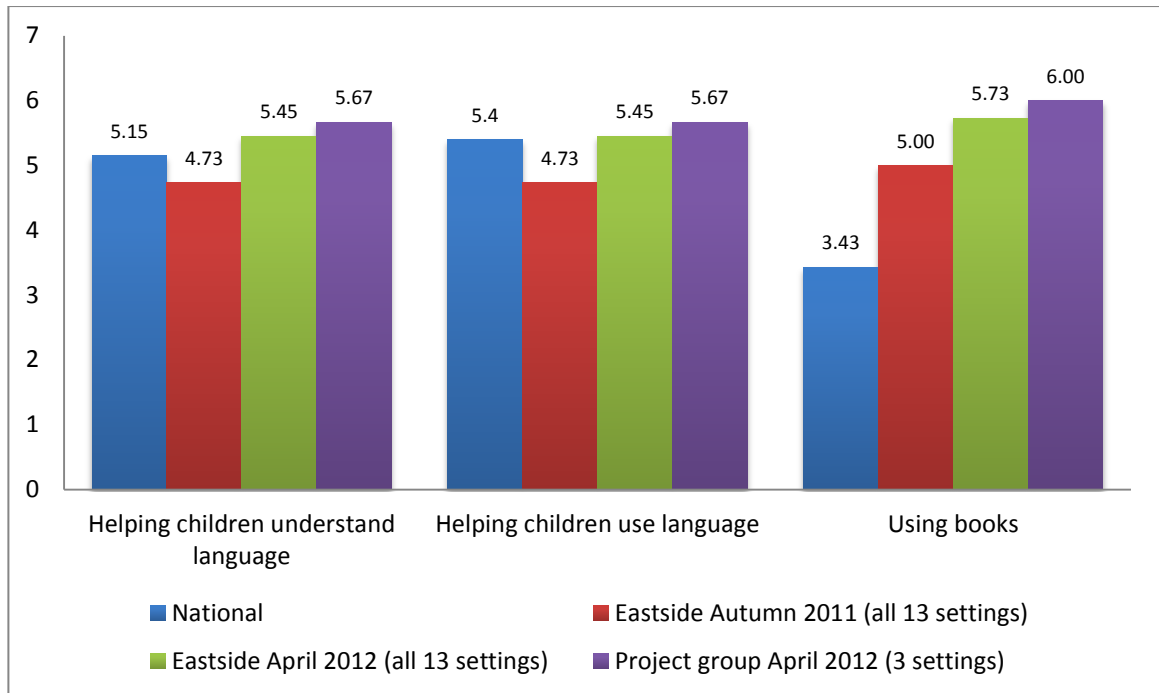
Figure 5.2. Graph showing scores in three ITERS-R language items

Smith *et al.* (2009) continue by noting that whilst the national pilot showed generally good support for the language of the younger children, this was not true for the older two-year olds, where the ECERS-R scale was used: "mean scores for "encouraging children to communicate" and "using language to develop reasoning skills" items were lower (4.55 and 3 respectively)." As a result, they conclude that "most settings did not offer sufficient opportunities for children's cognitive development and lacked activities and resources that would be intellectually stretching for older children." They also note that the use of books was not a strength in the pilot project, leading them to an overall judgement that "these missed opportunities highlight the need for improvement in language and literacy provision."

In these areas, the impact of the whole Eastside project was again largely positive, and was even stronger in the three settings involved in this project. Although the "Using language to develop reasoning skills" score remains low in Eastside, above

the minimal rating of 3 but well below a good rating of 5, in the three settings in the project it is closer to a "good" rating. The other two scores are well above a "good" rating in the three settings by April 2012, when the project ended:
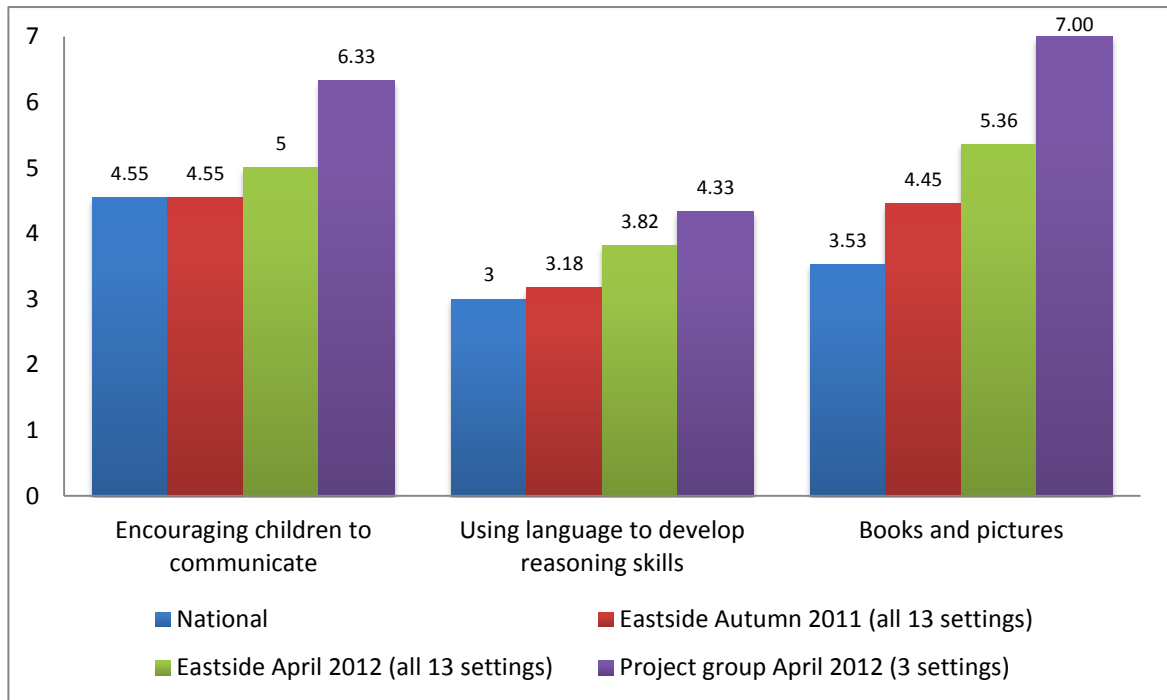

Figure 5.3. Graph showing scores in three ECERS-R language items

The second area of particular interest is the staff-child interaction scale. The data from the discussions suggest that the participants had a growing awareness of the importance of their interactions with the children. Therefore, it is of interest to see that the data from the ITERS-R and ECERS-R scales show improvements between Autumn 2011 and April 2012, with the three project settings all scoring the highest possible score of 7 in the ECERS-R scale by the end. It is interesting to note that the Eastside settings had comparatively high scores in this scale to begin with, but beyond the scope of this project to explore that further.
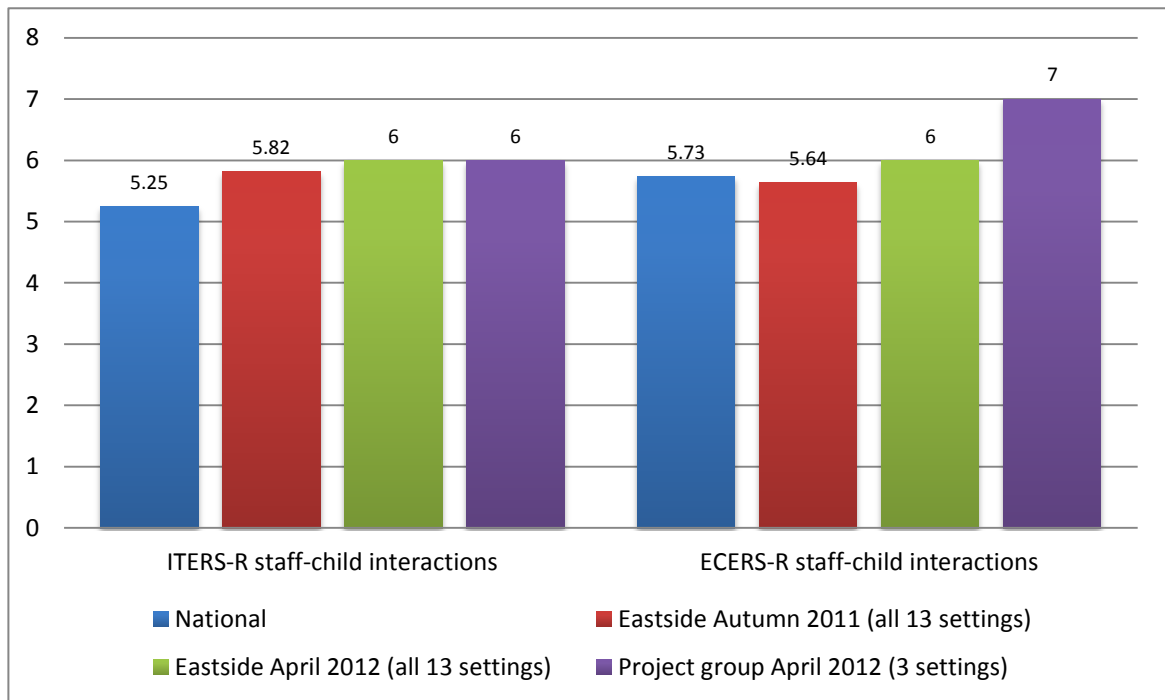
Figure 5.4. Graph showing scores in staff-child interactions as measured by ITERS-R and ECERS-R

Finally, the overall score across all the ITERS-R subscales used enables an overall "childcare quality" score to be established for each setting, in line with the methodology of Smith *et al.* (2009). Again, the overall results of the Eastside project are promising, showing that the average "childcare quality" was below the national average at the start of the project, but rose quickly between Autumn 2011 and April 2012 when it exceeded the national average score. The three settings in the smaller project again reached a higher score by April 2012 than the average for the whole Eastside project:
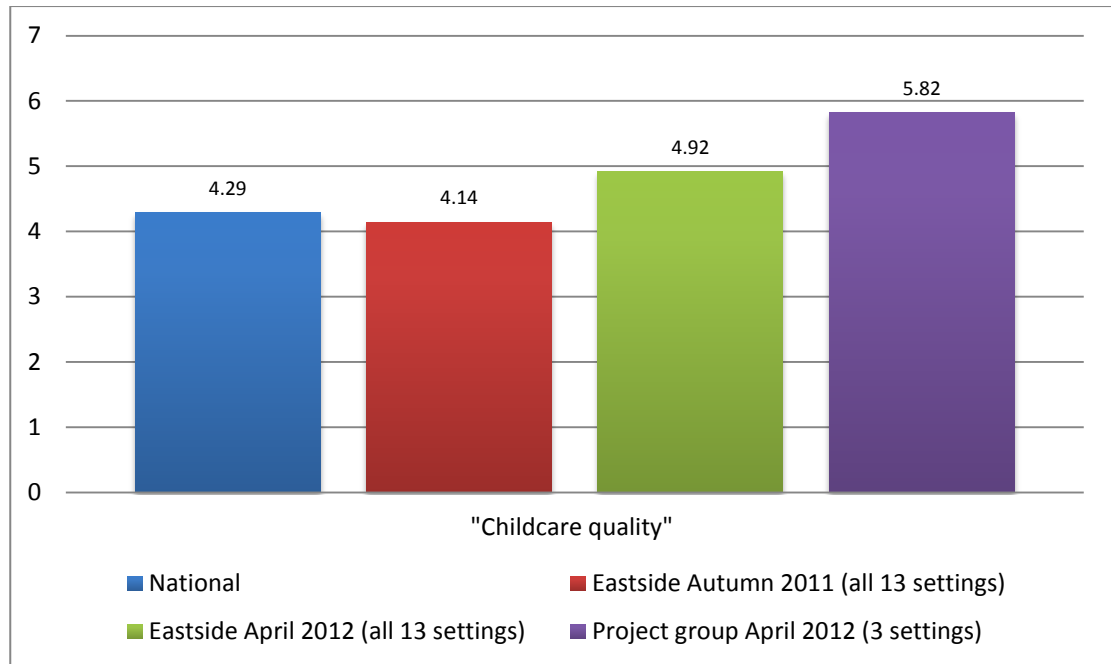
Figure 5.5. Graph showing the overall "childcare quality" score, measured by ITERS-R

In summary, the Eastside project overall had a positive effect on the ITERS-R and ECERS-R scores. Whilst it is not valid to argue that involvement in the smaller project had a particularly beneficial effect in respect to these scores, because there are no controls on other factors (for example, possible differences in impact with respect to the two project workers), it can be argued that spending time observing the children closely, analysing the data from those observations, and reflecting critically on that data, did not have any negative effect on the ITERS-R or ECERS-R measures and may have had a positive effect. This requires further investigation.

5.8. Summary

As argued above, the data from the Grounded Theory indicates some significant shifts in the participants' standpoints. The dynamic form of the groups involved the participants in gathering data, discussing them, and then critically reflecting on them, rather than receiving a more conventional style of training. This approach is consistent with the argument, presented in Chapter 2, that professional development should be conceived of in terms of negotiated meanings: no pre-determined destination, but rather an exploration of suitable best practices for local and specific circumstances (individual children, particular settings and neighbourhoods). This argument, however, needs to be contextualised by the over-arching imperative to improve the quality of the early childhood education and care experienced by the children attending the early years settings. It would have been neither professionally, nor ethically appropriate to undertake an exploration of the participants theories and engage in extended critical reflection without maintaining a focus on what Mitchell and Cubey (2003, p.xii) term "pedagogy in action".

The initial standpoint of the participants was somewhat analogous to that of Goldschmied and Jackson (1994): their role was to encourage and enable the children to follow through their impulses to explore and play, by providing the appropriate materials and by offering emotional security. Through close observation, analysis and critical reflection, the participants became increasingly aware of some limitations inherent in their model. They noticed that children's agency depended on behind the scenes work to ensure that materials were not just available, but actually being accessed by the children. This required some mediation by the adults between the children and the materials; for the children learning English as an additional language, that included the practitioners ensuring that they proactively interacted with the children and helped them to learn new words in English. This is consistent with the argument of Mitchell and Cubey (2003, p.xii) that professional development should be "linked to tangible changes in pedagogical interactions and this in turn is

associated with children's learning in early childhood settings" and that it should help "participants to change educational practice, beliefs, understanding, and/or attitudes."

The data from the ITERS-R and ECERS-R audits are congruent with the findings from the qualitative data in this study; they suggest that the practitioners brought about positive changes both in terms of ensuring that the children could access and engage in play with the available toys and equipment, and in terms of interacting with them in respect of informal conversation and also the types of interaction which promote children's reasoning and thinking. The implications of these findings are further explored in the final chapter.

Chapter Six

Conclusions.

In my introduction, I argued that improving the quality of early education for two-year olds, in the context of a fast-expanding scheme offering free places, presented urgent problems; and that research hand-in-hand with practice might offer some ways through. The data from the project suggest that it was successful, but because of the local and small-scale nature of the project, those findings cannot be generalised. As I will argue below, the contribution that this study makes derives from its exploration and critical discussion of previous research findings and theoretical propositions. This leads, in turn, to a consideration of implications for practice and further research, as well as a reflection on the implications with regard to my own professional role and the wider field of early years practice in England. This chapter also reflects on the qualities and the shortcomings of the study.

6.1. "Keen observation", analysis and critical reflection: a powerful approach to professional development and support in the early years

Blenkin and Hutchin (1998, p.63) argue, on the basis of their large-scale action-research project, that early years practitioners (both teachers and nursery nurses) could "find ways of improving their understanding of both their professional role and the children's learning" through an investigation of their practice by closely observing the children; as Mitchell and Cubey (2003, p.xii) argue, such investigation can prompt "insights and shifts in thinking." My own previous insider-research in the nursery school where I was the headteacher (Grenier, 2011) illustrates how nursery nurses can engage in sophisticated discussion and examination of their practice in order to develop their understanding and the quality of the early childhood education and care they offered the children.

However, there has been little previous exploration in the specific context of practitioners working with children up to the age of three years old. Moreover, the literature suggests longstanding, tense relationships between nurseries in the "care" tradition and advisory teachers; and where the context was more favourable, it was

difficult to work together and bring about change when the teacher presence was "spread thinly" (Garrick and Morgan, 2009, p. 78). There have been serious concerns about the quality of practitioner training and professional development and a culturally pervasive image of nursery nurses as somewhat unintelligent, drawn from ranks of working class girls who did not achieve well at school and found themselves with a limited choice of careers: "hair or care" (Nutbrown, 2012b, p.9). Just as the context in terms of the children's age was important, so was the location of the three settings, with research indicating a strong association between economic poverty in neighbourhoods and a poor quality early years education and care.

The findings of this study suggest that an appropriate form of professional support and development for staff working with children before the age of three can be planned around close observation, analysis and critical reflection. The Target Child Observation (TCO) system was welcomed by the practitioners because it prompted analysis and professional dialogue, in contrast both to implied beliefs that nursery nurses might lack the interest or ability for critical reflection, and to the notion that observation is nothing more than a chore and burden. The practitioners demonstrated an ability to use their observations to inform pedagogical decisions, both distal and face-to-face: the observations and the opportunities for critical reflection helped them, in Silvia's terms, to "notice more things in children's actions". These were iterative processes: using the TCO sharpened their observational skills, and critical reflection changed the way they thought about what they saw, leading them to look differently. The data suggest that these processes helped the participants to shape the early education and care they offered so that it was appropriate to those children.

There is a long tradition in English early education of writing narrative observations about children's play and learning (Isaacs, 1933), but there has recently been considerable concern about the amount of time taken up by this task (Tickell, 2011). It has been argued that written observations have been used more to build up a kind of "natural history" of the child's development, rather than "formatively", in order to inform "the practitioners' role in guiding play and conversation" (Evangelou

et al., 2009, p.85). It has also been argued that some practitioners see it merely as a bureaucratic burden, one of the many "chores" they feel obliged to put up with (Osgood, 2012, p, 127).

In summary, a comparatively low-level of external support (an hour every fortnight) enabled the processes of observation, analysis and critical reflection over the three-month period of the project. The level of self-direction afforded to the participants appears to have lessened the possibility of tensions damaging the relationship between nursery nurse and advisory teacher.

There were, however, examples of some of the participants struggling with two potential applications of their observation and analytic work. As previously noted, there were no examples of the participants using the TCOs or the group discussions in order to help them to plan specific experiences for individual children. The project did help them to adapt both the general learning environment, and their specific interactional styles, as discussed; but intentions, for example, to plan a cooking activity for a child who seemed to be interested in pouring, measuring and mixing were never developed. If the intervention had been over a longer period, then this would have been an important dimension of practice to address; but in the context of a very short intervention, my conclusion is that it was appropriate to focus on immediate practices – getting to know individual children, changing the arrangement of the learning environment and styles of interaction – which could, over a longer period, have been extended to thinking about longer-term issues like planning policy and practice.

Nor did the project seem to support the practitioners in establishing any sort of dialogue with the children's parents and carers about what they noticed about the children. Such a dialogue might, if established, have enabled learning by both parties – the parents learning about the child's play in nursery, and the practitioners learning about the child's play at home. This might, in turn, have supported more continuous support for the children's interests and the development of their skills at home and in

nursery. As discussed in Chapter Two, there is a century-long tradition of seeing early education as a form for rescue, saving children from inadequate homes and parenting. Yet one might also be struck by the findings from the evaluations of national projects to bring nurseries to disadvantaged areas (Mathers and Sylva, 2007) or to bring early education to disadvantaged two-year olds (Smith *et al.,* 2009) that there are significant inadequacies in many of the nurseries, especially in the area of supporting language development. It is hard to imagine anything good coming from a simultaneous emphasis on the deficits in the children and failure to notice the shortcomings in the early years provision being offered to them.

At Aneurin Bevan nursery, based in a Children's Centre, it was particularly noticeable that the discussion of parents and families was often marked by a somewhat negative and dismissive tone. The families using this nursery would, most likely, be the most vulnerable and in some cases the most challenging to work with, with a number of children in need and children subject to child protection plans on roll, so perhaps the difficulties expressed by the practitioners are understandable. It also needs to be stated that I never saw the participants showing anything other than kindness and care towards the children and the families they worked with.

But these were the very families who most needed help to engage in a positive dialogue about their children's development and wellbeing. These were the very children who needed to be seen positively by their parents, as competent and possessing potential. The apparent working assumption, that the parents were unable to support their children's development might easily slip from description to inscription, a prophecy fulfilled as it is spoken.

White (2005, p. 97-98) found that it was important for volunteer caregivers in the context of New Zealand family day care to engage in "professional discussion and investigation with a focus on positive and empowering images of the child, and the role that they could play to support children's learning and development." As I have argued previously, this focus was also appropriate to the design and the facilitation of

the reference groups in this study, but if I were planning the project again I would extend that to recognise explicitly the importance of holding a positive image of the child's parents – which is very much in keeping with White's (2005) overall approach.

6.2. The quality of early childhood education and care in economically poor neighbourhoods

Data from Ofsted (2013) and from the evaluation of the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative (Mathers and Sylva, 2007) indicate that poorer neighbourhoods tend to have early years settings which offer a poorer quality of early education and care. Despite the large sums invested in the Neighbourhood Nurseries, which were all located in economically disadvantaged areas, Mathers and Sylva (2007) report that on average their quality fell short of being good, though it was better than inadequate. Using the ECERS-R and ITERS-R quality audits, they report that the mean total score across the whole sample of 103 settings was 4.4, indicating that "the quality of 'typical centres' was adequate i.e. above minimal and tending towards good." Smith *et al.* (2009, p.87) found that the overall quality of the 75 settings which they rated as part of their evaluation of the early education pilot for two-year old children was slightly lower at 4.29. Although one must be cautious when comparing this data from larger national samples to data from just 13 settings in Eastside, it is notable that the data from the wider Eastside project are consistent with the national findings shown above, with a mean score of 4.18 before any intervention had taken place. A year after the project began, the mean score of the 13 settings had increased significantly to 5.36, a score which would have placed them in the top quartile of both national samples. In the whole national sample of Neighbourhood Nurseries, the highest quality setting achieved a mean total of 6.2 (Mathers and Sylva, 2007, p.28) – by the end of the first year of the Eastside Project, two of the three settings involved in this research had exceeded that score (Lyle House had an overall score of 6.27 and Aneurin Bevan had an overall score of 6.31).

Because of the small number of the settings involved in the Eastside project, it is not possible to make a reliable claim that the data prove that the particular approaches taken to improve quality were effective. There were also other forces and factors at play during the year; the data set is small; there was no comparison group in Eastside; and the settings were chosen by the local authority early years team without any sampling strategies being used to ensure the range was representative. However, it is also important to note that these data are likely to be robust, because all of the audits were completed by independent, qualified researchers or members of the local authority team who had been fully trained. Inter-rater reliability was carefully checked by the project team.

As previously discussed, that the use of outcome measures of quality has been problematized (Rosenthal, 1999; Moss, Dahlberg and Pence, 2000). Advancing a counter-view, Sylva *et al.* (2004, p.58) state that "the contribution of quality to children's developmental progress has been shown in many studies, often using the ECERS observational scale." Looking specifically at two-year olds in early year settings in England, the national evaluation of the early education pilot for two-year old children (Smith *et al*, 2009, p.104) found that there was a "a significant and positive linear association between quality score and child development outcomes, at least in terms of language development." However, that finding also needs to be contextualised by questions over the reliability of such measures of development for young children, particularly when a large proportion are from black and minority ethnic backgrounds (Hill, 2005).

In conclusion, I would argue that notwithstanding these important qualifications, the data suggest that there is nothing inevitable about early years settings in poor neighbourhoods being low in quality. A sustained intervention from a local authority team, working with a range of settings in a collaborative project, focussed on both overall quality improvement, and practitioner development, coincided with significant quality improvements during the year. Moreover, the findings from analysing the quantitative ITERS-R and ECERS-R data are consistent with the

findings from the qualitative data, which are the focus of this study and are further discussed below.

6.3. Grounded theory: the significance of "enabling autonomy"

The study offered the participants a high degree of self-direction. They could choose which child to observe, when to observe, and which of their TCOs to present to the group. Their decisions about coding and other aspects of data analysis were not challenged by me, and in general my role in the discussions was to encourage talk, rather than to direct it to particular topics.

However, on several occasions when I was disseminating early findings from this study, I was challenged about this approach. Given the limitations of time and other resources, might it not have made better sense to provide a higher level of direction, or a more usual style of training which might enable the participants to learn specific concepts and skills? I would counter this argument by stressing the importance, as an essential first step, of the practitioners beginning to articulate their own theories of their work as educators and carers. Without this initial articulation, development would be impossible.

Perhaps as a result of the shortcomings in initial training identified by Nutbrown and Siraj-Blatchford, much work with children in the early years, especially with those before the age of three, is not explicitly theorised. Instead, it is conceptualised in terms like "maternal instinct" (Moss, 2006, p. 34). As Colley (2006, p.20) argues, the ethos of nursery nursing can be seen to privilege a kind of unthinking "emotional dedication". However, these general findings and reflections arise from analyses of the public discourse around early childhood practice. As Osgood (2012) argues, early years practitioners are not entirely subject to these discourses and forces: they also have a capacity for agency, for professional reflection which can enable resistance to

those forces and a rejection of tick-box approaches which turn professional practice into a set of chores.

The analysis of the discussions in the reference groups during this study points to a marked development of the practitioners' articulation and use of strategies to support language development, and an increased awareness of the pedagogical strategies – both face-to-face, and distal – to support the children's learning. The concept of "enabling autonomy" begins as a relatively simple construct, focussed on children being able to follow their exploratory drives to play freely. During the course of the project, it develops into a more complex theory. That theory shows awareness of how practitioner actions in the background can enhance children's opportunities to make choices, play, and interact, and how face-to-face interactions are essential to ensure that all children experience an appropriate level of support. The participants developed approaches to mediating between individual children and the physical and linguistic learning environments in a subtle manner, thereby avoiding both the excesses of a *laissez-faire* "letting well alone" policy (Ogilvy *et al.*, 1990, p11), and an over-formal, adult-directed curriculum for two-year olds which, as Owen *et al.* (2005, p. 32) argue, caused concern amongst many early years experts when the pilot offering free places for two-year olds was first announced.

One particular importance of that finding, is that the data from this project do not support the notion that nursery nurses are unthinking, incapable of critical reflection or the articulation of theory. In fact, as previously discussed, they were enthusiastic about the opportunities to use a structured child observation tool, to engage in dialogue about coding decisions, and to engage in extended critical reflection.

Hargreaves and Goodson (1996, p.20) describe teacher professionalism as "a self-directed search and struggle for continuous learning related to one's expertise and standards and practice, rather than compliance with the enervating obligations of endless change demanded by others." In this project, the participants had a high-level

of self-direction, and the approaches which drew on Grounded Theory and Constructivist Grounded Theory privileged their own articulation and theorisation of their roles rather than a training approach with pre-set goals and outcomes. Where this did not happen – for example, the decision to include some specific references to theories from child development in the memos, or the strategy of challenging the Lyle House practitioners to take a different approach to one of the children's Batman play – the project appears to have been unhelpful to the participants.

However, this mostly-loose structure was buttoned down in some areas: there were data to consider, in the form of the TCOs, gathered from a defined standpoint (the child as a competent learner); and there were the data from the ITERS-R and ECERS-R audits. These cycles of data collection were planned to counter the possibility that self-direction might turn into aimless wandering, by me or by the participants, and to check that the time spent writing up, coding and discussing observations did not prove to be more distracting than useful, and lead to apparent falls in quality.

Overall, I would argue that the data suggest that the emphasis on self-directed data collection and analysis, followed by critical reflection, stimulated a significant degree of professional and practice development. However, at times it was very difficult for the participants to come together, as discussed above, because of competing pressures on their time. This is despite the fact that all three nursery managers were highly supportive of the project. In all three settings, the participants were given time, space and encouragement to reflect on their practice and modify it, making decisions autonomously. But this could have proved problematic, and it is easy to imagine the difficulties that might have arisen if there had been conflict with the managers of the settings over any of these decisions. If I were planning the project again, I would put more emphasis on the development of what Dalli *et al.* (2011, p. 3) conceptualise as the "membrane of constantly evolving supportive connections … located within a broader policy infrastructure." I would emphasise to the managers the importance of planned times for the release of staff which would only be altered in the event of

emergencies. I would plan opportunities for wider processes of reflection and review, including nursery managers, representatives from other local early years services (e.g. Children's Centres, Health Visiting Teams, and schools) for the consideration of both the structural and philosophical implications of the project. That would include dialogue about child development and learning, and about positive engagement with parents. The different professionals working with children also need to give more consideration to supporting children's transition from an early years setting at two, to a school nursery class at three. The distress which can be caused by that transition needs to be better-managed for the sake of everybody involved, especially the young child.

6.4. Implications for policy and practice

As outlined above, the findings suggest that the approaches taken in this project supported the professional development of the participants. The conduct of the project coincided with a significant increase in quality (as measured by ITERS-R and the scales from ECERS-R) in the three settings. I would argue that further research into this area would be warranted by these findings, especially in the context of concern about the training and qualification of early years practitioners in England working with children up to the age of three. There is a comparative paucity of empirical studies in this area, and the lack of evidence to show whether graduate-level practitioners have been able to develop the quality of early years education and care for the youngest children (Mathers *et al.*, 2011) is disappointing.

At the time of writing, there is considerable controversy in the area of policy and regulation. Government plans (Department for Education, 2013a) to "relax" the statutory minimum ratio of adults to children aged between two and three, from the current 1:4 to a proposed 1:6, were widely criticised (Nutbrown, 2013; Eisenstadt *et al.*, 2013) and then dropped. In the light of the findings of this research, it can be argued that if there were more children for each practitioner to work with, then it would become increasingly difficult to have time to get to know children as

individuals; as Eisenstadt *et al.* (2013, p.2) conclude, "being well qualified does not necessarily help staff to cope with the demands for feeding, changing and caring for very young children". With staff struggling to cope with care demands, it is likely that the capacity of each practitioner to develop relationships characterised by "intersubjective attunement" (Dalli *et al*, 2011, p.3) would surely lessen. Eisenstadt *et al.* (2013, p. 2) argue that even if the level of qualification of individual staff members were improved, quality overall would go down, "with the evidence pointing to reductions in the quality of care routines, health and safety, and the extent to which settings are able to provide for children's individual needs."

The second controversial policy proposal at the time of writing is the planned creation of a new post, the "Early Years Teacher" (DFE, 2013b). This proposal differs from the recommendations made in the independent review commissioned by the government, in which it was argued that there should be a new qualification for "Early Years Teachers" who would work with children from birth up to the age of seven years old, "providing overall pedagogical leadership for a setting, working directly with children and families, and supporting staff with lower levels of qualifications" (Nutbrown, 2012b, p.46). Pedagogical leadership is defined as "where the leader is working directly with children in the setting, leading by example and supporting the other staff with their practice, encouraging reflection and refinement" (Nutbrown, 2012b, p. 56).

The role of "Early Years Teacher" proposed by the Department for Education would have a lower professional standing than the early years teachers proposed by Nutbrown (2012b). Principally this is because the new role proposed by the government is not equivalent to qualified teacher status. These Early Years Teachers would only be qualified to work in early years settings, not schools. Furthermore, in contrast to the Nutbrown (2012b) proposals on pedagogical leadership and support for staff, the proposed Teachers' Standards (Early Years) – subject to consultation at the time of writing – would require candidates to demonstrate that they can:

8.3 Model and implement effective education and care, and support and lead other practitioners including early years educators.

8.4 Take responsibility for leading practice through appropriate professional development for self and colleagues.

8.5 Reflect on the effectiveness of provision, and shape and support good practice.

8.6 Understand the importance of and contribute to multi-agency team working.

(National College for Teaching and Leadership, 2013, p.5)

There are, I would argue, important distinctions between this and Nutbrown's (2012b, p. 56) conception of the teacher "encouraging reflection and refinement". Although the Teachers' Standards (Early Years) make reference to professional development and co-operative working, this model does not imply any processes of shared reflection; instead 8.5 appears to imply that the teacher will individually reflect on effectiveness and 8.3 implies a much more traditional leadership role of modelling and then leading others in order that they follow the same practice. This appears to be somewhat akin to the Plowden model of teachers supervising the other staff (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, p.122). In contrast, the design and conduct of this study explicitly encouraged the co-construction of meaning and valued the participants' own theories as a starting point for a cycle of professional development. It is perhaps also important to note that Mathers *et al.* (2011) found that very few of the graduate-leader practitioners actually worked with children before the age of three years old; Nutbrown (2012b, p. 56) reported that "too often I hear from highly qualified, talented practitioners that they spend too much time in the office and not enough with the children." In summary, although it is too early to form a view about the role of the Early Years Teacher proposed for England, one might argue that the findings of this project offer more support to the view advanced by Nutbrown (2012b) than that of the government.

6.5. Dissemination of the findings

I was able to disseminate my findings at three points, detailed below with a brief consideration of the significance and the impact of each event.

With the research participants: I met with all the participants on 5.10.2012 for a workshop-style discussion of the early findings, and also to ask them to evaluate the project. The early finding, which I shared, was that the data indicated that the participants had sharpened their observational skills through the training in the TCO, and through using it regularly. In turn, this had helped them to get to know the children better. At this stage I had completed initial coding of the data but had not managed the processes of reduction and interpretation which led to the "enabling autonomy" finding, as detailed in Chapter Four. The participants confirmed that they had found the observational techniques useful and of continued relevance, and their evaluation of the project overall was very positive. This encouraged me to continue to analyse the data closely to try to understand more about how they had found the project useful and whether there were signs of changes in their standpoints at the project developed.

The British Early Childhood Education Research Association (BECERA) conference and the Institute of Education (IOE) Doctoral School Poster conference, February 2013. I presented a paper based on an early version of the Grounded Theory findings at the BECERA conference on 21.2.2013. The delegates were most interested in the voices of the practitioners and illustrations of how they used the observations and developed their theories about their roles out-loud. As a result of this, I was confident to put my emphasis here and to investigate this finding further. My interpretation of what the practitioners said became more nuanced through this dialogue, and I recognised more subtlety in the concept of "enabling autonomy". This was reflected in the development of my analysis for the IOE Poster Conference on 7.3.2013, where I was engaged in an extended dialogue from one of the project workers from the Eastside Early Years team who challenged me on

whether I had emphasised sufficiently the needs of young bilingual children. This led me to reconsider the data in this respect.

Department for Education (May 2013) I presented a PowerPoint based on my findings on 16.5.2013 followed by a group discussion with a group of policy-makers and officials from the DFE. There was extended discussion of the findings about support and professional development for early years practitioners with level 3 qualifications and the role of a local authority team in poor neighbourhoods to support quality improvement, where the findings are at odds with current government proposals.

6.6. Implications for my professional role

In my current role as the headteacher of a Nursery School and Children's Centre, I have been strongly influenced by my experience whilst conducting this research, and the findings have shaped my work. The argument of Dalli *et al.* (2011, p. 3) that it is important to develop a "membrane of constantly evolving supportive connections … located within a broader policy infrastructure" has led me to work towards the development of a partnership model for the early childhood services in the Children's Centre reach area. The success of the Centre's network for local childminders, and the creation of a new network for EYFS providers in the school and private and voluntary/community sectors, has led to a high degree of joint training and mutual professional support in the local area. As the Nursery School plans to take two-year olds on roll, a plan is being developed for a locality-wide project focussed on co-operation, professional dialogue and quality for all children. The Nursery School and Children's Centre has also been selected by the Department for Education to be an "early education and childcare hub", working in partnership with all its local settings and childminders.

6.7. Final thoughts

I started work on this study because I judged that there was a pressing need to bring about improvements in the quality of early education and care offered in a poor part of inner London. I also felt, professionally, that my approach to working as an early years advisory teacher was failing; I was doing more to catalyse conflict than bring about professional and practice development. Rethinking my standpoint as an insider-researcher, I found further reflection on Kvale's (1996) contrasting metaphors of the researcher as miner and as traveller useful. In terms of the contrast between the discursive and the outcomes/impact schools of scholarship in the field of early childhood, one might further develop Kvale's (1996) metaphor of travelling: was I aiming to travel, discuss, reflect and explore alongside the participants, or was I aiming to use research in order to bring them as quickly and efficiently as possible to a specific destination?

This is a small-scale, qualitative research project; discursive in tone, sceptical about objectivity, striving for precision but recognising the inevitability that those tactics will not *quite* work. But whilst its findings cannot, therefore, be generalised, they can be used to explore the applicability of previous studies, propositions and assumptions. As I have argued above, the data in this study strongly suggest the value of a dynamic model of support and professional development for practitioners in the early years, privileging cycles of observation, analysis and critical reflection. The data suggest that this can support participants in first becoming more conscious of the theories that underpin their work and, through processes of articulation, develop their theories. The data in the background from the ITERS-R and ECERS-R audits are congruent with these findings from the qualitative data.

In its regard for these contrasting sets of data, the study has – depending on your standpoint – either the qualities of mongrel vigour, or of a dog's dinner. Pragmatically, it recognises the importance of using measures of quality, but argues that choices must be made openly, with sensitivity to other values, and without

making unwarranted claims for neutrality or universality. Findings from quality measures were appropriately contextualised by local understandings in relation to individual children and to the individual features of each setting and each community.

Gammage (2003, p.349) argues that "the child must have the opportunity to *be* as well as become". The same is true of professional development in the early years, and this study aims to have shown the value of *being* over merely seeking out the fastest route to *becoming*.

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Appendix One

Overview of the subscales and items of the ITERS-R and ECERS-R

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Overview of the subscales and items of the ITERS-R
(Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2006)

Space and Furnishings
- Indoor space
- Furniture for routine care and play
- Provision for relaxation and comfort
- Room arrangement
- Display for children

Personal care routines
- Greeting/departing
- Meals/snacks
- Nap
- Diapering/toileting [1]
- Health practices
- Safety practices

Listening and talking
- Helping children understand language
- Helping children use language
- Using books

Activities
- Fine motor
- Active physical play
- Art
- Music and movement
- Blocks
- Dramatic play
- Sand and water play
- Nature/science
- Use of TV, video and/or computer
- Promoting acceptance of diversity

Interaction
- Supervision of play and learning
- Peer interaction
- Staff-child interaction
- Discipline

Program structure
- Schedule
- Free play
- Group play activities
- Provisions for children with disabilities

Parents and staff [2]
- Provisions for parents
- Provisions for personal needs of staff
- Provisions for professional needs of staff
- Staff interaction and cooperations
- Staff continuity
- Supervision and evaluation of staff
- Opportunities for professional growth

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[1] "Diaper" is the American term for "nappy"
[2] This subscale was not used in the research as many of the settings did not have the required rooms/areas and had no opportunity to enlarge their accommodation

Overview of the subscales and items of the ECERS-R
(Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2006)

Only the highlighted items in the Language-Reasoning subscale were used.

Space and Furnishings
- Indoor space
- Furniture for routine care, play and learning
- Furnishings for relaxation and comfort
- Room arrangement for play
- Space for privacy
- Child-related display
- Space for gross motor play
- Gross motor equipment

Personal care routines
- Greeting/departing
- Meals/snacks
- Nap/rest
- Toileting/diapering
- Health practices
- Safety practices

Language-reasoning
- Books and pictures
- Encouraging children to communicate
- Using language to develop reasoning skills
- Informal use of language

Activities
- Fine motor
- Art
- Music/movement
- Blocks
- Sand/water
- Dramatic play
- Nature/science
- Math/number
- Use of TV, video, and/or computers
- Promoting acceptance of diversity

Interaction
- Supervision of gross motor activities
- General supervision of children (other than gross motor)
- Discipline
- Staff-child interactions
- Interactions among children

Program structure
- Schedule
- Free play
- Group time
- Provisions for children with disabilities

Parents and staff
- Provisions for parents
- Provisions for personal needs of staff
- Provisions for professional needs of staff
- Staff interaction and cooperation
- Supervision and evaluation of staff
- Opportunities for professional growth

Appendix Two

To gain the informed consent of all the participants, I wrote a factsheet for the managers and a letter to the nursery practitioners. These are reproduced below, with any identifying features anonymised. I met with the practitioners to discuss the consent forms and to answer any questions before asking them to sign.

<u>Factsheet for managers: Early Learning for Two Year Olds Research Project</u>

Thank you once again for allowing members of your staff team to take part in this project. I hope that the project will prove worthwhile for the individuals involved and for the whole of your setting.

The research project is being carried out according the Ethical Guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA).

I have emailed you a copy of those guidelines, and also the handouts for the participants.

Each setting will have a folder for everything related to the Project. It would be very helpful if this folder could be kept somewhere which is both safe, and accessible to the participants.

Part of the project is about training the participants to use an observational tool called "Target Child Observation" (TCO). This is a way of recording what a child does for a period of ten minutes. As well as contributing to the project, these observations will also contribute to your assessment and record keeping systems, and can be shared with parents and used to inform your planning.

Before a child is observed using the TCO, parents/carers should be asked for their consent. I have emailed you suggested wording for this letter. I would suggest that you do not approach any parents whose children are already involved in being systematically observed, e.g. for child protection reasons, or anyone else who might be reluctant or made anxious by the request.

Thank you for your support, and please do not hesitate to get in touch at any time if you have any further questions.

Julian Grenier, Early Years Adviser.

<u>Letter to participants in the [Eastside] Learning for Two Year Olds Research Project</u>

Hello, my name is Julian Grenier and I am the lead officer in [Eastside] for the Early Learning for Two Year Olds Project, which is initially running from April 2011-April 2012. I am also a doctoral student at the Institute of Education, London University. My supervisor is Dr Liz Brooker (e.brooker@ioe.ac.uk)

As part of the project and also part of my studies, I am conducting a research project with three groups of nursery staff to find out more about your views and about how you understand early learning and care.

During the project, I will be:

- Recording the group discussions;

- Asking you to do 'Target Child Observations' of the children you work with, for discussion in the group, and making copies of these observations;

- Building up a file of our discussions, which will be kept at your setting, including a 'memo' summarising the main themes of each discussion and all of your observations.

This research is being conducted according the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) which were updated in 2011. Each setting will have a copy of these guidelines in its research folder.

In particular, please note that:

- Your participation in the research is entirely voluntary
- You are free to withdraw at any time
- You are free to take part in the research project, and have your contributions excluded when I write it up

The discussions in the group will be kept strictly confidential. The details of what you say will not be shared with anyone else (unless there is a legal obligation on me, for example in order to protect a child from harm). Excerpts from the discussions will be included in the final research report, but under no circumstances will your name or any identifying characteristics be included in the report.

If you have any further questions, you can contact me at any time during the project. My contact details are: **[Eastside contact details given]**

Appendix Three

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was used at the beginning of the project, in January 2012, and at the final whole-group meeting in October 2012. In the second questionnaire, all the straightforward factual questions on the first page were omitted (gender, age, ethnicity, etc.). The final question was also changed, as shown below.

Your name:

Gender:

How would you describe your ethnicity?

Your age:

Please sign below to confirm that you have read the handout about the research project and that you are giving your informed consent to take part. Thanks

Your signature:

What is your highest qualification in early years education and childcare?

How long have you been in your current post?

How long have you been working with children under 5?

How would you describe the background characteristics of the children you work with?

About the early learning and care in your setting:

1. If you could prioritise 3 things you hope the children learn from your setting (e.g. in terms of areas of knowledge, attitudes, dispositions, skills) what would these be?

2. What kinds of resources help children to learn and why? (e.g. outdoor area, worksheets, construction materials, sand etc.)

3. What do you think are the main constraints/barriers to learning?

4. [This question was different in the two questionnaires]

Initial questionnaire: What do you hope to gain out of taking part in this project?

Concluding questionnaire: What do you think that you have gained by taking part in this project?

5. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix Four

Meeting dates

Date	Meeting
W/C 23.1.2012	Individual training sessions with each team on using the TCO, and completion of consent forms and initial questionnaires
21.2.2012	First meeting at Aneurin Bevan
23.2.2012	First Meeting at Lyle House
27.2.2012	First meeting with Samuda at the Town Hall
1.3.2012	Second meeting at Aneurin Bevan
5.3.2012	Second meeting with Samuda at the Town Hall
8.3.2012	Second Meeting at Lyle House
15.3.2012	Third meeting at Aneurin Bevan
19.3.2012	Third meeting with Samuda staff at the Town Hall
22.3.2012	Third Meeting at Lyle House
23.3.2012	Fourth meeting at Aneurin Bevan
29.3.2012	Fourth Meeting at Lyle House
3.4.2012	Fourth meeting with Samuda staff at the Town Hall
5.10.2012	Whole-group meeting to discuss initial findings, evaluate the project and complete the final questionnaire

Milestones in the research project

January 2012	Formal agreement of the Local Authority and the management boards of each nursery. Meet staff teams, explain the project, and ask for participants. Ensure all participants give their informed consent, within the ethical framework outlined above. Ask each participant to complete a questionnaire about their role and their understanding of how children learn. Start cycle of meeting with the reference groups.
January-April 2012	Monthly meetings of reference groups ongoing. Coding of data ongoing.
April-August 2012	Further data analysis
October 2012	Present key findings to each reference group in a workshop style, encouraging feedback, confirmations and disagreements.

Appendix Five

Target Child Observation proforma and coding guide

Observer:

Child initials:	Gender**: F/M**	Age: **yrs**	**mths** Time:	
ACTIVITY RECORD	LANGUAGE RECORD	**TASK**	**SOCIAL**	
Context:				
1 min				
2 min				
3 min				
4 min				
5 min				

6 min			
7 min			
8 min			
9 min			
10 min			
What happened next?			

Adapted from Sylva, Roy and Painter (1980)

Adapted coding and guidance

Adapted from *Childwatching in playgroup and nursery* (Sylva, Roy and Painter, 1980). Please ask Julian if you would like to borrow this book.

Language record

Try to record as much of the language which is spoken (or signed) as possible.

TC → C (Target child to child)

TC → A (Target child to adult)

A → TC (Adult to target child)

C → TC (Child to target child)

A → TC + C (Adult to target child and other child/ren)

For a conversation (two turns or more) use a double arrow, so:

A ←→ TC (Adult and target child conversation)

Social codes

SOL   solitary (child on her or his own with no-one nearby)

PAIR   child with one other

SG   small group (3 to 5)

LG   large group (larger than 5)

/P   parallel play: if the child is close to, but not interacting with, the other person or people.

Circle

Put a circle around the *social code* if the child is interacting with, or is very near to, an *adult.*

Task code categories

The codes have been adapted from those suggested by Sylva, Roy and Painter (1980) to reflect developments in the Early Years, particularly the implementation of the EYFS. The "3 Rs" code (reading, writing and arithmetic) has been replaced with individual codes for each of those areas of learning (R for reading, Wr for writing, and M for maths). These codes are understood in terms of emergent learning, so a child is said to be "reading" in any situation where the child is actively interacting with a book or other written text, e.g. turning over the pages of a book carefully, looking at the pictures and talking about what is happening in the story).

LMM   Large muscle movement

Active movement of the child's body, requiring coordination of larger muscles, such as running, climbing

LSC   Large scale construction

Building with unit blocks, large hollow blocks, boxes, planks etc.

SSC   Small scale construction

Using small scale construction e.g. duplo, sticklebricks, 232obile

ART   *Free artistic expression (not adult-directed or guided) e.g. drawing, painting, chalking, sticking etc*

MAN   Manipulation

Small motor skills (co-ordinating eye/hand, eye/arm) e.g. playdough, sand, water

ADM   Adult-directed art and manipulation

Child is refining skills or techniques under adult direction e.g. cutting out a particular picture and sticking it down as directed, colouring-in, sticking tissue-paper under adult direction or onto an adult drawing (like a star, a snowman, etc)

SM   Structured materials

Materials with design constraints e.g. jigsaw, pegboard, sewing card, shape-posting

R   Reading

Child looking at book/pretending to read/listening to adult read

Wr   Writing/mark-making

Child makes marks which stand for a word e.g. own name, "mummy", McDonalds etc.

M   Maths

Child is counting, sharing objects out, exploring space (e.g. covering something up), exploring capacity (e.g. carefully pouring from a smaller container into a larger one at the sand or water tray)

PS   Problem-solving

The child solves a problem in a purposeful way using logical reasoning e.g. looking to see why something won't work and repairing it.

EX   Examination

Careful examination of an object or material e.g. looking through a magnifying glass. It differs from MAN because the looking, smelling or tasting is more important than the handling.

PRE   Pretend

The transformation of everyday objects (or people) so that their "meaning" takes precedent over "reality" (e.g. picking up a duplo brick and talking into it as if it's a mobile; pretending that another child is "mummy" in the home corner)

SWM   Small world materials

Miniature versions of people, animals, cars and other things e.g. dolls' house, farm set, toy car. This does not include real-sized objects like plates in the home corner. If the materials are used in pretend play, use **PRE**

IG   Informal games

A play situation, with or without language, which is spontaneous and loosely organised, e.g.: following one another round whilst chanting, giggling in the corner, holding hands and jumping.

GWR   Games with rules

Includes ball games like football, skittles, circle games, singing games, and board games like Snakes and Ladders.

MUS   Music

Listening to sounds, rhythms, music, playing instruments, singing, dancing to music.

PALGA   Passive adult-led group activities

A large group of children, under the leadership of an adult, listens to stories, watches demonstration of how to do something, etc.

SNIP   Social interaction, no play

Any sort of social interaction with another child or with an adult, where there is no play e.g. chatting, being cuddled. Only use when the child is not engaged in another task code category e.g. if child is doing a puzzle whilst chatting, code **SM**

DB   Distress behaviour

Child is crying, withdrawn, breaking or spoiling things.

SA/AWG   Standing around, aimless wander or gaze

The child is not actively engaged in anything or watching anything specific.

CR   Cruise

Active movement around from one thing to another, or purposeful looking around: child appears to be searching for something to do.

PM   Purposeful movement

Purposeful movement towards an object, person or place e.g. heading outside to play, child seeking her or his key person.

W   Waiting

The child is inactive, waiting for an adult or child e.g. lining up at the door, sitting at a table waiting for a snack to be brought over.

WA   Watching

Watching other people or events. The child may watch a specific person or activity, or look around in general. Includes listening-in to conversations without participating.

DA   Domestic activity

Going to the toilet, washing hands, dressing, putting on coat etc.

Themes

If a child engages in a spell of sustained activity over two minutes or more, that is a "theme" and should be marked with double-lines. For example: a child spends four minutes painting.

This would include a series of separate activities, all united by the same theme, e.g.: a child puts on an apron, takes part in water play, goes to the cupboard to get a different size of container and goes back to the water.

If a child just has a small interruption, then this can be ignored e.g. a child spends a few minutes playing with playdough, then stops and goes over to chat to a friend for a minute, then goes back to the playdough table.

Appendix Six

Key to the Simplified Transcription Symbols.

Adapted from Silverman (2006, p. 398-299)

[	Julie: quite a [while Frances: [yea	Left brackets indicate the point at which a current speaker's talk is overlapped by another's talk.
=	Jasmin: that I'm aware of = Mia: = Yes. Would you confirm that?	Equal signs, one at the end of a line and one at the beginning, indicate no gap between the two lines.
(0.4)	Yes (0.2) yeah	Numbers in parentheses indicate elapsed time in silence in tenths of a second.
(.)	to get (.) treatment	A dot in parentheses indicates a tiny gap, probably no more than one-tenth of a second.
WORD	I've got ENOUGH TO WORRY ABOUT	Capitals, except at the beginnings of lines, indicate especially loud sounds relative to the surrounding talk.
.hhhh	I feel that (0.2) .hhh	A row of h's prefixed by a dot indicates an inbreath; without a dot, an outbreath. The length of the row of h's indicates the length of the inbreath or outbreath.
(( ))	confirm that ((continues))	Double parentheses contain author's descriptions rather than transcriptions

Appendix Seven

An example of a memo to the participants.

Memo: discussion on 23rd February, 2012.

Participants: Julie and Frances

Memo written by Julian. *By email.*

Julie and Frances had both completed TCOs, and it was apparent that a lot of care and thought had gone into this work. We spent time going through the observations and discussing the codes.

Julie's close observation led her to change her understanding of the child's development. It had seemed that the child was going "from one thing to another", but Julie found it was "quite interesting to find that in the 10 minutes she focussed on the house … she stayed with one thing." - "we thought she just goes from one thing to another but we found completely the opposite."

Julie said that the child must be "using her imagination to stay in there for so long", and noticed how she comes and goes, and opens and closes doors and windows. It seems as if she is on the edge of pretend play – using her imagination to give a "meaning" to objects and actions. So the peg is transformed into a key through her careful actions as she pretends to use it to unlock the door. Using your imagination to make one thing stand for another is important – this will lead up to the understanding that we can use the symbol 3 to stand for three things, or a line of letters to stand for a person (their name) etc.

Julie noticed that the child is "active" in the observation, even when she is not actually doing anything – "she seemed like she wanted to interact with them by just watching them … she stood back and watched and listened to what they were saying and what was going on around her in the house."

When the child says "oh too cold going in", it shows that she is putting together her own sentences which she has thought about in response to what she is doing and experiencing. She is not just repeating words that follow on from what adults or children say to her, or just using single-words. I wondered if it might be helpful to spend some more time thinking

about the best ways to help the language development of bilingual children, and how to help them learn English?

Julie also showed her appreciation of what children bring to playgroup and offer each other – "I think the other children are helping her really, by showing her how to play." She suggested that "if she had a doll, maybe that would help." The house is new, and has not got any resources for play in it yet, so it will be interesting to see how her imaginative play might develop in the weeks ahead.

Frances talked about a child settling into the playgroup and noticed how "when he does things he always refers back to his mum … goes back to tell her what she's done." This is an example of "social referencing" – looking to another person to see how they react, and using this to help you come to your own opinion about what you are doing. In this case, the mother's availability to her child seems to give him confidence to go and explore in the nursery, and makes him think that what he is going is interesting and worth showing her or telling her about.

Two-year olds are very active learners and explorers, and Frances could see a difference between a child (like her target child) who explores a lot of things in quick succession, and a child who is just flitting randomly. Frances showed how she valued the child's exploration and his choices.

Julie ended by saying that the time spent reflecting on the children's development "was good because although we were talking to each other about the children we didn't actually go through them and talk about the children until we sat down here, there's no kids around, it's quiet, we've actually spoken about them, we've realised how different they are."

Some key ideas in this discussion:

Children's early play might be sparked off by watching, listening and copying: "I think she's repeating and copying what the other children are doing to sort of investigate it herself before she starts to play" (Julie)

Watching children closely can change our understanding of what they are doing.

Allowing settling-in time is enabling the child to check back with his mum ("social referencing") – so he feels secure: "every now and then he does go in and show her what he's done, just to make sure she's there" (Frances). This also means that he feels that his mum and the nursery staff are positive about his exploration and play.