

A Critical Analysis of the Accountability Discourse in Early Years Education in England and Finland

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anna Max". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'M' at the end.

Anna Max

Abstract

In recent years early childhood education and care has become the focus of global political attention as an area of investment and concern. Measures of accountability have been introduced to ensure that “high quality” early years education produces children with the requisite skills and knowledge to enter formal education suitably prepared.

The primary aim of this thesis is to identify and analyse how the ideological and educational intentions of accountability policies of England and Finland (re)produce international and local discourses and their impact on the beliefs, attitudes and practices of practitioners. Most research has been concerned with the outcomes of early years education, concentrating on the oldest children, finding that developmentally driven practices produce normative narratives about (un)successful children, practitioners and settings. This research is situated in a post-structural theoretical framework of Foucauldian discourse analysis and Butler’s theory of performativity to interrogate how policy and hegemonic beliefs are used to mandate that practitioners subjectify themselves and the children to fulfil narrow constructions of practice and purpose. Ethnographically informed participant-observation and semi-structured interviews in six settings in England and Finland is used to explore how evaluation and inspection regimes and the practices associated with them are reproduced. Critical Discourse Analysis is used to explore how dominant discourses constitute children, practitioners and practice as normative or problematic within narrow, standardised boundaries.

The impact of the accountability discourse is felt at all levels of early years education, with children being prepared for future and school-readiness from babyhood. The domination of developmental discourses pathologises non-normative development, leading practitioners to implement measures not directly required in the evaluation/inspection frameworks including measuring children's attainment in Finland and constituting Ofsted as an additional curriculum in England. I conclude that the accountability discourse imposes systematic disadvantage and requires challenge at policy and practice level.

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Your absence has gone through me

Like a thread through a needle.

Everything I do is stitched with its colour.

Separation, by E. W. Merlin.

Chapter 1. Introduction to the Thesis: The Accountability Discourse in Early Years Education

Introduction

This thesis is concerned with the ways in which settings, practitioners and children assume responsibility for meeting the educational outcomes and broader societal goals within key education policies of England and Finland. This research provides an insight into the accountability discourse that permeates the education policies, practices and curricula frameworks of England and Finland. Specially, the aim of the research was to examine how early education curricula and accountability policies are produced and reproduced in the thoughts, opinions, attitudes and practices of settings and practitioners and to consider what the impacts of the (re)production might be, for settings, practitioners and children. To achieve this, the thesis utilises both a Foucauldian critical discourse analysis and Butler's theory of performativity (Butler, 2006) in a post-structural framework by which to understand how policy and hegemonic beliefs impel practitioners to construct certain practices, attitudes and behaviours.

I began to consider the issues in this thesis while writing my MA dissertation which examined the practitioner-parent partnership in England. As a result of that research, I became aware of how hegemonic discourses are reproduced as opinion, common sense or a seemingly inevitable outcome (Foucault, 1991b). As an early years practitioner, I resisted the neoliberal constructions of the self as individualised, self-reliant and essentially selfish, although I did not yet have the critical knowledge to be

able to articulate this. It was important to me that I remained in practice while I was working on this PhD, as I was aware of how quickly one can lose sight of the struggle practitioners have, daily, to accommodate policy requirements with the needs of the children. Being in practice for the first two years of this PhD study was not simply a reminder of the hard grind of working in a daycare setting, it allowed me to talk with my colleagues about the issues we had with implementing policies that were sometimes contradictory. It became clear to me that the framework that shaped accountability the EYFS was both the curriculum and Ofsted. I then began to wonder if the same was true of other countries. In the meantime, I had contacted Professor Maarit Alassutari of the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, regarding a question resulting from my MA. She replied and offered me the opportunity to conduct research in Finland and thus, the thesis was born. I considered Finland a good choice of country as it is similar enough to England, being a European, wealthy nation, but also contrasting in political outlook with a famously successful education system that espoused a different ideology and practice to England. Both England and Finland regard early education as a wise investment in the future; this thesis investigates how settings and practitioners are held accountable for implementing measures to realise this investment. While this thesis takes two contrasting countries as its basis for examining how the accountability discourse is produced and reproduced, my intention is not to simply compare and point out that England does one thing and Finland another. Nor is it my intention to judge one country to be more successful than another. Rather, the intention of this thesis is to show how, despite the differences in ideologies and practices, and national and local narratives, opinions and assumptions are shaped by international discourses that are hard, if not

impossible, to not be compelled by. Therefore, my aim is to explore how these discourses are interpreted and embodied at practice level, understood through the perspectives of local and national policies.

This thesis has three key aims. The first is to identify the ideological and educational intentions of the early years education policies of England and Finland. The second aim is to explore how these ideologies and educational intentions are realised in practice. The opinions, beliefs, practices and goals of settings and practitioners are shaped by the policies they implement; my intention is to interrogate how they are held accountable for the outcomes. The third aim is to interrogate what the consequences of the accountability discourse are for settings, practitioners and children. This thesis is part of a growing number of studies (see for instance, Paananen, 2017; Cochrane-Smith, 2021; Ehren and Godfrey, 2021; Högberg and Lindgren, 2021) that focus on the issue of accountability in early years education, both in England, Europe and globally. However, most of these studies are concerned with the oldest children in early childhood education and particularly with the issue of school readiness (Wahlgren and Andersson, 2024; Klapperirch, 2022; Steinberg and Kleinert, 2022; Zhou and Lu, 2024). In this thesis I aim to look at the impact of accountability, and school readiness as one of its consequences, on the early years stage as a whole. I examine the impact that the school-readiness debate has on the education and care of babies and toddlers, an area that has been neglected, because of the assumption that preparation for school begins in the year before formal education commences (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). The differences in age range in England and Finland in this first stage of education is illustrative of how

subjective the concept of early years education is. In England children attend early years settings between the ages of 6 weeks and 5 years (with their final year being in the reception class at school). In Finland children attend between 11 months and 6 years and start formal education the year they turn 7.

A further key area that this thesis aims to contribute in is by recognising policy as instrumental in constructing practice, not only as a statutory framework, but almost as a colleague. Above, I explained that it was important that I remained in practice while I began my PhD; one aspect of practice that became clear to me as I began the process of thinking more critically was how we included the policies in discussions every day. We referred to Development Matters (DfE, 2023) in the weekly planning sessions, to the EYFS as a reminder of what we needed to include in the areas of learning in the classroom and to the Ofsted inspection framework in room lead meetings to ensure we were meeting the criteria by which we would be inspected. Including policy as an active part of practice is not an approach that is commonly taken in education research, and not one I had seen taken in early years education. This thesis contributes to the literature in this area.

1.1 Researching the Accountability Discourse in Early Years Education

The terms 'accountability discourse' (Penrice, 2012) and 'discourses of accountability' (Longmuir, 2019) are interchangeably employed in social policy as an academic discipline and research to describe methods and methodologies used in scrutinising and challenging policy, legislation, practices and political structures. Researchers are required to define both the discourses and methods used in specific studies and each

time they undertake a new piece of analysis (Boni et. al., 2014). I argue that the use of the term “discourses” suggests that there are competing and contrasting opinions and practices available with the potential for debate and challenge. However, the literature (Ball, 2003; Mirowski, 2013) and my results and analysis suggest that fear of public shame for failing to meet standards delimits debates to what and how accountability is measured. Accountability is viewed as fundamental to ensuring quality early years education and care and this is viewed as an irrefutable truth (Ball, 2003). Furthermore, while there are regional and local differences in what is held accountable and how it is measured, the essential nature of accountability is placed beyond question . Therefore, I have chosen the appellation ‘accountability discourse’ over ‘discourses of accountability’ in the formal construction of the term to signify that it is a discourse that can be identified in any area where accountability can be found to be a feature. Having settled on an appellation for this term for use in this thesis, the single quotation marks are no longer considered necessary; therefore, from this point onwards the term shall be used without them.

Goetz and Jenkins (2005) argue that historically accountability is recognised as a democratic process of electors holding representatives to account but that more recently a reversal of this process can be identified whereby those in government hold citizens and organisations to account. Newell (2008) argues that this is indicative of the shift in the role of governments and policy from government to governance, whereby policy provides a framework for management. It is this more recent definition of accountability that is explored in this section.

Accountability can be described as “the relationship where A is accountable to B if A is obliged to explain and justify his actions to B, or if A may suffer sanctions if his conduct, or explanation for it, is found wanting.” (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005 p. 8). The power relationship between A and B is one-sided, where A is accountable to B, but B is not accountable to A. Goetz and Jenkins (2005) identify A as the agent – one who is obliged to account, and therefore is the one to whom the requirement and power to give answers has been assigned. B is identified as the seeker, who has the right to demand accountability, as the legitimate source of the agent’s power. In early childhood education settings, some agents are positioned as both agent and seeker, answering to seekers above and demanding accountability from agents below. The final and highest seeker is the inspectorate or evaluative body. Anderson (2009) argues that these constructs of accountability in fact create an illusion of accountability that generates and conceals the disfunction inherent in organisations and inhibits honest and open accounting. As Møller (2009) identifies, accountability is no longer a tool within the system, it now constitutes the system itself. This systemisation of accountability is the consequence of neoliberalism, the ideology that is hegemonic in global dominant discourses of politics (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). Eyban (2008) identifies that neoliberal governments view accountability as supporting individual democratic rights, emphasising the role of accountability mechanisms to protect the customer or client and to promote equality across organisations. The terms by which accountability are measured are not available to dispute or challenge.

Eagleton-Pierce (2016) claims that there is no way to conclusively summarise and define the term “neoliberalism” because it is used in so many ways to explain behaviour, policies and ideologies. Eagleton-Pierce (2016, pp. xiv-xv) defines it as being,

“commonly associated with the expansion of commercial markets and the privileging of corporations; the re-engineering of government as an ‘entrepreneurial’ actor; and the imposition of ‘fiscal-discipline’, particularly in welfare spending”.

This broad definition is useful by providing a context for the following definitions which add detail to the overall meaning of the term neoliberalism that I intend to be understood in this thesis. Ball (2016) asserts that neoliberalism has “changed how we value ourselves, and value others, how we think about what we do, and how we do it” (p. 1047). Teng, Abu Bakar and Layne (2020) contend that “Individual survival has become attached to national survival and both are tethered to the market.” (p. 459). Ball (in Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021) describes it as “an insidious and seductive economisation of the social and depoliticisation of the political” (p. xv). Neoliberalism can therefore be seen to have far-reaching influences in both the social and political aspects of life. This duality of influence is important to recognise as it allows this research to identify where and how neoliberalism shapes both policies and peoples’ opinions, assumptions and constructions of themselves and their relationships.

Key concepts associated with neoliberalism read like a list of slogans that are used ubiquitously in the media, political messaging and policy, reflecting Ball's point that neoliberalism impacts both the social and the political. Key terms have their origins in language used to describe the market but have been transferred into many policy areas including health, education, welfare and care. Terms such as choice, community, diversity, freedom, market, participation, performance, reform, responsibility, stakeholder and state (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016) are used without explanation or challenge in areas of policy far beyond that of the market. Many of these terms are now so entirely a part of the rhetorical language that they have become invisible and unchallenged discourses (Foucault, 1972). The impact of neoliberalism's ability to configure both personal and political aspects of life (encountered through policy) is significant. It affects "how we understand the way the world works, how we understand ourselves and other, and how we relate to ourselves and others" (Ball, in Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021, p. xv). Butler (2005, p. 22) describes these ways of understanding the world and relationships as "the terms that make self-recognition possible", thereby eliminating other, non-neoliberal understandings. Therefore, the use of the term neoliberalism is significant in this thesis. It is used as Ball suggests, both as present in policy as a political ideology that is found explicitly in policy and as a discourse in cultural constructions of self. Therefore, in this study the term neoliberalism is used in referring both to the discourse and the ideology, sometimes separately, sometimes simultaneously, reflecting its nebulous nature.

Studies in several sectors including social work and welfare, business, charity and voluntary organisations, health and education employ the terms accountability discourse/discourse of accountability (Hemmer, Masden and Torres, 2013; Isaza, 2017; Yan et. al., 2017; Figgou, 2020). In their paper examining the neoliberal discourse of accountability in social services in Hong Kong, Yan et. al. (2017 p.986) argue that “the prevalence of this [accountability] discourse has become almost a form of hegemony”, concurring with Bourdieu and Wacquant’s (2001) description of neoliberalism and the integration of the new right’s ideology of the market into social policies as a “planetary vulgate” (p. 2). Kantola (2014) argues that this has come about because national “policies are based on the idea of social engineering with trans-national experts and indicators providing guidelines for high-modernist, rationally planned development” (p.44). Global institutions and organisations such as the World Bank, and the Organisation for the Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are in part responsible for this, by producing comparative research and guidance that encourages national governments to conform to global ideologies by aligning their policies with the measurement tools used (Rautalin, 2018). Alasuutari and Quadir (2014) point out that these ideologies are not implemented without critique but are assimilated by governments on the political spectrum according to their national political characteristics. Therefore, some aspects of neoliberalism may be found in socialist or social-democratic systems albeit in possibly less overt forms than in conservative and neoliberal systems. Newman (2001) catalogues some of these aspects of neoliberalism as the politics of reform, performance, partnership, representation, inclusion and governance. As Perelman (1982, 1984) argues, these terms are both constitutive and performative. Across

Europe, the USA, the Nordics, and Anglo-speaking Southern countries these terms are the lingua-franca of social policy.

In the field of education, it is the Higher Education (HE) sector that has attracted the most research on the manifestation of neoliberal discourses. However, there is less research in EYE. More importantly, findings from research on neoliberal discourse in HE are pertinent to this discussion about the accountability discourse in general and to education and EYE in particular.

Managerialism utilises management structures to ensure that education takes place, and to provide proof of progress, quality, equality and access (Ajayan and Balasubramanian, 2020). This positions the student (in HE) as both the consumer of the education and the product of it. In the market structure of neoliberal education, consumers, producers and products are the essential components (Newman, 2001). Education is decentralised and institutions, educators and students become competitors (Rinne et. al. 2016) both within institutions and between them. Additionally, institutions compete to attract educators and students, motivated by league tables which are used to rank institutions and decide funding (Chaoqun and Teo, 2020). Managerialism in HE is seen globally and across political positions. As examples, Wong (2008) in China, Machovcová, Zábrowská and Mudrák (2019) of Central Eastern Europe, Ajayan and Balasubramanian (2020) from the United Arab Emirates and Nickson (2014) from the UK have interrogated issues related to managerialism in regimes from across the different political spectrum. It is therefore

clear that as Alasuutari and Quadir (2014) point out, neoliberal discourses are a global phenomenon found dressed in culturally appropriate language.

This position is supported by many studies of accountability in education that identify how structural systems such as curriculum requirements and inspection processes produce and reproduce accountability discourses in primary and secondary schools in a variety of countries (Penrice, 2012; Møller, 2009; Israel, 2023). The hegemony of discourses such as quality, accountability, assessment and evaluation is evident in the pressures that schools and teachers are under to fulfil requirements and prove adherence to accountability measures (Bailey, 2016) with little or no opportunity to consider them or to question them (Redden, 2018). Court and O'Neill's (2011) paper interrogating the resistance to neoliberal accountability discourses in schools in New Zealand found that despite popular (both the electorate in general and educationalists in particular) rejection of managerialism and accountability measures, they nonetheless found their way into structures to control and shape education in the 1990s and are now embedded in the school system. This was in some part due to the introduction of international Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests and the ranking of countries (OECD) thus reinforcing the point that global pressures are hard to resist.

Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, (2016) categorise a key issue of accountability in English EYE as “datafication”. Datafication identifies the requirement of government, inspecting bodies and internal setting governance to provide proof of children’s progress in the form of records of work, rendered as data (Nicholson, 2019). Under

neoliberal governance systems, settings must prove progress and hold all agents in the setting accountable. In addition, dataveillance is identified as “a mode of surveillance enacted through sorting and sifting datasets in order to identify, monitor, track, regulate, predict and prescribe” (Kitchin, 2014, p. 168). Dataveillance makes possible the continuous monitoring of children’s, teacher’s and setting’s data, which is regarded as necessary for ensuring accountability. These hegemonic discourses are apparent in national policy and in settings’ practices (Brown and Rogers, 2015). In social-democratic systems, where the discourses are not overtly influenced by neoliberal ideologies of individualisation, accountability and proof of progress, there are nonetheless identifiable neoliberal discourses that run counter to the popular discourses of socialisation, social cohesion and holistic development (Heiskanen, Alasuutari and Vehkakoski, 2018).

In EYE in neoliberal systems such as England, the focus is firmly on the development of the child (developmental psychology) employing measures that target “school readiness” (Boström, 2017; Ring and O’Sullivan, 2018; Gregory et. al., 2021; Wahlgren and Andersson, 2024). In social democratic systems such as Finland, individualisation of the child exists alongside communitarian ideals of the importance of community. To some extent therefore, both reflect neoliberal ideology described by Hursh,

“Because employability and economic productivity became central, education became less concerned with delivering the well-rounded liberally educated person and more concerned with developing the skills required for a person to become an economically productive member of society.” Hursh, 2005, p. 5)

In HE the pressures on institutions to prove their worth through how well-prepared graduates are for the workplace is seen in the Complete University Guide's category of "Graduate Prospects". EYE settings are under similar pressure to prove children's "school readiness". In some systems for instance, England's EYFS (DfE, 2024) this is a stated aim of the policy. In the same way as a degree is seen as a passport to social mobility and increased future prosperity (Ozge and Rodriguez, 2020) the acquisition of particular skills and dispositions at the end of EYE is seen as a measure of future success in school, achieved through "narrowing the achievement gap" (Roberts-Holmes, 2020, p. 171) between disadvantaged pre-schoolers and their more advantaged peers. This "school-readiness" is found by Roberts-Holmes (2020) to be part of the managerialism accountability discourse of EYE in England that results in a factory-like universal curriculum (Trevor, Ince and Ang, 2020), fixed outcomes and an individualised focus on the child that ignores all contextual and environmental influences and allows the government to ignore wider questions about the impact of poverty (Roberts-Holmes, 2020). In doing so, not only are the setting, practitioners and parents held accountable for the attainment of their charges but the children themselves are made responsible for their own achievements. This self-governance is recognised in children knowing and being expected to manage their own work towards academic and socio-emotional targets (Foucault, 2002; EYFS, 2017). Labels such as "low achieving", "below expected level of attainment" and the collection of interventions deemed necessary, follow the child from pre-school setting to school and act as a "form of evil" (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2017, p.1). Jarvis (2016) observes that for many children, and particularly boys, the combination of

inappropriate targets and labelling unleashes a “tsunami of mental health problems” (p.15).

Social-democratic countries reject the ideas of universal targets and school readiness as being inappropriate for pre-school children (Alasuutari, Markström and Vallberg-Roth, 2014). Instead, in Finland, the role of pedagogues, environments and activities as the focus of evaluation are emphasised (ECEC, 2016). Rather than individual children’s progress, the educator’s process of observation, planning and activity is scrutinised and (self)-evaluated. However, Heiskanen, Alasuutari and Vehkakoski (2018) find that children with disabilities and learning difficulties in Finland are subject to comparisons with the normative child. This is initially to support the educator’s judgement and consequently to create an appropriate Individual Education Plan (IEP). This practice suggests that all children are subject to this judgement, in order to single out those that do not fit the normative positioning. Pedagogical Documentation exists in various forms in Nordic EYE systems and settings, both electronic and paper based. They shift attention from the group to individual children, their experience and particularly their deficits and needs (Alasuutari, Markström and Vallberg-Roth, 2014). The Finnish ECEC aim is to produce socially and emotionally well-developed children who can take their appropriate place in society. Therefore the “normative” child is one who displays particular social and emotional traits and skills.

Thus, while the contrasting systems appear to be simple examples of the different ideological perspectives of each country, a similar neoliberal ideology of comparison

against a “normative” set of targets can be identified underpinning both systems. Rose (1996) finds that the representation of the normative child is found in the routines, documentation and context of a setting. Therefore, in Nordic settings pedagogical documentation, parent-teacher meetings and observation and record keeping constitute documentality (Ferraris, 2013). Documentality is found to act in a similar way to the datafication (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016) of neoliberal systems, creating the image of the “normal child” against which individual children are compared, assessed and evaluated (Alasuutari and Karila, 2010). This contrasts with the neoliberal societies such as England whereby it is the setting or the teacher’s work they are intended to evaluate (Markström 2009). Operating overtly in neoliberal and covertly in social-democratic societies, the accountability discourse can be seen to act to subject children and educators to surveillance in a panoptical cycle of perpetual governance of others and of the self through the application of normative development and progression through datafication or documentality.

Policy constructs relationships between actors (distinct from personal relationships) that are “intrinsic to leadership and management practice” (Tickell, 2011, p. 47); professional relationships that have become ubiquitous in “best practice” in EYE. Within EYE settings these relationships are enacted within the accountability framework of supervisions, evaluations of practice, peer reviews, inspections/evaluations of settings, child profiles, Individual Education Plans, yearly reviews, standardised tests and league tables (Soni, 2018, Veijalainen et. al., 2019). Each of these measures positions managers, practitioners, parents and children as seeker or agent (Yan et. al., 2017).

1.2 Research Contexts

Early Years Education in England and Finland

Early Years Education is internationally understood to be a vital and formative time in a child's life (Taggart et. al. 2015). Early childhood education has moved from being private and invisible to being highly visible and politicised (Palmer, 2016). The politicisation of early childhood has created high expectations for the effectiveness of this investment (Aliga, et al., 2023). Early childhood is a "nodal point at which many knowledges and discourses surrounding childhood, families and parenting, schools and education intersect." (Ailwood, 2004, p.22). Early childhood education is therefore indicative of how countries construct childhoods in ideological and political arenas. This section sets out the contexts of early childhood education in England and Finland.

England

England is one of four nations that comprise the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The other nations are Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Devolution means that some legislation, including education is devolved to the four nations, while some are retained by Westminster and pertain to all four nations of the union. England is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system. Historically, power oscillates between Conservative and Labour administrations. Policy is written by ministers, advisers, civil servants, Parliamentary Committee members, MP's and Lord. Education is a devolved responsibility, therefore the English

EYFS is different to early years curricula in other countries. Therefore, this thesis focuses only on England.

Historically, welfare in England rested on charitable contributions distributed through the church. In 1945 a public Welfare State was founded. Currently the state regulates welfare that it is distributed through a variety of private, public and charitable agencies. Therefore, according to Esping-Andersen's (1990) model, it is a Liberal Welfare State. Voluntary and charitable organisations are a part of the raft of services providing basic support for families, such as foodbanks and Citizens Advice. This supports the political position that providing for one's family is an individualised responsibility, rather than society (Millar, 2019). Esping-Andersen's definition of de-commodification as the situation that "occurs when a service is rendered as a matter of right and when a person can maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market" (1990, p. 22). The state regulates welfare that it is distributed through a variety of private, public and charitable agencies (Spicker, 2000). Support is residualist and is accessed when set criteria have been met (Esping-Andersen, 1990). However, there are concerns that welfare support does not provide the level of de-commodification described by Esping-Andersen (1990), leaving 30 % of children in the UK living in poverty (Parliament, House of Lords, 2024) (figures do not differentiate between different nations).

Until recently in England early years education was the preserve of the family.

Policies between 1903 and 1970 considered early childhood as a time for play and for maturation and childcare as a family concern (King, 2020). Seven was considered the

age where formal learning was appropriate (Beauvais, 2016). In 1989, the Education Select Committee described learning as play-like and identified nine areas of learning (Larsen and Juhasz, 1986), indicating the beginning of the shift from early childhood as a time for physical growth to a time for cognitive development. New Labour were elected in 1997 and prioritised babies, young children and families. Development in the first years of pregnancy and life were identified as a crucial time of life, supported by medical and sociological research (Sylva et. al., 2004; Banerjee et. al., 2019). Sure Start children's centres were opened, targeting deprived areas. They brought together social workers, health visitors and nursery education under one roof. Over the last twenty years early years education in England has pulled in two directions; at once attempting to retain roots in holistic and integrated learning that is child centred and based on the needs and interests of the child, yet also shaped by the discourses of universal development and school readiness. The overarching principles of the EYFS (DfE, 2024, p.12) construct children as unique, strong and independent and learning at different rates. These principles are set alongside the requirement for children to be assessed against learning and development goals, prepared to "ensure they are ready for KS1" (DfE, 2024, p.13; Bradbury, 2020) by fulfilling the Early Learning Goals (ELG's) (DfE, 2024) (see Appendix 8 for a complete list of the Early Learning Goals). The juxtaposition of competing discourses has been shown to raise tensions which have serious implications for practitioners, parents and children (Brooks and Murray, 2018). Tension between the overarching principles and the learning and development requirements in the classroom is identified by Brooks and Murray (2018).

EYFS settings in England comprise a mosaic of provision comprising state-funded nurseries and pre-schools, Sure Start Children's centres, Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) daycare, play-groups, and child minders. Ofsted frameworks of external inspection comprise the accountability framework.

Early years education funding is in the process of reform which makes it a confusing situation currently. Thirty hours a week of funding is offered to all three year olds, during term time. However, not all settings are able to provide this, so some settings offer 15 hours per term time week. Thirty term time hours funding is offered to two year olds where they are assessed to be disadvantaged, and to families with two working parents. Working parents generally need wrap-around care with extended hours from 8 am – 6 pm. Settings are encouraged to provide these hours and increasingly, due to market demand, some that historically offered 9am-12pm and 1-4pm sessions are now offering extended hours. However, funding per child does not cover the costs of running a setting and paying staff, and providers are not allowed to charge top-up fees. This means that if a child attends a setting for more hours per week than their funded hours, the parents pay fee privately for the additional hours. During school holidays when there is no funding, parents pay full fees. This makes childcare an impossibility for many families on low incomes. Furthermore, affordable wrap-around care is unavailable in areas where disadvantaged children live (Webb and Bywaters, 2018). Disadvantaged parents face a huge number of challenges in supporting their families whether through Universal Credit or work (Millar and Ridge, 2020). Austerity measures over the Conservative government's years (2010-2024) have resulted in the increase of families with at least one parent working needing

welfare support (Lindberg, Nygard and Nyquvist, 2018). Government statistics show that 30% of children live in poverty in the UK (DWP, 2024). As the government's aim is to give disadvantaged children more support through early years education this mismatch between availability of provision and areas of need is significant.

An issue that the sector faces is that of professional qualification and pay. Most PVI settings are operating on very small margins, with funding not covering costs (NDNA.org.uk, 2024). Therefore, settings economise on staff wages. University graduates tend to use PVI settings as an entry level job before moving on to either further education to gain a teacher qualification and work in schools, or into related but better paid work, in social work or education (Basford, 2019) leading to high levels of staff turnover.

In conclusion, early years education in England is a fractured landscape. Funding is inadequate to cover costs and this impacts on the availability of provision, especially in areas of poverty. Problems are exacerbated by problems of recruitment and retention of well-qualified staff caused by the low funding. Developmentalism shapes both early years education and its intended outcomes of school-readiness, for which settings, practitioners and children are held accountable by Ofsted.

Finland

Finland is a republic in the North of the Nordic area of Europe, with Sweden and Norway on one side and Russia to the other and is a member of the European Union.

Finland is a republican Social Democracy which has a unicameral parliament that

delivers coalitions between political parties through a system of proportional representation with high levels of trust from citizens (Malmberg, 2021). The discourse of equality and equity, which is central to the Finnish conception of nationhood are enshrined in the Finnish Constitution (Constitution of Finland, 1999). Policy making is perceived as a joint venture between politicians, civil servants and citizens (Paliokaite and Sadauskaite, 2023), consequently, citizens have high levels of professed involvement and investment in public life. Accordingly, citizens accept higher taxation at a personal level because they experience high levels of health, education and welfare provision, as well as infrastructure provision such as transportation and internet (Engel, Mittone and Morreale, 2024).

Social democratic welfare is institutional and universal, with benefits being substantial enough to ensure that the lowest level of need is deemed acceptable to the country. Provision for welfare such as family benefits, pensions and early childhood education and care are available to all who qualify through age, status or stage in life. Historically in Finland, the state funded welfare through high taxation and contributions. Services are provided by the state, with choice of being offered, for instance in health, to the patient as to which health centre and which professional provides treatment. The Epsing-Andersen (1990) model of the welfare state found in Finland is therefore Social Democrat. The measures that Finland uses to support its citizens are not to ameliorate poverty, but to prevent it. However, while historically many benefits and services were universally free at the point of use, there was a move, driven by the government of Sipilä (2015-2019), to make many of them less generous, or means tested. The present government, a coalition between the right-

wing Finns Party (FP) and right of centre National Coalition Party (NCP) has introduced a range of welfare reforms that critics maintain will dismantle the welfare state beyond repair. These reforms include cutting unemployment benefits and social security payments, labour reforms aimed at changing labour markets and significant cuts to social and health services (Vatanen, 2024).

Reflecting the high decommodification level of the welfare state, the child poverty rate is 4% (Statista, 2024). Härtull and Saarela (2019) conclude that Finland's commitment to equality can be observed in the low levels of poverty and that there are negligible differences due to ethno-linguistic affiliations. As in England, Finland regards ECEC as a vehicle for preventing poverty. Every child has equal access to ECEC settings. Economic hurdles in the family are ameliorated through child benefit and means testing for the capped ECEC fees. However, research identifies ways in which the ideal of equality is thwarted in insidious ways. Fjällström, Karila and Paananen (2020) find that differences between the ways that municipalities set the criteria for access reduce equality with access framed by parent's position in the labour market, the level of concern for the child and parent's decision.

Finland's commitment to Early Child Education and Care (ECEC) was evident before Finland existed as an independent country. Uno Cygnaeus was influenced by Froebel's philosophy of movement and experimentation in the education of young children. His curriculum for primary schools included equal amounts of handiwork as academic work and this legacy continues to this day, seen in the comprehensive curriculum (Age 7-15) with handiwork and physical education given as many

timetabled lessons as academic development. The downward influence of this was to develop kindergartens that had no direct academic requirements. Rather, free play and guided craft activities were prioritised. Again, this is visible in the current ECEC and Pre-Primary curricula (Raisinen and Rissanen, 2010). From the beginning the discourse of childhood and children was of capable children who are a part of society on their own terms. Respect for individual children and for the time of early childhood was central to the type of curriculum and activities that were provided. The ECEC is therefore the repository of past attitudes to children and childhood, as well as the reproduction of present discourses. ECEC settings are mostly state funded with children attending local provision. There is a growing number of private-run settings but they are funded by the government and subject to the ECEC and the evaluation guidelines.

The role of the local ECEC curricula are covered by the national legislation and must comply with its statutes. National core ECEC and pre-primary curricula are national regulations issued by the Finnish National Board of Education. The core curriculum contains the goals and key contents of ECEC and pre-primary education, which is shaped by social pedagogy. Local curricula are prepared and developed by local education providers and municipalities. They specify how the national core curriculum is delivered, taking into account local circumstances such as languages. The local curricula describe how the curriculum is prepared, implemented, evaluated and how it will be developed. (FNAE, 2014a).

The ECEC is made up of three parts. The first is the core curriculum; a national regulation that provides the legislative and educational framework. The second is the local curriculum. Every municipality must provide a collaboratively devised curriculum that reflects the needs of its locality, for instance, Sami communities in the far north, ethnically diverse communities in cities, Swedish speaking or bilingual communities in the west, or rural communities in the Lake District. The third part is the individual early childhood education and care plan. Every child has an ECEC plan prepared between the teacher, guardian and child. This plan reflects the child's interests and as they grow old enough, their voice. It is produced at least once a year and more often if deemed necessary.

Rather than targets, skills or typical behaviours the ECEC describes environments to support learning and how teachers should evaluate the value of the activities shaped by social pedagogy (FNAE, 2018). There are no child-centred targets, assessments or milestones. The ECEC curriculum is described by Kardynal-Bahri and Smith (2019) as "clean, clear and minimalist". There are two discourses visible in the areas of learning and the competences – the first is that of individualisation, a neoliberal discourse; the second is collectivist orientation, a social democrat discourse. These competing discourses are found throughout the ECEC. Individualisation is seen in the aim to enable children, to hear their voices, to act on and help them act on their interests and desires (Alasuutari, Markström and Vallberg-Roth, 2014). The collectivist discourse is found in the aims centring on participation and community and the good of the group (Heikkinen, Ahtiainen and Fonsén, 2022). Evaluation guidelines supporting internal evaluative processes comprise the accountability framework

Heiskanen, 2019). Trust in teachers is high (Richardson, 2013; Schleicher, 2019) with teachers among the best trained and paid in the world (Aspfors and Eklund, 2017; Malinen, Väisänen and Savolainen, 2012).

A small but growing private sector in ECEC is becoming an issue for some in Finland. The ideal of equality has so far been upheld by the inclusion of private daycare settings in the municipal programmes, so that to parents they appear the same. However, the ideal of every child being offered the same provision where-ever they live, is being superseded by the discourse of “choice”. Parents are being offered the choice of alternative curricula that reflect either philosophies, such as Montessori, or international perspectives, or choice in flexibility and hours, with some offering 25/7 care (Ruutiainen, Alasuutari and Karila, 2020). This study shows that there is push-back from politicians and the public against the idea of a marketized ECEC, on the grounds that equality would be compromised. Nevertheless, overall, the picture of early years provision in Finland is one of high quality, well-funded provision supported by trusted, well paid professionals.

Finland and England have ideological and political differences that lead to contrasting solutions to early childhood education. Finland offers capped, fully funded universal education and care from the age of 1, in mostly public settings. England offers funding at various ages depending on socioeconomic status in a range of public, private and voluntary settings. Funding is per child but does not cover the costs of running settings and paying staff and has prompted a crisis in recruitment and retention of staff. Participation and social learning are the primary aims of Finnish

ECEC while fulfilling the Early Learning Goals is the key aim of the EYFS. While England is overtly neoliberal and Finland social democrat, there are signs that Finland is becoming more neoliberal, especially in the growth of private settings (Ruutiainen, Raikkonen and Alasuutari, 2023) thus indicating that international ideas of early childhood education are visible in both England and Finland, in different ways.

In this study I explore how the accountability discourse in early years education is influenced by international discourses of developmentalism and responsibility. I investigate how they are embedded in policies and reproduced through practice. I focus on the ideological and educational purposes of early years education to identify the intentions of policy to produce school-ready children who will become human capital. I consider the possible effects of policy representations of accountability on the educational practices of practitioners, including proving they produce “right” kind of children, evaluated through contrasting accountability regimes. In this thesis I hope to identify the route that powerful, unchallenged discourses take from ideological conviction of government, through policy writing, reproduction, embodiment to evaluation and judgement, and its effect.

The research questions are

- i) What are the ideological and educational discourses that construct the accountability discourse in early years education in England and Finland?
- ii) How is the accountability discourse reproduced in policy and practice in early years education in England and Finland?

- iii) What is the impact of the accountability discourse on educational practices in early years education in England and Finland?

1.3 Organisation of the thesis

This thesis follows a traditional structure, laid out below. The issues outlined above are examined through a discourse analysis and ethnographically informed participant observation in six settings, three in Finland and three in England.

Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework of this thesis. A post-structural, feminist framework is used to support a Foucauldian discourse analysis to identify and interrogate the international and national discourses of key policies. I use Butler's (2006) theory of performativity to examine the practices and opinions of practitioners. Together this framework is used to interrogate how hegemonic discourses of early years education are diffused through policy, attitudes and professional knowledge and the performative reproduction of practices.

Chapter 3 considers the literature and the policy context which form the basis of this study. I examine the international discourses that shape early years education, and the means by which the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in particular has come to dominate policy and practices. I discuss the literature relating to the accountability discourse in early years education and how this connects to accountability frameworks and practices in England and Finland. Finally, I examine the literature concerned with practitioner positionality.

Chapter 4 evaluates my methodology, methods and ethical considerations. The application of key concepts such as reflexivity, positionality and the feminist ethics of care are explored. The six settings participating in this study are introduced and finally, the analysis framework is explained.

Chapter 5 is the first results, analysis and discussion chapter. The key accountability policies of England are analysed, examining the ideologies underpinning the EYFS, DM and Ofsted inspection frameworks and identifying the educational intentions of early years education in England. Finally, the question of “quality” is addressed, which I ultimately argue is a term without a definition, but weaponised to induce compliance.

Chapter 6 is the second of the English results, analysis and discussion chapters, which examines how the ideological and educational intentions of policy impact on practitioners’ practices and attitudes. The confusion in practitioners’ minds between the curriculum and the inspection framework is exposed and interrogated. The issue of the accountability discourse and practices is therefore identified as productive of confusion and anxiety. Outcomes of school-readiness are unsurprising, but an additional outcome of Ofsted-readiness, for both practitioners and children was exposed and discussed.

Chapter 7 is the first of the Finnish results, analysis and discussion chapters comprising a critical discourse analysis of the Finnish ECEC and pre-primary curricula and the Guidelines for Evaluating the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care

to identify their underlying ideologies and educational intentions. Then, the issue of “quality” was addressed. As with English policy, it was found to lack clear definition and therefore produced confused practice.

Chapter 8 completes the Finnish results, analysis and discussion chapters, concluding with an analysis of how Finnish ideological and educational intentions are less clear-cut than policy assumes. In particular, policy was found to be interpreted in a variety of ways by practitioners, including a turn to neoliberal, developmental constructions of children, which resulted in practitioners reproducing models of development and testing, despite this being contrary to policy.

Chapter 9 concludes the thesis. I sum up my findings by arguing that the accountability discourse is a recognisable discourse found in international, national and local policies, practices and attitude and identify limitations in the research. Finally, I discuss where I have identified gaps in the research that could indicate further study.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework

Introduction

This chapter provides a critical description of the two key theorists I use to examine the complex issues explored in this thesis. These theories are considered in relation to how the concepts are used to understand the effects of discourse and power within the context of accountability in early years education. A Foucauldian framework is applied in order to discuss issues of knowledge and power, including discourse (Foucault, 2005), biopower (Foucault, 1991a) and governmentality (Foucault, 1991a). The metaphor of the panopticon is drawn on to examine how power is invisible and yet compelling. Butler's theory of performativity (1990) is used to examine issues of ritual and routine which are used to identify the ways in which roles pre-exist the practitioner and child and impel the enactment of policy in particular ways. A Foucauldian framework of discourse and power coupled with Butler's theory of performativity work together to allow the issues of accountability to be interrogated from the micro through to the macro system levels, considering the ways in which discourses shape practice, opinions and attitudes through policy, qualifications and training. Throughout, the significance of these theoretical concepts will be set out.

The theoretical underpinnings of this thesis are located within the post-structural field, with the intention of troubling the dominance of the rational, scientific and objective perspective of modernism (St Pierre and Pillow, 2000) whilst also acknowledging this positivist ontology that shapes EYFS settings. In particular, the

role of post-structuralist theories in challenging the “norms” of a particular society in order to contest the settled order is an important facet of this thesis. Post-structuralists have a particular interest in the experiences of those on the margins of society (Baxter, 2016). Here, I argue that both the practitioners of early years education (Rudnoe, 2020), the children who attend early years settings (Mahadew, 2023), are marginalised and regulated to different extents by their countries’ policies and dominant discourses (Lee-Koo, 2019). This theoretical framework is used to interrogate the ways in which power and discourse is used to control, reward and reprimand the workforce. This chapter begins by setting out the Foucauldian framework used in this thesis.

2.1 A Foucauldian Framework of Discourse and Power

Discourse

Foucault describes a discourse as a “material reality as a thing pronounced or written”,

“in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role it is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality.” (Foucault, 2005, p.52)

Foucault contends that the ideologies, discourses, actions and attitudes of a society act as a “regime of truth” (1991b) which are “everywhere. Not that it engulfs everything but that it comes from everywhere.” (Foucault, 2008, pp. 121-122).

Discourse simultaneously creates the normalised attitudes of its time and place, and this becomes the subconscious framing of society's attitudes and ideas that is reproduced in conversation, texts, institutions and practices at a local and personal level, seeming to the individual to be a rational way of thinking and freely chosen by themselves as common sense. Discourse, which is subjective and hegemonic comes to be viewed as objective truth (Foucault, 1972). In this thesis I "pay particular attention to how things are framed and how that has a bearing on the way principles are turned into practice" (Alasuutari and Alasuutari, 2012, p. 131).

Relating the ideas of discourses to policy, Ball writes,

Discourses mobilise truth claims and constitute rather than simply reflect social reality [...] Policies are very specific and practical regimes of truth and value and the ways in which policies are spoken and spoken about, their vocabularies, are part of the creation of the conditions of their acceptance and enactment (Ball, 2008, p.5)

Discourses are produced in three ways, according to Foucault (2005). Through prohibition (speech that is forbidden), division and rejection (the pathologisation of particular people) and the division of knowledge into true or false. This last, Foucault called the "will to truth" and deemed it the most powerful production of discourse in modern society,

“We ask what this will to truth has been and constantly is, across our discourses this will to truth which has crossed so many centuries of our history; what is, in its very general form, the type of division which governs our will to know (notre volonté de savior) then what we see taking shape is perhaps something like a system of exclusion, a historical, modifiable and institutionally constraining system.” (Foucault, 2005, p.54)

Foucault argues that the nature of discourse is that it appears neutral and invisible to those it controls,

“‘True’ discourse, freed from desire and power by the necessity of its form, cannot recognise the will to truth that pervades it; and the will to truth, having imposed itself on us for a very long time, is such that the truth it wants cannot fail to mask it.” (Foucault, 2005, p.56)

Consequently, policy is imbued with the discourses of its culture, because it is written from a position of power, disseminates itself and is reproduced through opinions, beliefs and practices (Ball 2008). Therefore, in this thesis I interrogate the policies, practices and outcomes of the accountability discourse (defined in Chapter 1) to identify the commonalities and contrasts in discourses and thus expose and discuss the hidden will to truth of accountability in early years education.

One aspect that this thesis interrogates is the extent to which practitioners accept or question dominant discourses about children. In England the idea of the “unique

child” (EYFS, 2021) and in Finland that of the “agentic child” (ECEC, 2018) are presented as obvious and “normal” constructions of children, presented through policies as “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1980) which Youdell (2006) finds are not simply descriptive but also constructive; that is, that policy and practice exist in a cycle of predetermination and fulfilment. Clarke and Cochrane (1999, p.35) describe how such constructions of children may become established through state practices, “discourses shape and become institutionalised in social policies and the organisations through which they are carried out”, although Mac Naughton (2005, p.20) argues that understanding how discourses “naturalise discrimination and oppression” allows them to be made visible and to combat them. The idea of the “unique child” in England and the “agentic child” in Finland is presented as a positivist truth, acting to normalise these constructions of children and create categories of normative and non-normative behaviour and development that is observable and measurable.

Policy perpetuates the pathologisation of non-normative development, such as the identification of SEN in Finland (Heiskanen, 2019), or the failure to reach developmental goals in England (Rudoe, 2020). The accountability discourse that supports discrimination against children who fail to meet expectations acts by labelling the children as needing additional support or intervention (Bossaert et. al., 2015). These labels are carried through to the child’s next educational setting (Nah and Tan, 2021), through mechanisms such as pedagogical documentation in Finland and the EYFS profile in England. This thesis aims to uncover such hidden “truths” to

offer a way of questioning discourses with the aim of troubling the accountability discourse.

The Panopticon

Foucault's metaphor of the panopticon comes from Bentham's idea of a prison constructed as two concentric circles. The outer circle being the cells of the prisoners and the inner circle containing the warden. Bentham's intention was that the prisoners should be visible to the warden but that the warden would not be visible to the prisoners. This meant that the prisoners should act as if they were being watched whether they were or not. In addition, this prison was also open to the public, the idea being that the warden was also watched. The intention was a humane one, to ensure the ethical treatment of prisoners. However, Foucault used the metaphor of the panopticon to illustrate how surveillance is used to control behaviour, attitudes, beliefs and opinions. Foucault used the panopticon to illustrate how power, flowing through channels of discourse, reaches "into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourse, learning processes and everyday lives" (Foucault, 1980, p.39). He argued that surveillance, like the idea of the warden, impels individuals to self-govern as if they were under constant scrutiny. The panopticon (Foucault, 1991b) exposes both the discourses and the immense difficulty in challenging them. Foucault argued, "in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power". It operationalises power to enhance social and economic productivity through "instruments that render visible, record, differentiate and compare" (Foucault, 1991b, p.208). Settings are compelled to gather data that makes visible the progress

of children and allows children, teachers and settings to be held accountable according to datasets. Kitchen describes dataveillance as “a key component of modern forms of governance and governmentality” (2014, p. 168).

Perryman et. al. (2018) argue that schools now experience post-panopticism, whereby the threat of inspection impels leaders and teachers to go beyond acting as if Ofsted were present every day. Rather than preparing for an inspection, which might involve ensuring policies and practices are up to date and involving training on delivery of lessons, post-panopticism sees schools developing policies and practices that fulfil the requirements of Ofsted. Thus, the rationale for new policies, practices and developmental work is not to fulfil the needs of the school, its pupils and parents, or indeed curriculum requirements but rather to ensure that the requirements of Ofsted are met. Colman (2021) identifies compliance with Ofsted requirements as a response by schools to the anxiety felt by leadership teams and individual teachers. In this scenario, settings and teachers drill down into the requirements of Ofsted over and above the requirements of the National Curriculum with what Colman refers to as “hyper-enactment” (2021, p. 2). The intention of schools is to ensure that Ofsted inspections have the greatest likelihood of being positive, which Perryman et. al. (2018) refer to as ‘gaming’ the system. Wood (2019) identifies that Ofsted has stretched its remit from inspecting to ensure curricula were being taught, to imposing its own definition of quality of education through the quality descriptors of Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement and Inadequate. Post-panoptic surveillance therefore involves settings anticipating the expectations of inspectors as their top priority, attempting to ensure that the “fuzzy norms”

(Courtney, 2016, p. 627) of the ever-changing requirements of Ofsted are met. These expectations are proven through the creation of data that can be used to “identify, monitor, track, regulate, predict and prescribe” (Kitchin, 2014, [p. 168) the progress of students and children and monitor and judge teachers’ and settings’ performance. This study draws on both this conception of post-panoptic dataveillance as well as Foucault’s panoptic governmentality.

Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury (2017) identify that the flow of data in early years education in England can lead early childhood practitioners to regulate their behaviour and that of the children they work with, to produce activities and work that can be marked against set criteria in the EYFS (DfE, 2024) through “datafication”. Bradbury (2020) identifies how the standardised curriculum in early years (which is unusual globally) can be linked to aspects of “schoolification” including more formal lessons, a narrowed focus on literacy and mathematics and the use of ability groupings. Alexiadou et. al. (2024) identify a similar shift from social pedagogy towards more formal pre-primary education in Finland. The outcome of the use of these technologies is to reject/pathologise children who fail to meet these standards (Davis and Dunn, 2022; Aikas et. al., 2023). The concept of the panopticon is used to understand the processes and impacts of governance and accountability regimes, identifying how pedagogy and practices are altered to conform to the culture of accountability, thereby inducing practitioners to police their own practice.

While the EYFS in England and the ECEC in Finland appear to be very different in terms of intention, practice and outcome, they are both subject to the limitations of

specific knowledge imposed by those holding power having the appearance of common sense, historical legitimacy and accumulated wisdom (Blumenfeld-Jones, 2022). Foucault's metaphor of the panopticon (Foucault, 1991b) makes visible the unseen and untested assumptions and practices that practitioners draw on not only to shape their own work, but to ensure that their colleagues also draw on and shape their work. The panopticon illuminates the environment in which this downward press of power and accountability is accepted and reproduced.

Power

Power is conceived as something that is not fixed, but as a,

“shifting and changing interactive network of social relations among and between individuals, groups, institutions and structures that are political, economic and personal.” (Ball, 2013, pp. 29-30).

Hoskins, (2015) defines power as “complex, nuanced and contextual” (p. 376) and Heiskanen, Alasuutari and Vehkakoski, (2018) as “something that people do in social relations, not something that a particular person or institution automatically possesses” (p. 2). In the context of accountability in early years education this consideration reveals the hidden power of policies and practices, local, national and international (Alasuutari and Quadir, 2014). It delimits the assumed agency of a person to challenge either policies or documents, or the oral knowledge that is passed on within particular settings, or that is disseminated through qualification courses or Continuous Professional Development (CPD) (Mascarenhas, 2018). The

practices, texts and assumptions that are embodied in EYE practice are made a material reality, for instance, the Ofsted inspection framework (Ofsted, 2023) lays out what will be inspected, thereby delimiting the practices in settings to those that will be judged; the Finnish evaluation framework (Vlasov et. al., 2019) sets out the criteria by which settings self-evaluate. Those practices that are not described in the frameworks are made forbidden.

My study aims to identify the dominant discourses in early years education in each country and setting to uncover and discuss the “certain number of procedures” that are employed to “ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over chance events” (Foucault, 2005, p.58). I aim to expose the submerged “wills to truth” (Foucault, 2005) that exist in countries and settings. In the next section I show how discourses subjectify practitioners and children to produce and reproduce policy through governmentality and biopower.

Governmentality and Biopower

Foucault defined governmentality as being the notion of conduct (Foucault, 2007) or the ways in which the regulatory practices of the state and the conditions by which individuals govern themselves and others. Governmentality exposes and identifies those discourses that “entertain the claims of local, discontinuous, disqualified knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory” (Foucault, 1980, p. 83). Governmentality (Foucault, 1981) represents a search for “accidents, conditions, contingencies, over-lapping discourses, threads of power, and, importantly, conditions of possibility for the production of common sense, taken-for-granted

truths” (Ailwood, 2004, p.21). It is a search for “the non-necessity of what passes for necessity in our present” (Burchall, 1993, p.279) and an applied process of scrutiny, whereby analysing the “mentalities of government is to analyse thought made practical and technical” (Dean, 1999, p.18). Therefore, Miller and Rose (1990) argue it is concerned with the ways discourses are established and disseminated through language, providing “a mechanism for rendering reality amenable to certain kinds of action” (p.7). Governmentality is therefore a useful concept for interrogating the impact of accountability policies to identify the discourses that shape policy development and explain some of the inconsistencies that can occur between competing discourses such as for instance, child-centred learning and universal development.

Foucault posited that the areas of life that directly touch an individual’s experiences have the most powerful impact, found in the attitudes, norms, rituals, habits, untested assumptions and in what is perceived to be common sense (Keohane, 2002). Hope (2016) found there are many technologies used to place pupils under surveillance to ensure self-governance, concluding that panoptical hyper-surveillance has been normalised. Lindh and Mansikka (2023) found that the development of pedagogical documentation in Finland increased the level of surveillance on individual children by directing the teacher’s attention towards gathering information about children’s development rather than evaluation of activities. Similarly, studies in EYE settings regarding panoptical surveillance in risky areas such as bathrooms (Cliff and Millei, 2011) show how power is imposed in mundane and repetitive rituals of day-to-day life (Foucault, 1981). Governmentality therefore is used in this thesis to

examine how discourses shape personal and particular behaviours, attitudes and beliefs and lead to self-subjectification by practitioners and children.

Governmentality refers to a set of mechanisms by which people's thoughts and desires are known and policed, ensuring that citizens do most of the policing to themselves (Foucault, 1988; Fleming, 2022). When Foucault describes disciplinary forces, he is describing the intricate workings of power in society that exist where it is the least obvious (Rose, 1999). Individual's minds and bodies are disciplined through surveillance, control, suggestion, discipline, encouragement and discouragement from family, friends, colleagues, the media and themselves. In contrast, Biopower refers to the surveillance and control of citizens through the use of statistics, strategies and interventions at the level of populations. In early years education this is often seen in the school-readiness agenda, whether in academic requirements or social and behavioural expectations.

Foucault defined biopower as,

“a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species become the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power.” (Foucault, 2007, p.2)

The conduit through which this power is exerted is through any channel that information can be disseminated (Fletcher et. al., 2019). Therefore, medical

knowledge and psychiatric knowledge in their broadest terms are ways of subjectifying citizens. These areas of expertise are closely linked to the “basic biological features”, but education is closely linked because what is deemed to be the “natural” way that children learn are political strategies that are intricately linked with cultural norms. These cultural norms are inherent in accountability discourses in EYE, holding settings and practitioners responsible for ensuring that normative curricula are applied. Foucault asserts that biopower is productive, it produces a change in future actions (Mascarenhas, 2018). Biopower is seen in examples such as the use of developmental psychology as the theoretical perspective used to construct the EYFS, or Social Pedagogy to construct the ECEC. Children’s development, and the practices required to shape it are constructed as normative and are used to subjectify children and practitioners. Biopower is therefore a key concept to this study in understanding how political strategy impacts on biological functions such as physical development through the requirements and expectations of curricula.

Thus, governmentality and biopower combined make available selected knowledge that is cultural and discursive that becomes internalised by citizens who both restrain themselves to act in ways that correspond with that knowledge and ensure that they produce future behaviours shaped by that knowledge. Zembylas (2021) draws on biopower as a way of making sense of how neoliberal educational practices in schools create practices in classes and lessons that are absorbed and internalised by pupils. This study draws on governmentality to explore how practitioners and children subjectify themselves to reproduce discourses drawn from policy, while biopower is drawn on to explore how policy draws on universal constructions of children and

practitioners to insist on standardised inputs and outcomes that are measured nationally.

Several studies on EYE have used Foucauldian theoretical frameworks to show how the disciplinary forces of governmentality and biopower are interwoven into policy and practice that pertains to babies and young children. Cliff and Millei (2011) found that toilets in the toddler room were sites of both toilet and hygiene learning, and of social learning of how to manage themselves in an acceptable manner using panoptical practices (Foucault, 1979) to ensure compliance. Therefore, bodies and minds are closely monitored as part of the day-to-day routines and rituals and through the reproduction of policies and practices. These routines (Derochers, 2007) are recorded as part of the observation-planning-activity cycle and become absorbed into the accountability processes of evaluation and inspection.

Biopower produces a change in the individual's behaviour through control of attitudes, opinions and actions at the population level. Foucault expanded this argument,

“Discipline classifies the components thus identified according to definite objectives. What are the best actions for achieving a particular result? What is the best movement for loading one's rifle? What is the best position to take? What workers are best suited for a particular task? What children are capable of obtaining a particular result?” (Foucault, 1991b, p.16)

Biopower acts to limit the possibilities open to the population. As an example, the use of standardised testing limits the breadth of what is taught to children, in particular classrooms and in every classroom under that jurisdiction, not by banning anything, but by creating a sense of what is normal for a student to be taught and to learn. This creates a citizen who self-disciplines, both in terms of the teacher who ensures their class is prepared for the test and the child who learns only what is taught. Whether the standardised testing focuses on physical attainment, ensuring that every child can jump, hop and skip by the age of 5, for instance, or on learning to read. Both examples a certain physicality from the child, moving their body in particular ways for the physical test, or controlling their body to sit still and focus on a book in learning to read. Foucault named this action subjectivity and used the term in a particular way:

“The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. This subjection is not only obtained by the instruments of violence or ideology; it can also be direct, physical, pitting force against force, bearing on material elements and yet without involving violence; it may be calculated, organised, technically thought out; it may be subtle, make use of neither weapons nor terror and yet remain of a physical order” (Foucault, 1991a, p.16)

Limited information is made available, through education and training, and through the reproduction of discourses reflected in education, training, policies and law.

National curricula are built around their cultural perspective of child development

preparing human capital with skills and attributes suited to that economy. Therefore, the individual is both the object, who absorbs this information, and the subject, who subjectifies and disciplines their own body and thoughts. Foucault's critics argue that the information selected is rational based on our development as a species – that we have developed to be rational (Heracleous, 2006). This argument makes the Modernist claim that development is always progressive and builds on previous knowledge; therefore, progress is always rational and beneficial. Foucault (1991a) argues that reliance on rationality is dangerous. He rejects the Modernist claim of progressive and improving development and argues instead that what is considered rational is the perspective of most powerful. Consequently, he questions how one perspective comes to be prioritised over the other and concludes that the justification is power itself. The people who hold power decide on which limited information becomes authoritative (Armstrong, 2015). This leads to an understanding that human beings are subjectified, through the workings of both the tools of state, such as policy and guidance, and through the unseen power of discourses. Practitioners also become subjectified through what constitutes education and qualifications to consider curricula reasonable.

This understanding of subjectification is utilised (Dean, 1999) here in order to explore the ways in which governance is conducted (Rose, 1999) in early years settings in England and Finland (Mac Naughton, 2005). Martshenko (2023) interrogated the role that governmentality had in predetermining American teachers' labelling of children as "gifted". Martshenko (2023) found that internalised discourses of race were instrumental in creating a "white supremacist" culture of giftedness, showing how

practitioners are subjectified. These studies suggest that tools such as teacher training, curricula are reflective of the dominant culture and professional development, subjectifying the minds of practitioners to reproduce discourses without question.

Foucault's later writing explored the ways in which an understanding of power could be used to challenge and disrupt the regimes of truth (Foucault, 2002). Interrogating how truth is embodied in policy, text, institutions and practices can be used not only in an historical sense, to lay bare the layers of meaning and influence but also "to destabilise, to make things 'not as necessary as all that'" (Foucault, 1971) Foucault intended that holding this understanding of regimes of truth should not produce "a horizon of absolute subjection and domination, but rather the opposite – a horizon of freedom" (Ball, 2019, p. 133). It is in this spirit that I use Foucault's concepts of governmentality, biopower, discourse and subjectivity. Foucault (1981, p. 101) wrote, "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it." This is particularly relevant in studies of policy which aim to examine and expose how discourses operate as regimes of truth within policy. Policies are very specific and practical regimes of truth (Monarca, Mendez-Nunez, and Gonzalez, 2021). The ways in which policy is spoken about in early years settings not only reflects the "truths" of the policy but explain how these regimes are accepted and reproduced. Foucault (1980, p.133) wrote that "'Truth' is linked in circular relations with systems of power and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it". Youdell (2006, p.176) contends that identifying the dominant discourses allows us to identify

and consider other discourses that “might be characterised as subjugated, disavowed, alternative, marginal, counter or oppositional”, which allows for the potential of alternative possibilities.

The macro perspectives of governmentality and biopower works in the framework of accountability to create conditions of the subjective practitioner and child in early years education. The following section uses the theoretical perspective of Butler’s Performativity (Butler, 2006) as a perspective to consider how discourses, governmentality, biopower and subjectivity act on individuals to become the “right” kind of subjectivised person to step into the pre-existing roles of practitioner and child in early years education settings.

2.2 Butler’s Theory of Performativity

Butler’s theory of Performativity (1990) centres on the assertion that gender is not an immutable, natural phenomenon but is rather a cultural inscription upon the body. Gender is conceived of as something one does, rather than something one is. Butler explains,

“Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for

these acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.” (Butler, 1990, p. 25)

Butler draws on influences such as Lacan’s psychoanalysis (2006), phenomenology (Husserl 1982, Merleau-Ponty 2012, Mead, 1934), structural anthropology (Levi-Strauss 1967, Turner 1978, Geertz, 1972) and speech act theory (Searle, 1979). These theories explore the ontological position that reality is not a stable, positive state, but is constantly created “through language, gesture and all manner of symbolic social sign” (Butler, 1990, p.270). Butler’s theory of performativity utilises the concept of speech act theory (Searle, 1979) to identify how words make real what they say. As Butler explains, “Within speech act theory, a performative is that discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (1993, p.13). Therefore, language, gesture and symbolic social signs create reality and rather than reality being a fixed, positive entity, it is continuously created and constantly reinforced. Butler is concerned with how “gender acts” lead to material changes in one’s body and existence: “One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body” (1990, p.272). Butler contends this leads to gender being embodied, not because it is a biological imperative, but because the language, embodiment and symbolic social signs of a particular society construct it in this way, in each person’s particular body. This embodied understanding of performativity is used in this thesis to examine how for both practitioners and children, ways of acting and thinking as a child or practitioner in early years education is created through the language, social and physical expectations of the culture related to it.

Butler (2006) identifies two aspects of performativity. The first is that cultural expectation produces the phenomena it anticipates. The difference between how reality appears is that there is an internal essence of ourselves, whereas Butler's (2006) theory argues that this is illusory, and that phenomena are anticipated and produced in culture. Therefore, a practitioner's feeling that she "knows" how to care for children is not an internal consequence of personal characteristics or character type, or personal experience but is the effect of what is expected and anticipated in an EYE being produced precisely because that is what is expected in that context. As Lloyd (1999) identifies, it is not who one is, but what one does. Therefore, the ways that a practitioner acts and thinks is different from culture to culture, although there may be many similarities, there will be significant differences reflecting the ideological, political and cultural practices particular to each country which construct the act that the actor is compelled to perform. Nayak and Kehily (2006) find that gender is something that boys and girls are compelled to perform. Gendered behaviours are perceived to exist as neutral, natural ways of acting and thinking. Applying this to EYE, the role of practitioner exists before a person trains and qualifies to become a practitioner. Therefore, in becoming a practitioner, they merely step into the thoughts, actions and practices that make a person a practitioner and face a compulsion to perform.

The second aspect of performativity is that it is not a singular act but is achieved through repetition and ritual through a "stylised repetition of acts" (Butler, 1992, p. 160). These rituals are produced both through national, local and setting's policies and discourses and are reproduced through action. They are also produced through

conventions that are specific to a setting, a room, or an individual practitioner that are not written down but that are repeated, becoming ritual for a specific time, space and person(s). Charteris (2014) contends that identity is a continuous process that involves the reiteration and resignification of one's self across and within discourses. She finds that teachers' repetition of performative acts gives an illusion of stability, both in terms of their own and pupil's identities, and of classroom routines.

Therefore, the practitioner is seen to confirm their identity as an effective teacher by referring to curricula, returning to facts and practices taught during teacher-training and reproducing the practices of their setting. If a practitioner fails to continuously reproduce and reiterate the practices, opinions and rituals they are vulnerable to accusations of being inconsistent or of poor practice (Davies, 2010). As a means of developing a reflexive practice as a counter to unthinking repetition, Charteris (2014) offers the use of discourse analysis as a tool to prompt "the epistemological shudder" that enables teachers to review beliefs and trouble unquestioned assumptions.

Charteris' (2014) research echoes Mac Naughton's (2005) invitation to use Foucault in the classroom to trouble the dominant discourses by creating discomfort in accepting unproblematised discourses. By approaching the issue from the perspective of performativity Charteris (2014) offers an alternative perspective to the problem of unquestioned discourses and their impact in the classroom.

Hawkins (2005, p.16) claims that "individuals have agency but not autonomy". In her study of kindergarten children's identities as second-language learners, Hawkins finds that the agency is based on an individual's decision of whether to act within the boundaries, or to reject them. Therefore, from a performative perspective, the choice

made is whether to accept the performative role that exists before the individual, or to step outside it (Butler, 1990). However, while policy positions practitioners and children as agentic, and positions them within the normalising space of EYE settings, with their attendant policies and practices, they are not passive recipients of normalising discourses. Multiple truth regimes circulate and the meanings are not fixed but are attributed by the practitioners and children. Therefore, EYE settings are relational spaces that imply the potential for negotiation and struggle. Butler's (1991) theory of performativity provides a lens with which to interrogate "individual decisions" (Beck and Beck-Gersheim, 1997, p.29) that discourses of autonomy and responsibility lead practitioners and children to believe they are making. Practitioners (Picchio et. al., 2012) and children (Grajczonek and Truasheim, 2017) are framed as agentic in EYE, and as such, responsible for their decisions and held accountable for them. Performativity is useful in interrogating how disciplinary power (Foucault, 1991b) which is used to shape the opinions and practices of a culture through policies and discourses can be seen to work on a personal, embodied level.

Ball also used the term performativity but he uses it in relation to accountability. Ball's (2003) definition of performativity has similarities to both governmentality and biopower. He defines performativity thus,

"Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organizations)

serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement." Ball, 2003, p. 216

The distinction between Ball's and Butler's use of the term performativity is significant. There are overlaps, in terms of both being embodied, however, Butler's use of the term is more focused on the internalisation and reproduction of norms and expectations while Ball's use is related to how individuals and organisations are held accountable through measurement of their performance. Where I refer to performativity in this thesis, I am referring to Butler's use of the term unless I specify that it is Ball's definition that I am drawing on.

Foucault (1979b) and Butler (1990) together create a perspective that makes visible the discourses that policy is shaped by, and the performative spaces and actions that policy govern practitioners and children. Accountability governs these education spaces, ensuring that curricula are implemented, and policy complied with; practitioners and children are made responsible for the correct outcomes, made visible through assessment according to evaluation or inspection criteria.

The question of normalisation, in which discourses of development are shaped using developmental psychology to create accountability discourses of children's growth and learning, is further interrogated through the application of performativity (Butler, 1990). The use of assessments and diagnoses, within and beyond the classroom are

mechanisms for gaining control of children, by requiring children to sit, stand, walk and speak in particular ways. Furthermore, through the working of governmentality and biopower, children absorb the restrictions from practitioners and internalise and reproduce them. Thus, the modes of speaking and moving in the educational setting are ritualised and children and adults repeat them. Keddie (2016) concludes that the children impose the restrictions on themselves and “know” their success rests on never making mistakes. Butler calls this “cruel and it has to be exposed as a kind of systematic cruelty” (Butler, in conversation with Giuliano, 2015, p.192). She suggests that there need to be ways for students to recognise the limitations they are placed under and challenge and suggest alternative approaches to learning, asking “how can we create an education environment where the unexpected result is valued?” (*Ibid*, p.192).

The expectation and acceptance of unexpected results is pertinent to EYE where children’s development is never predictable, and yet developmental predictability is demanded by curricula and inspection/evaluation frameworks. Failure to fulfil these demands include pathologisation of the child and the imposition of remedial interventions, and of sanctions for the practitioner and settings (Heiskanen et. al. 2018; Bradbury, 2018). Therefore, this thesis uses performativity as an analytical theoretical tool by which the actions, thoughts and speech of practitioners participating in the study can be understood as symbols that indicate the impact of dominant discourses on their lived experiences. Mac Naughton (2005) demonstrates the ways in which practitioners can be unaware of discourses as controlling factors in practice. Charteris (2016) draws on Mac Naughton’s (2005) work shows how

practitioners experience an “epistemological shudder” (Charteris, 2016, p. 105) the moment where the unproblematised classroom discourses and performativity are made visible through the use of discourse analysis with the aim of provoking the teacher to look again at a familiar situation. Charteris (2016) establishes that reflective practice can lead to a realisation that discourses in policy can be problematic when viewed in conjunction with conflicting discourses about children, learning and development. Thus, I use performativity as a theory to go beyond simply identifying the discourses that create performative roles and how they are fulfilled, but also to interrogate the “epistemological shudders” experienced by both practitioners and me as researcher in the process of observations, interviews and analysis.

Robert-Holmes and Bradbury (2017) identify the ways that the requirement for data to prove children’s progress delimits the EYE curriculum they experience. Many studies (Adams et. al, 2020; Baker, Courtois and Eeberhart, 2023; Flensburg-Mandsen and Mortensen, 2018; Henning, 2013) show that curricula based on developmental psychology ages and stages construct practitioners’ views of children as developing in binary good/bad trajectories, and that social-pedagogy curricula similarly shape practitioners’ views about the social competence of children (Basford, 2019; Broström, 2017; Formosinho and Figueiredo, 2014; Power et. al., 2019; Sproule, Walsh and McGuinness, 2019). Many of these studies identify that whichever ideological position is reflected in policy there will always be some groups of children who benefit from the discourses and norms, and others who are disadvantaged.

Therefore, regardless of the ideological position of the curriculum, it is inevitable that

they produce models of behaviour, attainment and attitudes that are considered optimal in their context, with the contingent neoliberal outcome of blame being placed on those who fail to perform (Heiskanen, 2019). Discourses, governmentality and biopower act as regimes of truth (Foucault, 1991b) to create the performative actions and outcomes that practitioners and children are compelled to attend to.

2.3 Reconciling tensions between Foucault and Butler

This thesis utilises Foucault's and Butler's respective theoretical frameworks. Specifically, the thesis deployed Foucault's concepts of discourse, governmentality and biopower in tandem with Butler's concept of performativity. Taken together, these theoretical concepts are utilised in my thesis as an analytical tool to consider how regimes of truth come to occupy powerful positions in policy and understand how these are inscribed into the body and mind through performativity. Structures of governmentality and biopower such as policy, internalisation of normative practices, inspection and evaluation create spaces within which a range of performative actions, thoughts and opinions are acceptable and others are not. These linguistic structures create an illusion of agency, whereby a particular practitioner appears to be making choices based on research, experience and expertise and how a child acts according to freedom within the policy, ideology and setting. However, Butler (1990) argues agency is an illusion imposed through cultural expectations, which can be applied to EYE practitioner and children. However, crossing the boundaries incurs censure, punishment and pathologisation and expulsion (Foucault, 1980; Butler, 1990). A post-structural perspective challenges the modern dichotomy of structure vs agency and argues that they are in fact interdependent and mutually contesting

(Baxter, 2016). Post-structuralists regard these supposedly agentic actions, thoughts and opinions as constructed through language (Baxter, 2016).

While the outcomes of the EYFS and the ECEC/pre-primary curricula are radically different, the underlying mechanisms by which they are worked through are the same. That is, children are constructed as growing in agency through rational, logical and linear growth that is measurable and teachable, with consequences for those children who fail to achieve independence at the expected ages (Heiskanen, Alasuutari and Vehkakoski, 2018; Aubrey, Ghent and Kanira, 2012). This Foucauldian framework is used to identify and analyse the discourses, coupled with Butler's theory of performativity to expose the ways in which roles created through discourses pre-exist the practitioner and child. They are impelled to step into these roles or risk being pathologised. The combination of these theories to interrogate the accountability discourse allows me to look at the issue from the widest perspective of policy and cultural expectations to the most personal and detailed experiences of practitioners. Ultimately, it is practitioners who bear the brunt of the accountability discourse, being held responsible for implementing policies with consequences where they are judged to have failed. Butler addresses the issue of breaking out of repetition and routine to trouble dominant discourses. She asks, "How do we move on from the perspective of daily life when you have just taken this task as an ordinary way of looking?" Her reply is to take a systematic look at the world to decide which perspective is more helpful. She suggests that one should "move outside of a purely self-interested subjective perspective to learn how to see a larger picture" and that this enables us "to take into account larger versions of power that have produced the

world we live in. This means we need more precise models of analysis, we need precise models of description” (Butler in conversation with Guiliano, 2015, p. 186). It is in this spirit that I intend to use the theoretical framework of Foucault and Butler in this thesis.

Chapter 3. Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review provides some context for this study in terms of research literature and key policies. I discuss how the construction of practitioners through discourses of maternalism and professionalism create complex and contradictory identities that require surveillance to ensure reproduction and enforcement. I also discuss the consequences of the accountability discourse. I begin with a discussion of the research that addresses accountability as a discourse that is found in early years education in both neoliberal and social democratic systems. Policies have different aims and outcomes but studies (Raman and Ghosal, 2021; Park and Savalyeva, 2022) show that there are common features of accountability discourses that transcend national boundaries.

3.1 International Discourses

The accountability discourses of early childhood education do not appear in national policies drawn only from the historical and cultural experiences of that country. Rather, they are shaped by international research and global ideological influences. This section situates national accountability discourses in an exploration of how globalisation of education has reached into national policy writing mechanisms and explains how international discourses impact on national and cultural constructions of childhood, education and care.

“Methodological nationalism” describes the world as composed of self-contained entities called nation states, making policy decisions independently of each other (Beck and Sznaider, 2006). Koos and Keulman (2019) contest this idea that nation states make ideas independently of international discourses. Alasuutari and Qadir (2014) argue that nations organise themselves in similar institutional systems of government and governance, despite there being no expectation or requirement for them to do so and conclude that this is due to isomorphism. Meyer et. al. (1997, p.145) define isomorphism as “a world whose societies, organised as nation-states, are structurally similar in many unexpected dimensions and change in unexpectedly similar ways”. In this isomorphic model of the world, the similarities and parallel changes are described as a shared rationalistic world-culture. Ben Rhouma, Koleva and Schaltegger (2018) argue that this dominating perspective is particularly perpetuated through non-governmental organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank and the United Nations (UN).

The OECD produces comparative studies between countries that rank participating nations in order from “best” to “worst” in many areas from agriculture to education (OECD statistics, 2021). These comparative reports work to legitimise certain policies, outlooks, assumptions and discourses and to delegitimise others (Tasaki, 2017; Neelam et.al., 2020). This promotes and enables world models that are “ritually enacted” by nation states in order to climb the ranks of the next comparative study and be able to claim improvement (Tommaso et. al., 2021). Meyer et. al. (1997) claim that the outcome of this process is that all participating organisations and nation-

states eventually look the same. Therefore, isomorphism is seen to happen because of dominating discourses, not independently of them.

Over the past three decades early childhood has moved from the private concern of families, to being an issue that national and international policy is aware of, as McGovern's (1993) report shows. The shift in intention being from care to education is visible in White's (2004) analysis of early childhood development policy in Canada and the US, where the emphasis between care and preschool education was balanced equally. Ten years later the shift was fully realised in the United Nation's Sustainable Goals, of which the fourth goal includes,

“By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood education development, care and preschool education so that they are ready for primary education.” (Open working Group of the General Assembly in Sustainable Development Goals, 2014, p. 10)

This goal was mirrored in the 2012 reform of the EYFS which stated it,

“promotes teaching and learning to ensure children's 'school readiness' and gives children the broad range of knowledge and skills that provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life.” (DfE, 2012, p. 3).

International discourses that represented a shift from early childhood policy being perceived as a private, family decision about baby-sitting to a policy focus with educational intentions were reproduced in national policy. Thus, international organisations have been instrumental in promoting a dominant discourse of development with the aim of school-preparedness (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017). In developing countries this is achieved through development goals and non-government support. Hazelton, Leong and Tello (2023) identify the inequality of power between the organisations imposing solutions and the developing countries receiving support, with developing/pre-industrial/Global South countries being under-represented in Global Reporting Initiatives, resulting in hegemonic discourses being reproduced and imposed against the will of the recipient country. In developed/industrial/Global North countries, a similar, but less transparent imposition can be identified in the use of studies that promote a hegemonic discourse of childhood and education (Noam, 2020). The complex issue of international discourses of childhood is discussed next.

The OECD's *Starting Strong* series of reports into early childhood education and care are both representative and productive of this concern (OECD, 2001; 2006; 2011; 2015; 2017; 2018; 2021; 2023). The OECD also instigated the International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS) (OECD, 2020) which claims to provide a robust, international study of pre-school children's learning and development aiming to provide,

“valid, timely and comparable international information on early childhood education and care. It aims to support countries in reviewing and redesigning policies to improve their early childhood service and systems. The series includes thematic reports on key policy areas, reviews of individual country policies and practices as well as key indicators on early childhood education and care.” (OECD, 2024).

Thus, the OECD, which as an international organisation operates without accountability but with huge influence, propagates discourses through its thematic reports and comparative studies. Prime among these discourses is the idea of what education is for,

“educational purposes have been redefined in terms of a narrower set of concerns about human capital development, and the role of education must play to meet the needs of the global economy and to ensure the competitiveness of the global economy.” (Rivzi and Lingard, 2009, p. 10)

Human capital theory permeates the neoliberal literature of the OECD and national policies. Equality of opportunity is configured as the way in which education plays its part, through curricula that give all children the same knowledge and skills, which are their responsibility to utilise (Bandelj and Spiegel, 2023; Ozga and Jones, 2006; Ho, Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2010). Becker, an original proponent of Human Capital Theory explained it thus,

“Human capital refers to the knowledge, information ideas, skills and health of individuals. This is the ‘age of human capital’ in the sense that human capital is by far the most important form of capital in modern economics. The economic successes of individuals, and also of whole economies, depend on how extensively and effectively people invest in themselves.” (Becker, 2002, p. 3)

People (Romer, 1990), and therefore children, are reduced to their economic value, which is perceived to be achieved through universal process of equal access to a standardised education system that supports development that is perceived as natural and universal (Eun, 2010). Human capital theory also neatly cuts out the context in which “the economic success of individuals” is achieved. Human capital theory therefore decontextualises the person from the conditions they live in and from their history. Education becomes the responsibility of the family and the child to access and of the setting and practitioner to provide (Daldal, 2014).

Human capital theory is also visible in the parallel discourse of early childhood policy as a means of supporting parents to work exists alongside the discourse of education, positioning early childhood education as childcare (Bandelji and Spiegel, 2023).

Rather than prioritising children’s time in an early years setting as a time of learning, this discourse views working parents as the priority, enabling them to fulfil their, and the country’s, investment in themselves (Schultz, 1971c; Youderain, 2019; Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Becker, 1993). This discourse is visible in many policies globally, including England and Finland. Discussions about this role of early years education

are inextricably intertwined in the wider discourses about the role and value of children and practitioners throughout the chapter.

The discourse of early years education as childcare is one that has gained traction in the last thirty years and is in direct opposition to the previous dominant discourse of motherhood and the nuclear family of the post-war years (Boulay, 2016). This dramatic shift in rhetoric is seen throughout the Global North, where early years education has become a tool of the economy to enable mothers to return to work relatively soon after birth. Regardless of ideology, policies recognise the position of early years education in expanding the existing workforce and extending the availability of workers, couched in the language of opportunity, empowerment and efficiency (Brennan et. al., 2012). Mahon et. al., (2012) find that this is as true of social democracies such as Sweden and Finland as of liberal democracies such as Australia and Canada, although Brennan et. al. (2012) point out that ideological context is important as it influences the way in which the concepts are actualised in policy and practice.

As is explored in the next section, a neoliberal economy needs a neoliberal early childhood education system; one that invests in the child and subjects them to surveillance and measurement to ensure as many as possible fulfil their economic potential. To do this, curricula that outline the criteria by which children, practice and practitioners are measured, are constructed. The next section explores the concept of developmental discourses, which is the international standard by which these criteria are measured.

3.2 Developmental Discourses

There is no universal model of good early childhood experiences. There are “no inherent features, no essential qualities, no necessary purposes” (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2013, p. 101) although there is a universal agreement that early childhood is important and that a good experience of it can have a positive impact on a child and on their society (Sylva et. al., 2004). Alasuutari, Marksrom and Valberg-Roth (2014) point out that differences in curricula are related to many factors including tradition, economy and the education system. Additionally, stakeholder expectations, ideals, values and ideologies as well as historical factors which have changed over time shape curricula in regional and local settings. However, an international discourse of child development frames development as being time limited has come to dominate globally (OECD, 2001); if opportunities are missed, the child is disadvantaged forever (Banerjee et. al., 2019). This is seen in the “first 1000 days” discourse that the first thousand days from conception to around the child’s second birthday (Cusick and Georgieff, 2016). This has become embedded in discourses around growth and nutrition (Galaurchi et al., 2021), cognitive development (Alam et al., 2020), the potential to thrive (Goldshmidt et al., 2021) and the pathologisation of non-normative development (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2010). Sonu (2022) contends that development is normalised according to dominant discourses, leading to the pathologisation of non-normative development; examples of non-normative development pathologise both the development of individual children, and the pathologisation of entire populations, especially those in non-dominant cultures (Stirrup, Evans and Davies, 2017; Cornelius, 2023). These are examples of some of the

many studies focused on the experiences of children living in poverty in many diverse populations around the world. What the studies implicitly share is a belief that the outcome of poverty is most acutely seen in the failure of disadvantaged children to reach their economic potential (Toussaint, 2019). Early intervention through early years education is widely held to be instrumental in preventing poverty (Stevens, Siraj and Kong, 2023; Klapperirch, 2022; Steinberg and Kleinert, 2022; Zhou and Lu, 2024). As such, early years education is viewed as an investment in the future for states and individuals (Campell-Barr, 2012). The thousand-day discourse has been taken up in the Global North in the marketing of developmental toys and equipment, and in the marketisation of services, including early years education (Agdül, 2021). This disadvantages children from low socio-economic backgrounds, whose parents lack the cultural and economic capital to engage with these ideas and procure products (Troost, Maarten and Manley, 2023).

The “first 1000 days” discourse has its foundation in developmental psychology. Foucault (1991) described disciplinary power as being constructed through discourses that claimed to have their foundation in scientific fact that is cultural and normative. He used the example of medicine to discuss how knowledge of the body developed through so-called rational and scientific frameworks could be viewed as dominant discourses of the body. This knowledge is held by a few, powerful and educated individuals who subjugate and control populations, by deciding on normative or pathologised presentations. Developmental psychology places great emphasis on the narrative of the “first 1000 days” claiming that children develop faster and learn quicker than at any other age or stage (Raghavan and Ruta, 2022).

In the same way, developmental psychology claims a scientific basis for describing children's development as universal and predictable (Piaget, 1932). Developmental curricula are based on normative, cultural models of development (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kummen and Thompson, (2010). For example, the EYFS is rooted in a normative developmental model that is supported by Development Matters which states, "This guidance sets out the pathways of children's development in broad ages and stages" claiming to offer a "top level view of how children develop and learn" (DfE, 2023, p. 4). Play is presented as a vehicle for learning, a concept which is challenged by Wood (2019) who identifies play in the EYFS as a target-driven, less formal type of teaching rather than the child-driven, targetless, free and unlimited activity she identifies as the definition of play. The concept of "cognitive load" (Avgerinou and Tolmie, 202; Sun, Toh and Steinkrauss, 2020; Vaicuniene and Kazlauskein, 2023; Wong and Shada, 2022) which positions learning as a purely cognitive process is visible in universal developmental models of learning. This conception of learning side-lines the roles of physicality, emotion and experience and emphasises the role of instruction and memorisation. However, Derry (2020) challenges the concept of cognitive load, arguing it is rooted in a belief in individualised minds, separated from their bodily and political, social and economic contexts, all minds taking in the same amount of information and using it in the same way. Derry argues that "mind and world are not separated, and inferential connections, arising through human activity, constitute representations in the first place" (Derry, 2020, p. 7).

Developmental models of learning and development are claimed to be “insidious” (Moss, 2019, p. 96), especially when viewed in the context of cross-national studies such as those conducted by the OECD (such as the Starting Strong series discussed above). As pointed out above, the international discourses around early childhood education have coalesced around the idea of school-readiness, which is presented as an investment by the state in the future (Zhou and Lu, 2024; OECD, 2016).

Developmental models of early years education curricula are thus constructed to produce and reproduce constructions of children that are ready for school (Jahreie, 2022) through standardisation, categorisation and normalisation and the measurement of achievement (Kim, 2020). Jahreie’s (2022) study found that developmental constructions mean that ECEC teachers in Denmark unintentionally reproduced and legitimised stratified educational out-comes, with native-majority children being advantaged and children from low socio-economic and non-native speaking backgrounds being disadvantaged at entry to school. Griffen’s (2024) finds that considerable responsibility is given to early years education to give children a good start in life, while Kimball (2016) finds this pressure creates a fear in practitioners that if they fail to establish learning within this window of time the child is permanently disadvantaged.

Developmentality (Fendler, 2001) is a term developed by combining governmentality (Foucault, 1978) with development, to express the discursive power of development. Fendler, like Mac Naughton (2005), Burman (2008) and Diaz-Diaz, Semenek and Moss (2019) challenge and critique developmentalism, identifying it as a regime of truth. The development criteria outlined in early years education curricula or models such

as in parenting manuals is not neutral or universal (Burman, 2008) but are treated as such. Developmentalism acts to normalise “approved” development and sets milestones as standardised markers by which to categorise children’s skills (Mac Naughton, 2005). Developmentality impels parents and practitioners to view themselves and the children through the lens of the developmental model and to govern the child and themselves through that lens. The consequence is that having been told what to expect next, the practitioner sets up activities to ensure the child learns the subsequent skill next thereby confirming their construction of development and the child as correctly developing. The practitioner’s sense of self is reinforced as experienced and successfully implementing the curriculum.

This discourse of normalisation is founded in the neoliberal technology of government of “what works”. It denies that there are any other possibilities and constructs a discourse of no alternative (Moss, 2017). Neoliberalism sidesteps debate about policy content by presenting it as a technical exercise in applying content written and approved by experts (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). Instead, it concentrates the early years education practitioner’s mind on implementing the content to as high a standard as possible (Bradbury, 2013).

Alasuutari, Markström and Valberg-Roth (2014) and Bennett (2010) identify two distinct traditions of early years curriculum design. The developmental design that they call the Anglo-Saxon or infant school approach is discussed above. The second they designate Nordic (Kaskac and Annete, 2023; Korsvold and Nygård, 2022; Anette and Hanne Hede, 2023), or social pedagogical approach. Social pedagogy

(Einarsdottir et. al., 2015) is characterised by notions of early years education that have aims that are comprehensive and broad. The curricula set out the expectations of the environment and the teacher. Bennet (2010) describes the social pedagogical approach as,

“A broad national guideline, with a devolution of curriculum and its implementation to municipalities and the centres. Responsibility falls on the centre staff, a collegial responsibility... A culture of research and observation on children’s interests and how they learn.” (Bennett, 2010, p. 19)

Alasuutari, Markström and Valberg-Roth (2014) describe the social pedagogical understanding of the child and childhood as a child who has rights to agency and autonomy, well-being and the right to grow according to their own interests and learning strategies. Equity and equality are viewed as being key to children’s participation (Blaise and Taylor 2012; Ahonen, 2021), although Kangas, Lastikka and Outi (2023) contend that inclusion is missing from the legislation which research (Frankenberg et. al., 2019; Millei, 2019) suggests leads to a weak understanding of what is required in practice. The concept of early childhood is of a protected time that is different to what follows but equally valuable. Therefore, the concept of the first 1000 days carries as much weight in social democratic countries, but with a different connotation of protecting this time as unique and as having its own tasks. As is suggested by the term, social pedagogy is focused on the social experience of the child, with relationships between the child and their parents, the practitioners and their peers considered fundamental to all learning (Strandell 2010). In addition, social

pedagogy does not separate education from care, considering both should be considered in the educational experiences of young children, leading to the term “educare” (Bennett, 2010).

The curricula that reflect a social pedagogy is, as suggested above, a broad one. The curricula set out the areas of learning but it is for the practitioner to decide how and when. In the Finnish ECEC each area of learning is described in relation to how the practitioner supports the child. For instance, in the Rich world of languages,

“Children’s **language comprehension skills** are supported with abundant linguistic modelling. Verbalising activities in a consistent manner and discussion support children in developing their vocabulary. Descriptive and accurate language is used in different situations. Images, objects and gestures are used for support when needed.” (FNAE, 2018, p. 44)

The focus of the curriculum and the evaluation system (Vlasov, 2019) is on the work of the practitioners and the environment. Practitioners are constructed as agentic, professional and empowered to construct their own local curricula, according to the needs and interests of the children and populations local to them (Jeon et. al. 2018). Despite academic learning not being a key focus of social pedagogy, studies nonetheless show that that children’s development as democratic and communitarian, independent and agentic members of society (Fatigante et. al., 2022; Ragnhild, 2023; Rentzou et. al., 2023) while also adhering to social norms (Strandell, 2010) is observed, measured and subjected to normative/non-normative

constructions (Peters and Johansson, 2012; Lansdown, 2010; Lister, 2007; Vanjesevic, 2020). Attributes such as physical independence, cooperation and democratic decision making are encouraged (Melvin, Landsburg and Kagan, 2020) as they are regarded as skills needed by adults to work successfully (Ernawati, Deliviana and Wigunawati, 2024). Verjalainen et. al. (2019) identify the importance of self-regulation in Nordic discourses as being linked to persistence and eventual academic success. As Alasuutari, Marskröm and Valberg-Roth (2014) point out, “self-regulation and independence seem to be important for a competent child” (p. 85), reflecting similar constructions of the “good learner” in the EYFS (Bradbury, 2013). Self-regulation is part of significant section of the Finnish curricula designated transversal competences, otherwise known as soft or basic skills (Bunaiasu, 2014). Therefore, the ECEC curricula of Finland are shaped by dominant discourses that construct children’s development as normal or pathologised (Valkonen and Furu, 2022; Sevón, Mustola and Alasuutari, 2024), shaped by both developmental and social discourses.

Hjelt et. al. (2023) and Kumpulainen et. al. (2023) find that work organisation practices and autonomy in ECEC practice do not support these ideals of agency and empowerment in practice which lead to the practitioners’ perception that work situations are challenging (Kangas et. al. (2022)). An example of a challenging situation is illustrated in Jahreie’s (2022) study on language development in Denmark, (a Nordic country with an ECEC curriculum based on social pedagogy). This study raises the concern that developmental discourses are finding their way into early years education via an increasing anxiety about children’s language development fuelled by international (OECD, 2019) concerns about normalised development and

measurement, comparison and intervention. Jaheire (2022) finds that kindergarten teachers are unwillingly placed in the position of having to act against their social pedagogical training and beliefs to teach (particularly) ethnic-minority children in ways that the practitioners perceive to be too formal and outcome based. Similarly in Finland, Heiskanen (2019) finds that children with special educational needs and disabilities are viewed through a developmental rather than social pedagogical lens. Thus, a conflict between international, developmental discourses of children and childhood and regional, national and local constructions of children through social discourses is evident. Kangas and Ukkonen-Mikkola (2021) argue that both perspectives are visible in Finnish pre-school teachers' attitudes. Hennessy and Patricia (2013) found that where practitioners experience conflict between different pedagogical approaches they may attempt to create a feeling of stability by turning to standardised testing or other resourceful means to create a feeling of stability (Downes and Brossuek, 2022). This conflict has an impact on the opinions, assumptions and actions of practitioners and consequently on what children experience in ECEC settings (Millei, 2012; Moran-Ellis and Süinker 2018; Raby 2014; Arvola et. al., 2020). Kettunen and Prokkola (2022) and Piskure et. al. (2022) contend this has particular implications for children from ethnic and non-Finnish backgrounds.

Alongside the issue of international discourses influencing local practices, Hanhikoski et. al. (2024) identify that social pedagogy demands close teamwork between practitioners but that time and resource shortages (both economic and workforce) made the ideal of ECEC teamwork difficult to achieve. They identified that practitioners felt their work was reactive rather than proactive which led to feelings

of personal inadequacy. Additionally, the same study found that “top-down” managerialism, itself reacting to expectations from national government, reduced the autonomy of room level teams and practitioners, leading to feelings of injustice and lack of autonomy. Saleem, Kauser and Deeba (2021) found that practitioners are held accountable for by managers for children acquiring the attributes of a Nordic member of society discussed above, despite the curricula stating that there are no common goals for children. Evaluation is the means by which standards, such as the autonomous actions of teams and individual practitioners are assessed in Finland. The literature suggests that Finnish practitioners experience conflicting discourses regarding which standards they are required to meet.

Standards are the technology of government by which settings and practitioners are held accountable for implementing the policy. Standards are known by different terms; in England they are termed “quality” and in Finland, “values”. Regardless of terminology, the technology of standards is used in the same way, to impel discourses through practices, opinions and attitudes, and delimit others. Therefore, the next section interrogates the issue of standards.

3.3 Standards

International discourses of human capital and developmentality in educational systems impel a system of standards by which settings, practitioners and children’s attainment can be measured, categorised and sorted according to normative judgements (Brown and Lan, 2015) This is the hegemonic discourse of accountability, by which education systems are known and the actors within them are made

responsible for the reproduction of the discourses, practices, beliefs and opinions that policy produces. In general terms, neoliberal education systems favour developmental psychology that are based on the belief that children develop in universal, linear and measurable ways. They have early years curricula that contain ages and stages guidelines, milestones and endpoints and are focussed on individualised children (Gibbons, 2013). Education systems that have a framework of social pedagogy favour curricula with guidelines for educators, general statements of the aims of areas of learning and a focus on children's learning though being part of the group (Alasuutari, Markström and Vallberg-Roth, 2014). While this is a brief and general description of the two key categories, they are helpful in illustrating that there are differing views of the purpose of early years education.

Much international and English research accepts the neoliberal definitions and examples of "quality" and begin their study from this starting point. As an example, Melhuish et. al. (2016) examine the benefits of attending a "high-quality" setting without first challenging the Australian neoliberal definition of positive behavioural and learning outcomes as creating "high-quality" practice. In this way, the research reproduces the very discourses they aim to disrupt and challenge. This is indicative of the neoliberal technique of side-stepping the fundamental question of whether what it describes as "what works" is as necessary as it claims (Moss, 2017). Therefore, some research must be questioned as to its validity regarding this study. Where researchers fail to identify the neoliberal ideology of a policy or structure, any attempt to challenge it will simply reinforce and reproduce it. While this is a methodological question, I argue it is pertinent to discuss it here, as it explains why

much research that would be expected to be included has been put aside. For example, Eadie et. al., (2022) aimed to challenge the domains of quality in early childhood education and care, but reproduced the OECD (2006) Starting Strong II claim that, “The importance of curriculum in driving quality improvement and children’s learning and development has also been described as a feature of process quality” (Eadie et. al., 2022, p. 1058). While Eadie et. al. (2022) identify the lack of agreement between researchers and professionals as to what constitutes “high-quality” provision, they do not pursue the issue and thereby leave the dominant discourse to prevail. Similarly, Brooker, Cumming and Logan (2024) identify a neoliberal discourse in the issue of leadership in early years education and critique it as being lacking in conceptual clarity. They conclude that without further debate, the concept of leadership will remain a powerful, yet obscure term. These two studies are examples of how dominant discourses shape the issues being interrogated. A final example of how researchers unconsciously accept and reproduce dominant discourses is the study of Cooke (2021) who chose “high-quality” settings to participate on the basis of being awarded ‘exceeding’ in every quality area and available standard from the Australian quality assurance and rating process. Where researchers have failed to address the issue of ideology as constructing the problem they address, I have not included their studies in this literature review.

This section begins with an exploration of standards in early years education, identifying how discourses of development and human capital can be found to have infused the question of how we describe what we value in early years education.

The question of what standards are depends on and arises from the ideology and intentions of the education system of a country. Standards are a social construction of normative, cultural and dominant discourses; regardless of their appearance, each country's standards represent disciplinary tools that are produced and reproduced through the policy writing cycle. In neoliberal systems the question of what standards refers to is clear. The framework sets out explicit categories and outcomes of performance that practice and attainment (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). In social democratic systems the curricula are underpinned by social pedagogy which support the Nordic kindergarten model (Einarsdottir et. al., 2015). Quality education is held to be achieved through evaluation of activities and environments (Alasuutari, Markström and Vallberg-Roth, 2014, however Hucjala, Fonsén and Elo (2014) and Salminen (2017) find that there is little debate in Finland about what constitutes quality, leaving the term open to problematic interpretation by settings and practitioners. Because neoliberal and social democratic systems have such different perspectives of what is indicated by the concept of standards, in its different guises, the following sections look at the broad concept of standards in England, followed by Finland.

Early years education in England is mandated by the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2024). This policy sets out the statutory framework of learning and development, assessment and safeguarding and welfare. Ofsted oversees the implementation of the EYFS through an inspection framework (Ofsted 2023, Ofsted, 2024). These policies combine to create the accountability framework by which early years education is enforced. The explicit standards and measurements of

performance are set out in the EYFS (DfE, 2024). As discussed above they are based on developmental psychology, separating learning and development into areas of learning and ages and stages. This produces a “matrix of performance measures” (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021, p. 123) that define normative development and progress, described as “quality” education (Puttick, 2017). Simpson et. al. (2018) challenge this model of “quality”, suggesting that it has limitations, especially in its intended outcome of breaking cycles of disadvantage through encouraging resilience. Blanden et. al. (2022) suggest that while there are small gains for children from disadvantaged areas these have faded by the age of 7. This suggests that the standards of performance measurement fail to fulfil their own criteria (Sims et. al., 2018).

The matrix of performance measures produces data which is used to make performance visible. The EYFS does this in a number of ways. Data is produced throughout a child’s time in the setting and is recorded in a personal file that are often online (Knauf and Lepold, 2021; Nuttal et. al., 2023) and are presented as ways for parents to be included as partners in their child’s learning (Moss, 2012). The data is used to ensure children not only reach the Early Learning Goals (ELG’s) that make up the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) at the end of the reception year, but also to show that they are reaching milestones at designated points throughout their time in the early years setting, reflecting the neoliberal construction of learning as linear (Done, Andrews and Everden, 2022). Research (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016) shows that performance matrixes act as a system of governance, whereby practitioners are impelled to ensure children fulfil the requirements in

narrow and specific ways. Bradbury (2018c) identifies that Foucault's idea of the panopticon which was envisioned as a network of surveillance always active and uninterrupted is a reality in primary and early years settings in England. Specifically, the performance matrices that teachers are required to use to record children's progress constitute data-selves of the children. These data-selves are represented through tracking data, assessments and school league tables. The information in these data sets can be broken down into decontextualised renderings of children's data-selves according to cohort, disadvantage, disability, gender, age and so on. The outcome of these data sets is that schools and settings work upon these rendered children to ensure they "catch up", receive interventions or are labelled to enable the setting to prove best practice and value added. This process constitutes the dataveillance of children, practitioners and settings, as it is the data that is acted upon, rather than the needs of the children.

The standards are accepted as common sense and normative, by which means the practitioner is compelled to govern the self, embodying and reproducing the behaviours and outcomes desired by the state (Foucault, 1991b). This requires practitioners and parents (Reynolds and Duff, 2016) to accept as necessary and natural the developmental learning stages, learning goals and intentions of the government (Lewis and West, 2017). Rogers (2021) argues that these types of "quality" descriptors are accepted by professionals due to the pressure they are under to show they are being fulfilled. Wood (2019) contends that Ofsted, rather than the EYFS defines what quality is by applying the technology of judgement, with a reductionist and decontextualised focus on children's developmental outcomes

(Scott, 2018). Rudnoe, (2020) found in her analysis of “quality” with nursery school head teachers that early years professionals have sophisticated and multidimensional understandings of what is meant by quality. In their discussions it was applied to education as a holistic entity that addressed the needs of the child across educational, emotional and wellbeing factors. As Riddle and Hickey (2023) found, practitioners contest the reduction of relationships with children to transactional aids to learning and development. The intended outcomes in England are the production of human capital and the school-ready child. These are the standards that settings and practitioners are held accountable for fulfilling, through inspection by Ofsted.

In Finland, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (FNAE, 2018) refers to both the policy and stage of education and more widely to pre-formal education which includes ECEC (ages 1-5) and Pre-primary (FNAE, 2014a) (ages 6-7). The curricula are underpinned by social pedagogy (Einarsdottir et. al., 2015). The framework for accountability is set out in the Guidelines and Recommendations for Evaluating the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (Vlasov et. al., 2019). Evaluation is used to scrutinise the outcome of activities and environments rather than children’s attainment and fulfilment of targets (Vlasov et. al. 2019; Lindh and Mansikka, 2023). The term “quality” is used to describe favourable practices, including outcomes. However, the policies refer to the “quality” of early years education without giving concrete guidance as to what is involved. For instance, Ranta et. al. (2023) investigated how Finnish ECEC teachers’ pedagogical competence is defined in policy, as this is considered an indicator of the quality of education. Ranta et. al. (2023)

argue that pedagogical competence is often narrowly understood and, lacking clear definition in policy, teachers enact it according to narrow meanings.

Evaluation is used over many formats, including self-evaluation, pedagogical documentation and whole-setting evaluations. Kangas and Harju-Luukainen (2021) suggest that the ECEC policy reforms of the past ten years have resulted in teachers being required to take on more responsibility for children's active engagement and participation, the production of more pedagogical documentation that evaluates both the child's progress and the teacher's process and responsibility for the production and evaluation of quality practice. However, Knauf (2020) suggests the documents risk becoming a record of the child's attainment, rather than an account of pedagogical reflection and Pitkänen (2022) argues that practitioners use the documentation as a means to govern colleagues and self-govern their own practices. They conclude that policy writers need to take a more critical perspective on what they require from teachers. Lindh and Mansikka (2023) argue that pedagogical documentation is not, in itself, a guarantee of social pedagogy. Ferraris (2013) identifies documentality as a form of governmentality (1991), whereby the act of documentation becomes a form of self-governance (Luockkamäki et. al., 2016; Kulju et. al., 2020; Manninen et. al., 2021). Heiskanen, Alassutari and Vehkakoski (2018) conclude that documentality can lead to normative narratives about children's development, and consequently the pathologisation of children determined to have non-normative development. Evaluation cannot, therefore be assumed to be an automatic opposite of the matrix of performance seen in England. Outcomes for the Finnish ECEC are constructed as children who are learning to become sociable and

participatory (Hult and Edström, 2016); these characteristics position the children as both agentic (Rentzou et. al., 2023) members of their society and as future citizens of the Finnish culture (Arvola et. al., 2021; Pardon, Kuusisto and Uusitalo, 2023). Pihlainen et. al. (2022) find that settings and practitioners are held accountable through evaluation for ensuring that quality can be made visible through documentation.

Bradbury (2023) addresses the issue of data and teachers' reliance, comfort in producing it and discomfort in attempting to move away from it. England's new EYFS of 2021 and the supporting document Development Matters set out a move away from producing large quantities of data in favour of practitioners spending more time with the children. However, she found that having been required to show children's progress with data collected throughout the year, the teachers in her study had an ambiguous and complex relationship with data. Teachers reported supporting the move away from collecting large amounts of data in favour of spending more time with children, but equally were conflicted about how they evidenced their professional judgements that standards were being met. Bradbury's (2023) study shows that having had the need for data inculcated into the EYFS workforce, removing the requirement for it has not resulted in practitioners feeling comfortable in doing so. In fact, the study shows that practitioners continued to gather data and record it despite, rather than because of the demand for it.

The discourse of standards, whether viewed from the English or Finnish perspective can be seen to be discursively constructed. Neither are common sense, neutral or

natural constructions of children, practices or outcomes (Ang, 2010). Both discourses of standards, whether understood through the lens of developmentality, inspection and school readiness (Burgess-Macey, Kelly and Ouvry, 2020; Klapperirch, 2022; Steinberg and Kleinert, 2022; Zhou and Lu, 2024), or the lens of documentation, evaluation and participation (Alasuutari, Marström and Valberg-Roth, 2014), form part of the accountability discourse of each country. The second part of the literature review therefore interrogates the accountability discourses of England and Finland.

3.4 Accountability

In this section, a detailed exploration of the term “accountability discourse” is undertaken, leading to a comprehensive definition of the term and its use in early years education. Then, how the accountability is put into practice is investigated. The research in this area has much to say about the ways in which accountability is experienced by practitioners, children, parents and settings, and what the consequences are. Finally, the areas where literature has not yet fully examined the key issues are identified and the focus that this study will address is specified.

Accountability Discourse

Accountability is a term used in education to describe the ways in which those who put policy into practice are held responsible for doing so in a manner that is regarded as best practice by those who write policy and those who inspect and evaluate practitioners, children and settings (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013). Accountability processes include documentation, data collection, inspection, evaluation and

judgement (Cowan and Flewett, 2020). Not all countries use all processes to measure the quality of education, but accountability is ubiquitous in some form.

There are numerous ways in which the terms “discourse of accountability” and “accountability discourse” are used interchangeably in social policy and education research. In this thesis the term “accountability discourse” is used to describe the components that combine to create a discourse about accountability. In this thesis I identify five components of accountability from the literature. These components are historical discourses, which Foucault calls genealogy (Foucault, 2002); relationships between actors, which identifies who has the power to insist and who does now (Yan et. al., 2017); measures of accountability such as inspection, evaluation, standardised tests and action plans (Penrice, 2012; Møller, 2009); answerability, and enforceability which refers to the inspection/evaluation body, judgements and consequences of judgement (Newell and Bellour, 2002). These five components form the framework within which the literature of accountability in policy, practice and the construction of practitioners and children is discussed.

Högberg and Lindgren (2021) find that outcome-based accountability in education is a global discourse that creates either “thick” (using many accountability measures) or “thin” (using few accountability measures) regimes of accountability. However, it is not a homogenous regime, rather, accountability measures are combined according to regional and national discourses (Penrice, 2012; Møller, 2009). While accountability is identified as political measures that are claimed to ensure good educational outcomes (De Beer, 2016), this can also act as a foil to mask the problem

of vacuum defined as the space reserved for those in power but without answerability (Newell and Bellour, 2002). Countries using “thick” regimes tend towards neoliberal ideologies while those using “thin” tend towards social democratic ideologies, although this is not an absolute rule. Therefore, political context matters; similar language means different things in different contexts (Biesta, 2004). This study identified England as using “thick” regime where-as Finland uses a “thin” regime. This tension is explored further below.

Early years education has become a global phenomenon that shifts the responsibility of educating babies and young children from the private concern of parents to the public interest of the state (Meyer and Gornick, 2003). Global discourses about the importance of early years education in providing the means for parents to work, educate children according to the cultural norms of their nation. To achieve these aims and prove their attainment the process of “accountibilisation” (Macheridis and Paulsson, 2021) has been identified as taking place. Ball et. al. (2012c) identify the process of passing the responsibility down from government to setting governance as the ‘delivery chain’ whereby responsibility for outcomes in putting policy into practice is decentralised down to managers of settings (Clapham, 2015) and ultimately onto the shoulders of the practitioner. This responsabilisation was found to cause anxiety to practitioners (Burrow, Williams and Thomas (2020) who changed practices to fulfil inspection criteria rather than fulfilling curricula requirements (Brady and Wilson, 2020). Burnell (2017) found that settings were providing Continuous Professional Development sessions to educate practitioners on how to fulfil inspection criteria in everyday documentation and practice. This included the

requirement to be able to talk about key children with the inspector, without needing to look at paperwork (Kay, 2024), while Cochran-Smith (2021) found practitioners were using the language of performance in their daily practice, so great was their anxiety about being found inadequate during inspection. Colman (2021) identifies a disconnect between the lack of responsibility held by those who write the policy and the accountability of those who enact it while Chopra (2011) argues that policy writers are not held to account for how effective or relevant their policy is in practice. In addition, the lack of involvement in writing policy by those who enact is noted by Ehren and Godfrey (2017). Vintimilla (2014) and Lefstein (2013) identify how practitioners and settings are problematised when the intended outcomes of the education system are not met, rather than the system itself being challenged.

There are some general processes that can be identified in all accountability methods, although these can appear very different depending on the political and cultural perspectives of where they are implemented. Some of these processes include a system of inspection or evaluation, standardised measurements, competition, marketisation and business style management.

The Accountability Frameworks

The research literature identifies two possible scenarios for responsibility-taking in the accountability process. The first is in a neoliberal context where the policy making process is opaque and draws on the opinions and evidence of politically aligned people and organisations (Hallsworth and Rutter, 2011), is conducted through data-collection about both practitioners and children and concludes with inspection,

judgement and publication of results. This includes the inspection process of the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted).

The second scenario is that of a social democratic context, where accountability starts with the policy making process which is a participatory process including all types of stakeholders (Ellger, Klüver and Alberto, 2023), is conducted through a process of self and peer evaluation and concludes with supportive measures given or received from colleagues, other settings and the municipality (Vlasov et. al., 2019). Results are not publicised. Both scenarios are examples of Foucault's disciplinary power, whereby early years settings are judged through the technology of inspection or evaluation and monitoring. Each technology has a bearing on practices and priorities. Discipline "normalises" and "of course analyses and breaks down; it breaks down individuals, places, time, movements, actions and operations. It breaks them down so that they can be seen, on the one hand, and modified on the other" (Ball, 2014, p.46, quoting Foucault, 2009). Högberg and Lindgren (2021) identify that in both liberal and social democratic contexts the accountability process is understood to provide a feedback loop (Broad and Goddard, 2010) that allows the quality of education to be examined and evaluated.

While in Finland evaluation is of practice and environment (Vlasov et. al., 2019) in England the inspection is of practice, environment, leadership and outcomes. Therefore, while both systems contain measures of accountability (Penrice, 2012; Møller, 2009) and systems to impose answerability and enforceability (Newell and Bellour, 2002) the tools of governmentality are radically different and have different

outcomes (discussed below). However, despite their surface differences research (see for instance studies regarding accountability in various countries: Balan, 2023; Cornelius, 2023; Ysden and Dorn, 2022; Li and Tsang, 2023) shows the global spread of the neoliberal ideology of accountability has influenced both neoliberal and social-democratic systems. There are limited comparative studies between liberal and social democratic systems that explore these experiences of accountability in early years education or draw conclusions about the impacts and therefore, this thesis will add to this area of the literature in order to make visible the existence of the accountability discourse in two contrasting education systems and to give participating practitioners a voice in describing their experiences and opinions.

Having discussed the accountability frameworks of England and Finland, the following section explores the tools of accountability.

Tools of accountability

In all accountability frameworks the appropriate tools of accountability are selected and used to gather data and subject it to analysis. The following section investigates the accountability tools of England and Finland, identifying how they are shaped by, and shape the accountability discourse and its outcomes in each country.

Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes (2017) found that in England teachers felt the need to create an “Ofsted story” for each child to prove the child’s progress is good, or even beyond expectations. Ball et. al. (2012) identify the downwards pressures that work from international organisations to government, inspectorate, school, down through

the hierarchy to the bottom layers of teacher and finally, children and parents. Teachers, practitioners and children bear the most pressure, encountering it on a daily basis (Bradbury and Robert-Holmes, 2017). Archer (2020) points out that practitioners hold each other, parents and children to account in order to ensure they are able to gather the data needed to prove children's attainment. A variety of technologies are used to gather, formalise and standardise data. Wood (2020) found that early years practitioners in England were required to fulfil multiple roles to gather and analyse data including assessing outcomes, evaluating standards and defining quality; in fact, they were required to imagine how an Ofsted inspector would view their data and present it accordingly. Waters and Palmer (2023) found that the stress of such "thick" (Högberg and Lindgren, 2021) accountability regimes had a detrimental impact on the mental health of head teachers and practitioners. Woods and Jeffries (1998) identified Ofsted inspections had a detrimental impact on the mental, emotional and physical health of practitioners; more than 25 years later studies (Swales, 2023; Dufour, 2023; Albin Clark and Archer, 2023; Perryman and Bradbury, 2023) show that this issue has not changed, nor have the issues been addressed by Ofsted (Bousted, 2020).

Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) identified the concept of policy enactment, whereby schools and settings can be analysed through a number of contexts to understand how they hold children, teachers and parents to account to provide evidence of their good practice. The contexts by which policy enactment can be interrogated are *situated contexts*, *professional contexts*, *material contexts* and *external contexts*.

Situated contexts include factors such as the locale of the setting, the setting history

and their intake. Professional factors include values, teacher commitment and experience and how policy is managed. Material contexts include staffing, budget, buildings, technology and infrastructure. Finally, external factors include Local Authority support, pressures and expectations of inspection or evaluation systems and factors such as ratings, league tables, legal requirements and responsibilities. Bradbury et. A. (2022) found that understanding and analysis of context matters in understanding how settings enact policy. Perryman et. al. (2018) found that schools were not simply concerned to have good inspections and prepared for them in terms of Continuous Professional Training, ensuring that data was up to date and that policies were enacted, with the aim of showing that the curriculum was being implemented and all legal responsibilities were met. Rather, school management acted to ensure that longer lasting and more deeply rooted practices were enacted to ensure that the school behaved as if it were being inspected every day. As Courtney (2016) contends, "This, however, is a post panoptic regime in which the scrutiniser forces continual renormalisation by obscuring those norms through multiplication" (p. 632). Policy enactment has been used primarily to explore how schools have responded to increasingly thick accountability regimes (Singh, Heimans and Glasswell, 2014; Braun and Maguire, 2019; Keddie, 2013), in this thesis, it is used to analyse the responses of early years settings. This post-panopticism can be observed in the phenomena of the gathering of data via online apps.

Formative assessments are carried out informally and continuously (EYFS, 2021), and these form the greater part of the 'Ofsted story'. The data is increasingly gathered via online applications where-by an activity can be photographed, videoed, sound

recorded, observed in writing, and boxes ticked to identify areas of learning covered (Lefstein, 2013). Apps such as Tapestry, Kinderly Together, Nursery Story, My Montessori Child and many others are commercially available soft wear that settings can buy or subscribe to. These learning journeys allow parents see what their children have been doing at school or nursery and to contribute to the contents to share the child's activities at home. Knauf and Lepold (2021) found that from a perspective of hearing the voice of the neoliberal 'competent child' they are perceived by children and families as positive and empowering (Reynolds and Duff, 2016). Parents can add photos and observations of activities they have done with their children thereby reinforcing the panopticon of surveillance that children are subjected to. From the perspective of governmentality (Foucault, 1991a) they therefore constitute a technology of governance that impels practitioners and children to self-govern with the intention of fulfilling the developmental model. Research from Germany suggests that documentation is also used by practitioners as a tool to prove their active compliance with policy. Rather than evaluate children's progress from a pedagogical perspective, they used them to document their own practice, listing activities without the intended pedagogical reflection (Knauf, 2020), suggesting an anxiety about perceived performativity. The "tsunami of data" (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2021, p. 120) produced to satisfy Ofsted also suggests an active desire to produce proof of compliance and therefore judgement of a "good" practitioner. Despite the minor reforms in Ofsted inspections of 2020, Boutsed (2020) finds that Ofsted offers no answers to problems caused by data production and the anxiety of inspection.

However, ethical concerns were identified by Lindgren (2012) regarding whether children gave consent to be documented. In addition, the problem of the conflict between the curriculum's obligation to document with the child or family's refusal to be documented was identified. This tension was not able to be resolved, with the two competing needs of the teacher to comply with statutory requirements taking precedence over the needs of the child to be freed from constant surveillance (Ashton, 2014).

Statutory assessments are the two year check, the Reception Baseline Assessment (RBA) and the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP). The two year check and the EYFSP are mandated in the EYFS (DfE, 2024) and comprise the developmental material contained in the EYFS. The RBA is a stand alone assessment that captures the mathematics, literacy and communication and language levels of the class at the beginning of reception which is compared against the Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) results at the end of year six. The aim is to show the quality of education in the school, based on the starting and finishing levels of the class. The RBA results are not shared with the school until the class reaches year 6. As the RBA was implemented in September 2021 limited research has been possible. However, Meecham (2023) found differences in purpose and values between teacher-led baseline assessments and the RBA. The study recommended the RBA was halted and reconsidered.

Roberts-Holmes, Sousa and Lee (2024) analysis found it to be an intensification of both the human capital and school-ready discourses already present in the developmental assessment practices of the two year check and EYFSP. Five year old children will have been formally assessed three times by the end of their reception

year. Santori and Holloway (2022) found that scholars, practitioners and parents are becoming sceptical of the merits, purposes and uses of high-stakes testing and are increasingly resisting.

The evaluation process in Finnish ECEC is applied at national, local and setting levels. At the setting level, directors are responsible for “the goal-oriented and methodological leadership” and teachers for pedagogical and group level leadership (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 77). According to Vlasov et.al. (2019) the process at setting level is an ongoing one with a four year cycle. There are two aims: to provide the setting with the framework and guidance to be used as a “quality management tool” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 13) to continuously improve and develop the quality of education and care provided and to create a national picture of the quality of ECEC. Therefore, while results of evaluations are not made public, the data does have a national use. A basic parameter used to create the guidelines was the quality framework of evaluation and development model prepared by the European CARE project (Moser et. al., 2017) with a theoretical framework related to Bronfenbrenner’s bio-social-ecological systems theory.

The evaluation model was introduced in 2019 and is therefore in the early stages of being implemented. Pedagogical leaders and setting directors have the task of creating evaluation systems within their settings and of ensuring that they are understood and utilised at a group level. Ahtianen, Fonsén and Kiuru (2021) found that the new system has not been without issues and that teachers and setting directors required more guidance and support, especially in the development of

evaluation tools are needed. This need for clarification was found to be cumulative with need for guidance about the curriculum which itself was introduced in 2018. Ahtianen, Fonsén and Kiuru (2021) found that directors and pedagogical leaders were struggling with the combined changes in policies. Paananen, Kuukka and Alasuutari (2019) draw attention to the fact that despite the discourse of policy being the outcome of a “uniform policy space” (p. 253), the reality is that practice interacts with policy as an “interrelated combination of, among other things, national policies, the physical environment, context-specific regulations and cultural norms” (p.254). Therefore, while the guidelines make room for differences in evaluations at local and setting level the directors identify that the lack of guidance at this level placed “top down” (p218) pressure to correctly implement the measures on their shoulders. Fonsén and Soukainen (2019) identified a distinction between the directors’ and teachers’ perceptions of the role of the curriculum. Directors regard it as a guiding document to help decide on setting development goals for the centre as a whole, where-as the teachers prioritised the children’s educational plans as more important for guiding pedagogical practices, with the curriculum providing background information.

Pedagogical documentation is the primary tool of accountability in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Pedagogical documentation has two intended roles. The first is documenting a child’s growth and development, setting targets and recording the child’s voice as a part of the democratic process. The second is as a tool for evaluating the practices and outcomes of the setting’s targets. Lindh and Mansikka (2023) found that a wide range of uses of documentation reflected the

ambiguity experienced in interpreting the policy but that normative discourses of child development seemed to focus some practitioners' use of documentation towards the individual child, rather than its parallel intended use as a method to guide the planning, development and evaluation of pedagogy. It can therefore be seen as a disciplinary tool that practitioners use to self-discipline their attitudes and practices, creating narrower than intended uses of the documentation. The same study also suggests that the policy reforms are resulting in some practitioners using it as intended, implementing democratic processes of planning and evaluating children's progress (Lindh and Mansikka, 2023). Both evaluation and inspection regimes can be seen to impose regimes of truth, whereby normative values, whether they be developmental or social, shape practices, attitudes and environments (Bartholomaeus, 2016). Tensions related to ambiguity in policy is evident in both systems. There are also pressures relating to performativity, with practitioners using documentation to prove their compliance with policies (Bourke, Ryan and Lidstone, 2013). Having identified the accountability framework and tools used in England and Finland, the following section looks at the issues surrounding questions of professional status in early years education.

3.5 Constructions of Practitioners

The issue of the professional status of early childhood educators is replete with contradictions (Kao and Chen, 2017). Floyd and Morrison (2014) find that internationally there are conflicting narratives about care, education, welfare and social care that are reflected in national discourses. Generally, there are two constructions of those who work in early childhood: that of the carer or of the

professional educator. However, these are not exclusive of each other; they also reflect historical, political and cultural discourses. The international discourses of human capital and preparation for school have become increasingly influential in recent years. Therefore, the status of early childhood workers is uncertain and conflicting (Liang, 2016).

Globally, childcare professionals are not regarded in the same light as teachers who educate children from school age (Boyd, 2013; Schacheter et. al., 2022; MacMahon, Firth and Younde, 2021). Research suggests that early year educators with a degree in early childhood studies view themselves as equally well educated (Huss-Keeler, 2020). Read (2019) found that discourses of women's innately caring nature were still prevalent in caring work. However, this is at odds with how many practitioners position themselves (Huss-Keeler, 2020). It is important to acknowledge that for some contemporary early childhood professionals, this link between care and mothering is important to their professional construction of self (Colker, 2008) while for others, the importance of higher education qualifications and professionalism on a par with teachers of older children leads them to reject this discourse (Ailwood, 2008). These opposing perspectives of the role of early years practitioners within the profession as carer or educator have significant implications in contemporary discourses.

Research in Europe shows that practitioners with lower qualifications are not considered to have the competencies to create quality but also lack opportunities for professional development (Peeters, Sharmahd and Budginaite, 2018). Conversely,

Manning et. al. (2019) find that higher qualifications do lead to a more professional workforce, but that employment conditions do not allow for a salary and professional recognition that practitioners hoped for. This conflict regarding status is reflected in studies that show that despite encouragement for all early years settings in England to have a practitioner with a degree, most practitioners gain it only to leave early years education because pay, professional recognition and practice does not reflect the government's rhetoric (Douglass, 2019; Ayooluwa, Butler and O'Neill, 2021). Practitioners with degrees migrate to better paid and professionally regarded school settings (McDonald, Thorpe and Irvine, 2018), while those with Level 2 and 3 qualifications are limited to the PVI sector, which is regarded more as a babysitting service (Tickell, 2011). As Hardy et. al. (2023) show, complex and interwoven issues such as low pay, lack of professional recognition and lack of the possibility for promotion have led to a crisis in recruitment and retention across the sector, leading to the closure of settings due to lack of staff.

In Finland research suggests that ECEC and pre-primary teachers are highly regarded (Kangas and Harju-Luukainen, 2021). The curricula depend upon teachers' professional knowledge to interpret and implement the curriculum in the group-room (Korkeamäki and Dreher, 2012). However, Roponen et. al. (2024) find that a shortage of ECEC teachers is an issue disrupts this process. The European Commission reports that Finland lacks 2600 ECEC teachers (European Trade Union Committee for Teachers, 2023). The Helsinki Times (2023) reports that the reason for the shortages in teachers is that training to be an ECEC teacher is not attracting sufficient candidates, coupled with a growing child population. Alongside this, an issue

regarding practitioners with various qualifications working on similar tasks is found to create ambiguity and have an impact on the pedagogy of activities. Teachers qualify with bachelor or master's degrees; working alongside them are childcare nurses who receive their training to college level education (Ranta et. al., 2023).

In England this division between high and low qualifications is visible in the contents of training courses. Level 2 and 3 qualifications use a developmental psychology frame of understanding child development and learning. The contents of such qualifications are based on an understanding of children as growing through universal ages and stages, becoming more developed and closer to adulthood, and with key skills necessary for all children to learn at the appropriate time. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is central to the training, and is an ages and stages based curriculum (see CACHE, 2022 for an example of level 2 and 3 curricula). Therefore, practitioners who graduate from these courses have a limited understanding of child development and a technical understanding of practice (Payler and Locke, 2013). By contrast, Early Childhood degrees focus on the social construction of children and childhoods, resulting in practitioners who have wide and confident understandings of development and pedagogical approaches to practice. Nonetheless, both types of practitioners are held equally accountable for standards of education by Ofsted inspectors, managers and parents. Despite the differences in status, all practitioners are held personally accountable to deliver the same educational requirements (Rosenblatt, 2017). The impact of the competing discourses of low-pay and low-qualifications reflecting the status of carers versus the relatively well-paid highly-

qualified professional status of teachers can be seen to have an impact on the professional career of practitioners.

Perceptions of professional status are further confused by historical constructions of practitioners as maternal figures. While recent reforms of policies in both England and Finland do not appear to draw on this construction of early childhood practitioners, a thesis with a feminist post-structuralist framework must address the issues that this discourse leaves traces of; especially when investigating the field of childcare, which has a predominantly female workforce. Maternalism is a leading assumption linking legal and political narratives to assumptions about work generally (Mezey and Pillard, 2012) and caring professions in particular. Maternalism, rather than the professionalism ascribed to teachers, is therefore a quality that has been and continues to be ascribed to early years educators both politically and culturally (Brown, Sumison and Press, 2011).

The ideal mother-figure as the carer of children resonates, especially for some mothers who choose to place their babies and children in daycare so they can work (Kaerts et. al., 2012). Research confirms that these two discourses about practitioners - that of the surrogate mother, who is caring, instinctive, patient, resourceful and playful; and simultaneously of the educated, pedagogically directed, scientifically and intellectually expert in education and care (Fothergill, 2013; Perren et. al., 2017) exist simultaneously and sometimes in conflict with each other. Play is seen as a vehicle for learning (Wood, 2019) and both the motherly and the professional practitioner is expected to use it as a part of their arsenal for caring for and teaching children.

Maternalism is therefore a construction of practitioners that conflicts with the professional construction but both of which practitioners are inherently expected to embody through their working practices. Maternalism is therefore one of many constructions of practitioners that is implicit in policy, training and practice and is thus considered relevant to this study.

Constructions of practitioners are variable and contextual. It would appear that the neoliberal discourses of young children being in need of care to allow their parents to work is found across the Global North. While Nordic and Finnish ECEC teachers have a higher status and better pay than their Anglo-American colleagues, they are none-the-less subject to similar discourses of conflicting carer versus educator constructions. Policies are found to be contradictory and to create ambiguity and problems regarding the status of practitioners and consequently, the impact that the accountability discourse has. In both England and Finland there are issues with training, recruitment and retention as the industry fails to attract trainees or keep those they have.

So far, this literature has failed to address the people for whom the industry exists – babies and children. This is largely because, in debates, research and literature regarding the experiences and opinions of this population, their voices are largely missing (Hanson, 2016). The following section addressed this issue and suggests the most important outcome of this lacuna.

3.6 Missing in the debate

The final partner of childcare – the child (or baby), is rarely included in debates about the issues. In part this is a result of the practical and ethical difficulties that exist in giving babies and young children an authentic voice (Arnott et. al., 2020). Matthews and Limb (1999) contend that children are marginalised and outsiders within their own society. Furthermore, James, Jenks and Prout (1998) argue that the spaces that children inhabit (such as early years settings, schools, playgrounds and even their own bedrooms) are ‘dedicated to the control and regulation of the child’s body, and mind through regimes of discipline, learning, development, maturation and skill’ (p. 38). This disciplining is seen in law, policies and practices that embody the neoliberal assumption that children are cognitively incomplete and unable to communicate understanding, needs or desires (Hanson, 2016). The work of childhood is often constructed as becoming an economically efficient and productive adult, or the production of human capital (Bandelji and Spiegel, 2023). It can be argued that the younger, and therefore further away from adulthood a person is, the less efficient and productive they are, and therefore the less voice or control they are given. Failure to reach this goal, or milestones along the way is subject to sanction and punishment (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998).

Therefore, it can be argued that despite language such as “child-centred”, “holistic” and “appropriate” being key concepts of early years worldwide (OECD, 2017), there is a fundamental gap in the arguments around childcare, which concerns the best interests of the child (Morrisey and Moore, 2021). The debate is so weighted in

favour of the arguments in favour of the economy and mothers' return to work discussed above, that the best interests of babies and children are rarely included in research or political discussion. Notwithstanding these issues, the fact remains that research investigating the types and amount of childcare that is most beneficial to babies and children is scarce. Drange and Havnes, (2019) found that childcare before the age of one had significant impacts on cognitive development that could not be otherwise be explained by childcare quality or family income. Similarly, the EPPSE (2017) report found that children who attended childcare for more than 35 hours a week (or three and half days) had noteworthy behavioural issues that were observable at least until the age of seven. Geoffroy et. al., (2006) found that children attending daycare experienced higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol, than on the days that they stayed at home. While so few studies cannot be said to provide conclusive evidence, they do suggest that more research is needed to put children truly at the centre of a debate that concerns them more than any other stakeholder, yet they have no agency in.

Conclusion

In conclusion, countries that tend towards neoliberal welfare and education systems use developmental frameworks to support a system of normative teaching and learning. Standardised assessment is used to hold educators, settings and students responsible for quality and achievement. The intended outcome of education is a productive, economically independent individual. Early years Education is regarded as a preparation for the next stage, rather than as a stage in itself, worthy of respect and privilege. Countries that tend towards social democratic welfare and education

systems use a social framework to support a system that is both individualised and communal, supporting a system of teaching and learning that is focussed on the evaluation of teaching and collaboration. The outcome of education is a productive individual who has a sense of responsibility towards their fellow citizens and is a part of the society. Early Years Education is recognised as a time that should be protected and honoured. There are therefore, some similarities between the two systems, with both recognising the role of education in preparing children for the future world of work; however, the social system has a wider and more holistic outlook (reflecting the social, spiritual and ecological standpoints identified earlier) situating the child within their society from the beginning, first as a recipient of support but increasingly as a contributor.

The discourse of early years education policy as childcare relies on the rhetoric of the economy, prioritising economic considerations before the needs of its stakeholders: parents, carers and children, yet holds these least powerful to account and subject to punitive correction. Most notably, this discourse silences and disempowers the two groups most intimately involved in childcare – the carers and the cared for, reducing them to technicians and products.

The literature reveals the importance of studies which examine the discourses and practices operational within early years education. In particular, those which identify the issues relating to the policy making and implementation process, in understanding the impacts and consequences that the neoliberal ideology of accountability has, through policy, on practice. As discussed, this has been the focus

of research internationally, as research has suggested that neoliberal discourses have far reaching influences beyond those countries with neoliberal governments.

The literature exposes there is more work to be done in interrogating the accountability and evaluation discourses in early years education in contrasting political, welfare and educational systems with the aim of illuminating the similarities and differences between policies and practices. Additionally, there is very little research where the experiences of practitioners “being accountable” are evaluated between contrasting education systems. In particular, the research literature shows that the voices, experiences and expertise of early years practitioners have differing chances of being translated from research to policy. Nordic countries, such as Finland appeared to show more trust in practitioners and value their contribution to debates about education and care far more than neoliberal countries such as England, where educators, researchers and experts struggle to cross the divide created by policy making processes.

Chapter 4. Methodology, Methods and Ethical Considerations

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to critically analyse the impacts and outcomes of the accountability discourse on early years education and care. In order to explore this research topic, I developed the following research questions:

- i) What are the ideological and educational discourses of England and Finland that construct the accountability discourse in early childhood education and care in England and Finland?
- ii) How is the discourse of accountability reproduced in policy and practice in early childhood education and care in England and Finland?
- iii) What is the impact of the accountability discourse on the educational practices in early years education in England and Finland?

This chapter explains and justifies the methodological framework used to consider these questions. It comprises a justification of the methodological framework and a discussion of how reflexivity is important to this study. The research design is outlined, followed by a description of the data collection methods. Details of the participants are given, with a discussion of how they were recruited, including problems caused by restrictions and concerns following Covid-19. Ethical considerations are examined. Finally, the analytical framework and the process of analysis are expounded.

4.1 Justification of the Methodological Framework and Reflexivity

Willig's (2016) asserts that the line between positivism and relativism is not sharply delineated. The phenomenon being researched "would be there even if the participant did not give an account of it to the researcher" (Willig, 2016, p. 5). The way in which a phenomenon is explored with the participants reflects an epistemological relativist approach (Mackie, 1977) seeking to understand the phenomenon from the participants point of view. This reflects the constructivist approach that qualitative research usually espouses and reflects my intention of understanding the accountability discourse from the perspective of my participants. In this study about childcare and education, it is significant that policy written in the logical, rational, neoliberal perspectives that shape early childhood education policies are overwhelmingly directed at governing the caring practices and experiences of (mostly) women and children.

Willig (2016) states that there is a direct correlation between realism and constructivism in the asking and answering of a question. The constructivist epistemological question of "how" can only be asked and answered when first framed by this realist ontology (Bhaskar, 1978). Willig's (2016) assertion that the empirical reality must be known, defined and reflexively examined before the researcher can embark on questioning how participants experience it guides this research. This thesis approaches a critical analysis of the accountability discourse by understanding it as embodied through discourses within which policy, settings, practitioners, children, parents and practices are encountered as ontologically real.

However, the epistemology acknowledges that these embodiments are experienced, interpreted, reproduced and challenged at personal, setting, local and national levels. Willig (2016) contends it is this agreed, knowable reality that allows the researcher to ask questions about how and why particular phenomenon are experienced.

A Feminist Perspective

Alongside this ontological position, I also take a feminist perspective that views the social world as being constructed in a way that marginalises women's lives and activities (Borgerson, 2001). From a feminist viewpoint, every phenomenon can be understood as occurring in an unequal society (Reinharz and Davidman, 1992). Gilligan (2011) argues that the dominant voice of the white, middle class, heterosexual male marginalises all other voices, not only those of women, but those of non-white, non-middle class, non-hetero men, and any other member of a community that does not fit into the dominant community. This marginalisation is constructed through the negotiated order (Levi-Strauss, 1963) of legislation, policy, rules, performativity (Butler, 2006) and discourses (Foucault, 1972), imposed through policy written from the perspective of the opinions, assumptions and beliefs of the dominant culture (Smith, 1988). This order can be challenged by troubling the perspective that "trivialises female's activities and thoughts or interprets them from the standpoint of men in the society" (Reinharz and Davidman, 1992, p.52). Men who are perceived as doing feminised work, such as caring for others, are also regarded as "less than" male (Gilligan, 2011). Tronto (2009) argues that current political theories work to degrade "others", by regarding the dominant male construction of humans as complete and all others as less than fully human. The inclusion of all marginalised

communities as within the interest of feminist research takes feminist methodology beyond Stanley and Wise's definition of feminist research as being "on, by and for women" (1983, p.17). A feminist perspective is important to this study because it identifies and interrogates the dominant discourses in early childhood education with the intention of troubling the status quo. Where these discourses marginalise and discriminate against communities such as women, children and carers working in early years education, feminism is a useful tool to examine how discourses about practitioners' professional status and children's developmental or social constructions are defined and constrained through hegemonic discourses in policy. The ontological perspective I take is one of a knowable reality that is inherently constructed by and for a dominant position that is invisible and denied by those in power who create it.

Epistemological position

According to Searle (1998), all social science methodologies are located within debates about epistemologies. Researchers such as Bowles and Duelli Klein (1983), Ramazanoglu (2002) and Harding (1987) argue that a feminist epistemology must take an interpretivist perspective. The participant's understanding is the lens through which meaning is made of the context. Blaikie (2004) and Charmaz (2014) contend that the perspectives of the participants must be the empirical starting point; I drew on this phenomenological perspective (Blumer, 1969) to use semi-structured interviews and detailed observation notes to create rich descriptions of practitioners' experiences of daily life, which were analysed to understand the meanings behind the words. This research also draws on aspects of ethnography,

through the use of participant-observation. Although this is not an ethnographic study, due to the limitations of time I could spend in each setting, it nonetheless aims to capture the lived experiences of practitioners.

A Feminist Ethics of Care

The feminist ethics of care acknowledges the interdependent nature of being human and the normative impetus of humans to care (Noddings, 1984), coming to a definition of care that Tronto argues is “both a practice and a disposition” (2009, p. 104). Tronto (2009) defines care as:

“a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to inter-weave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (p.103).

Care is therefore identified as not only caring for other humans (so including animals, objects, ideas) nor dyadic or individualistic. It is culturally defined and varies between cultures; care is ongoing, it can be a single activity or describe a process (Tronto, 2009, p. 103). Furthermore, care is defined as something that people do, and something people feel.

Tronto’s observation that care is “both a practice and a disposition” (2009, p. 104) is fully realised when the feminist ethics of care are applied epistemologically in the ways articulated in this section and requires the researcher to both think and act

reflexively before, during and after the data-gathering. Before, through the construction of a post-structural theoretical framework that intended to not only analyse but also challenge discourses of power. During the fieldwork the ethics of care guided my relationship with the participants. An ethics of care endeavours to do as little harm as possible. I therefore considered my positionality during fieldwork. I took a few moments to chat with practitioners and explain that my intention was to see how they applied the curriculum in their settings, bearing in mind that every setting is unique and therefore practice in each setting would also be unique. I emphasised that I was not an inspector looking for specific practices but that I was interested in how they did things because their setting was distinctive. I found this reassured practitioners, and they involved me in conversations so they could explain their issues and why and how they were addressing them. This allowed us to co-construct understanding, and for me to ask questions by taking the position of learning from them. For instance, in Setting 2 in Finland, participants included me in a conversation about a child who did not play co-operatively, explaining to me in detail how they used the curriculum and their experience to understand the child's behaviour as problematic. As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 8, the practitioners in this setting drew me into their conversations to give me a greater understanding of the issues being discussed. This was possible because we quickly established through informal conversation that England did not have the same expectations or practices as Finland. I was therefore able to ask questions without risk of sounding critical because their intention was to support my understanding; they were equally able to question me to ascertain my understanding of them. In this way, understanding was co-constructed. However, taking into account my intention to always have the

feminist ethics of care as “both a practice and a disposition” (Tronto, 2009, p. 104)

there were occasions where I did not fully disclose my thoughts to my participants. I did this on occasions when I felt that I did not have anything helpful to add to the situation.

The inherent power imbalance between the research and researched can create issues of trust. As I was in settings for short periods of time I used participant-observations. This allowed me to build rapport with the children and practitioners quickly. For instance, in Setting 1 in Finland, at lunchtime they were a member of staff down. I realised that it would help if I stacked dishes, so I began to do so. Sofia realised what I was doing and gave me a huge thumbs up from across the room to say thank you. By building reciprocal relationships I was able to break the researcher/researched barrier and be more integrated. This benefitted my research as I was asked to support children in their work (sometimes amusing given my limited Finnish and their limited English) and discuss the activities as they happened. It also allowed us to informally chat about my research, which allayed their fears about being observed and my intentions for the final study. My methods ensured that the participants’ voices and views were heard by recognising them as agents and narrators, creating conversation and discourse with them, not simply about them.

The ethics of care was also important in the writing of the Literature Review. I sought a balanced, unbiased review of the existing literature using papers that have clear ethical considerations. Finally, the ethics of care acted as a guide to the analysis process, in choosing methods of analysis that align with the desire to not merely

“mine” the participants’ responses for data but to honour the intention to hear their voices as they intended in taking part; and in the writing of the discussion, to ensure that the extraction of data as quotations or information does not become unnecessarily reductive but respects the participants’ contribution. Thus, Tronto’s (2009, p104) framing of care as “both a practice and a disposition” can be seen to guide this study at all key points.

A key theme in feminist ethics of care is the contrast between an ethic of care versus an ethics of justice (Botes, 2001). The ethics of justice in early years education is seen in documents such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)(UN, 1989) and policy documents including the EYFS in England and the ECEC in Finland. In these documents the discourse of justice exists as a right to an education, culture and a basic level of care. These documents could be argued to be a rational and logical response to the needs and rights of children (James, 2008).

Tronto (2009) maintains that the ethics of care does not intend to provide an alternative response that completely replaces the justice discourse. She contends that the legalistic understanding of justice is necessary, but that this is a partial understanding of the needs of humans. Tronto (2009) contends that the ethics of care completes this discourse so that justice and care are equally valued.

Barnes et. al. (2015) argue that research shaped by the feminist ethics of care challenges political and institutional judicial perspectives of care, necessitating a political orientation in research practice (O’Riordan et. al., 2023). Care ethics identify how hegemonic economic and political systems perpetuate inequality in care systems

such as early years education through policy and regimes of truth (Tronto, 2013; Held, 2006; Lynch, 2022). Such an approach provides a way to provide new insights into the impacts and outcomes of the accountability discourse in early years education (Ashton and McKenna, 2020).

Reflexivity and Positionality

Throughout this research process, reflexivity has shaped every aspect of the study, from choosing the subject and research questions, to the final analysis and conclusions. Reflexivity is defined by Richards and Coombs as,

“a nebulous, complex, and expansive concept that calls for ongoing acknowledgement and engagement with participants, selves, positions, research fields, and wider contexts.” (Richards and Coombs, 2024, p. 1)

The implications of employing a feminist ethics of care methodology, situated in a post-structural theoretical framework includes rejecting ideas of objectivity and neutrality in research. Traditionally, the researcher is admonished to remain as impartial and neutral as possible, to enable the participants’ voices to be heard as distinct from the researcher’s own experiences and opinions (Bryman, 2016). Post-structural feminism views this neutrality as unrealistic and unreliable and instead suggests positionality and relationality as ways to co-construct meaning (Aull Davis, 2006). Richards, Clark and Boggis (2015, p. 99) argue that the researcher themselves is a “significant presence in the field” whose subjectivity shapes the research process and the analysis of the data. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) argue that it is

necessary to be critically reflexive to avoid unexamined positionalities which allows dominant discourses to be reproduced without critique (Gilligan, 2016). Therefore, a critical reflexivity is an “invaluable methodological tool” (Richards and Coombs, 2024 p. 1).

St Pierre (2023) advocates uncertainty and recognising the non-linearity of human existences in research, encouraging a move away from quasi-scientific methodologies that try to mirror the positivistic aspects of quantitative research such as validity. Instead, Petrovskaya (2022) argues for a post-structuralist understanding including a critically reflexive rejection of logical empiricism and research formulations. Stewart et. al. (2021) suggest the adoption of inclusive and ethically sound methodologies that are “also instrumental in deconstructing entrenched power dynamics” (Salzmann-Erikson, 2024, p. 9). Richards, Clark and Boggis (2015) argue that the positionality of both the interviewer and interviewee need to be “acknowledged as situated participants, whose identities play a pivotal role in the research produced” (2015, p. 100). I therefore use reflexivity as an instrument to strengthen my methodology and choices of methods and analysis tools through continuously questioning my positionality as a researcher, for instance, by studying interviews through identity attributes, the practices, attitudes, beliefs and reproduction of discourses can be identified as cultural practices (Silverman and Grubrium, 1989). Additionally, awareness of the potential for participants to position me as “one of them” through category membership, self-disclosure and insider status (Richards, Clark and Boggis, 2015) and draw my compliance or agreement can be a strength of the research, if I am alert to it. This cannot be a perfect process, but by holding

myself accountable for the ethical as well as methodological consistency I hope I achieved a rigorous critical analysis of the accountability discourse in early years education.

The term positionality describes both an individual's world view and the position they assume regarding research and its social and political context (Foote and Bartell, 2011; Savin-Baden and Major, 2013; Rowe, 2014) which must be recognised as fluid and subjective (Chiseri-Strater, 1996). The "notion of positionality rests on the assumption that a culture is more than a monolithic entity to which one belongs or not" (Merriam et. al., 2001, p.411). The multiple positionalities of myself and the participants in this study can be considered a strength, so long as the issue of category entitlement is considered. Richards, Clark and Boggis contend that, "people specifically indicate their category memberships as part of their discourse" (2015, p. 103) and that "this is done by members claiming to hold 'expert knowledge or privileged experience' on research topics (2015, p. 104). Therefore, throughout the data-collection process and the analysis of data process, checking for instances of participants or myself claiming category membership enables discourses and hegemonic attitudes to be identified where they might otherwise have been perceived as experience and attitude. The co-construction of the data and connection between researcher and researched, if acknowledged, can be considered a strength of both the data-gathering and analysis of this thesis.

My personal positionality (Holmes and Darwin, 2021) was informed by the roles of Montessori nursery practitioner (I remained in practice until the end of 2019),

researcher and mother of three children making their way through the educational system with varying degrees of happiness and success. Each positionality impacted on my world view in sometimes conflicting ways. For instance, as a mother I was home-schooling a child who had been ejected from the system for being too autistic, but not autistic enough to warrant a place at a special school; my view of educational institutions was largely negative. Yet, I was also a committed educator with current professional experience of the challenges and joys of early years education. I consequently held views about the education system that were contradictory, both valuing and disliking what I was researching. Additionally, these positionalities had the potential to change how participants viewed me. Being a Montessori practitioner meant that some practitioners might view me as being different to themselves because of what they might assume to be my opinions of their practice. I was careful to explain that my intention was to observe their practice from their perspective and not from a position of a particular philosophy. Therefore, it was essential that reflexivity informed my positionality, explicitly ensuring that at the design, execution and interpretation of data phases of the study I self-consciously assessed my views and positions (Greenbank, 2003; May and Perry, 2017). However, I acknowledge that I can never be entirely objective nor is that my intention. Over time, I found that my positionality shifted (Rowe, 2014), from one informed by professional and parental frustration (in the early days of my PhD feedback about my writing was concerned with angry bias against England) to a position that was informed by my growing academic critical approach, which invariably shaped my understanding of the phenomenon.

The implications of the Feminist ontological and epistemological positions that I take includes a rejection of a neutral, positivistic view of reality. Therefore, I view the participants, my observations, the interviews and the policies through the lens of my own positionality. By being reflexive and acknowledging this, I use my positionality as a strength in my methodology, recognising that I am unable to assert objectivity by simply declaring my positionality and believing that to render it value-free (Greenbank, 2003). There is no truth to be discovered (Gubrium and Holstein, 1994) by observing and interviewing practitioners and analysing policy. It is always possible I have a blind area which conceals, to myself, aspects of the self that are hidden, missed or not known (Luft and Ingham, 1955). Nonetheless, this reflexive interrogation of my positionality was applied at every stage of the research to keep in mind that practitioners, beliefs, performative practices and the reproduction of discourses are shaped by regimes of truth. These reveal, not positivistic truth, but explorations of relations of power that are socially constructed through the accountability discourse, on the lived experiences of practitioners in early years education settings.

4.2 Research Design

The research design of this qualitative study consists of three main elements. Ethnographically informed participant observation, semi-structured interviews with teachers, nursery nurses, practitioners, managers and a critical discourse analysis of policies, interviews and notes. These three design elements lie within the constructivist paradigm, whereby in-depth knowledge of subjective beliefs and

experience explored the impact that policy has on the accountability discourse encountered in early years education settings.

An Ethnographically informed design

The research design for this qualitative study drew on aspects of ethnography, primarily participant-observations and interviews in three early years settings in England and three in Finland that. Aull Davis (2008, p. 5) offers a broad interpretation of ethnography as,

“a research process based on fieldwork using a variety of mainly (but not exclusively) qualitative research techniques but including engagement in the lives of those being studied over an extended period of time.”

Field observations are concerned with what happens in a social environment; ethnographic research is also interested in the how and the why things occur (Whitehead, 2005). By engaging in the lives of participants, the researcher becomes able to understand internal aspects of observable behaviour. I was not able to spend at least a year immersed in a single setting, which is what would have been necessary to call this a true ethnographic study. However, Jackson (2006) points out that short-term ethnographically informed sojourns (4-10 weeks) are becoming more common as part of university courses. For example, Asian universities sending students to English-speaking countries during the summer break. This reflects the move in ethnographic research more generally from long (1-2 year) studies in “exotic”

cultures to “urban ethnography” (Deegan, 2001) that are a few months long (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999).

To prepare for my stay in Finland I took a few preparatory measures such as learning basic Finnish and researching the area of Jyväskylä to learn its socio-economic background and history. I knew that I would not be able to understand all the cultural cues around me and therefore undertook a course by Her Finland (Rusila, 2024) which introduces Finnish culture and spoken Finnish, which is different to the formal Finnish taught in language courses. Similarly in England I familiarised myself with the area that each settings was located in.

Before I began my fieldwork, I prepared my interview schedule, with the intention that would act as a guide and to focus my thoughts in what I hoped would be wide-ranging interviews informed by my initial thoughts prompted by observations. Oakley (1981) argues that for women interviewing women, where the ethics of care informs the interview, it is impossible for the researcher to take the position of questioner and the participant only able to answer. Taking a reciprocal approach, I prepared to be involved by answering questions as well as asking them. Additionally, I recognised and even welcomed my effect on the relationship with my participants. By acknowledging our shared categories of variously early years practitioner, mother and researcher we were able to co-construct interviews that were more insightful because we shared attributes (Richards, Clark and Boggis, 2015). In line with Silverman’s (1985, 1981) experience of ethnographic work I was prepared to be flexible, both in terms of the questions I asked and the focus of the study, depending

on my reflexive responses to what I was observing. I equipped myself with notebooks and pens with many colours for field notes (Vieira, 2011). In line with ethnographers noticing the everyday (Aull Davis, 2008), I prepared myself to make notes about the environment, draw maps and note informal conversations as precisely as possible. I knew that due to safeguarding considerations settings in England would not allow me to take photographs of their settings, even when the children were not present. For the sake of balance, I do not include any photographs from Finland in this thesis. I did not feel comfortable taking photographs with the children in, despite being assured this was acceptable in Finland. My primary reason for this was that I was not able to seek consent from the children and therefore from an ethics of care perspective (Tronto, 2009) I ensured I did not abuse my position of power.

I also considered how I would present myself during participant-observation to fulfil the feminist ethics of care of reciprocal, co-construction of observation (Noddings, 1984). I sent emails with the posters and information sheets and I also included a photograph of myself so practitioners would recognise me and had the option of showing it to the children if they thought that would be necessary. I introduced myself to everyone, not just the lead teacher and asked if there was anything I could do to be helpful.

While I was not able to spend extended periods of time in the settings, due to Covid-19 related restrictions on access, the design was broadly based on the idea that

ethnographic studies of research settings provide data that is detailed and rich and able to record the “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973, p. 6) of everyday life.

Participant observation

The ethnographically inspired approach was achieved by drawing on aspects of participant observation (Aull Davis, 2008, p. 81). Historically, there has been discussion about how much observing, and how much participating the researcher should do while in their research context, as if observation – participation exist along a sliding scale (Gold, 1958). I found data-collection to be far more chaotic (Bell and Newby, 1977) than a simple decision to observe more or participate more. Instead, I moved between these positions, often trying to remember an incident or comment I wanted to note down, while finding myself participating in a time-critical manoeuvre such as mopping up a spilt drink. I carried a notebook with me at all times and jotted notes during and after data-collection sessions. In the evenings I made more notes, reflecting on conversations and observations and being as reflective and reflexive as I could be. I was conscious of the ethics of care, and this guided my actions during data-collection.

As an example, at the pre-school a sudden snowstorm had encouraged a large group of children outside. They returned to the classroom, dripping melting snow onto the floor, struggling to get out of their snowsuits and wellies and crying with hunger. All the practitioners were engaged with supporting them, leaving a small group of 2 year-olds to play in a tuff-tray filled with rice and toys. The rice was being scattered across the floor, mixing with the melted snow. I abandoned observation and stepped

in to ask the 2 year olds to help me find brooms and dustpans and encouraged them to help me tidy up. In this way, the rice was cleaned up and the children engaged, allowing the practitioners to concentrate on transitioning the children back inside. My action prevented me from making notes about the interactions between the children and practitioners, which potentially looked interesting in terms of aspects the EYFS being reproduced but the consequences of leaving the 2 year olds to scatter rice would have been to add to what was an already difficult situation for the practitioners. I felt I made a decision that reflected the relational and caring ethics that I wanted to ensure my data-gathering was shaped by. In turn, this increased the practitioners' confidence in me and they positioned me more as a colleague than an observer. One positive impact of this was that they became very engaged with my research, asking questions about my experiences in Finland and about my subject. In fact, one practitioner dictated her feelings about Ofsted to me, to be sure that I had her opinion! While I lost an opportunity for data capture, I gained the trust of the practitioners which was beneficial to me and my interviews. This incident challenges the idea that participant observation is a linear scale, with observation being more important than participation. Instead, it is more like Rabinow's spiral model,

“Observation ... is the governing term in the pair, since it situates the anthropologists' activities. However much one moves in the direction of participation, it is always the case that one is still both an outsider and an observer ... In the dialectic between the poles of observation and participation, participation changes the anthropologist and leads him to new observation, whereupon new observation changes how he participates. But

this dialectical spiral is governed in its motion by the starting point, which is observation.” (Rabinow, 1977, pp. 79-80).

I found this model allowed a richer observation of each setting, revealing how it operated, allowing me to fit in with the practices and cultural norms of that context, and gaining an understanding of why practitioners held the beliefs and attitudes and performatively enacted practice as they did.

Insider and Outsider

In both Finland and England, I experienced being both an insider and an outsider (Savin-Baden & Howell-Major 2013), occupying a fluid positionality (Bruskin, 2019). Asselin (2003) suggests that the insider should go into the field with their “eyes open” (p. 103) but assume that they know nothing about the phenomenon being researched, arguing that being a member of a culture does not presuppose that they understand everything in it. Rose (1985) agrees, “There is no neutrality. There is only greater or less awareness of one’s biases. And if you do not appreciate the force of what you’re leaving out, you are not fully in command of what you’re doing” (p. 77). I was obviously an insider, having shared the positionality of practitioner. Other shared positionalities such as mother (of a child with autism) and researcher were also categories that came up in some conversations, such as when Ilona and I discussed her MA research that had led to changes in how her setting taught English. However, by being conscious of my biases and that I was not aware of everything in a setting, I was able to ask naïve questions and attempt to see phenomena with new eyes. In Finland I was more obviously an outsider (Zou, 2023). Not understanding the

language made me feel disconnected, as I could only guess what lessons being conducted in Finnish might be about. Fay (1996) asks “Do you have to be one to know one?” (p. 9) and concludes that the key attributes a researcher needs is to be honest, open, deeply interested in the experiences and opinions of ones participants and unswerving in accurately and adequately representing them.

It helped that I conducted my research in Finland first. I experienced quite a culture shock both generally in daily life (such as using google translate to find I was about to buy liver casserole), and in the daycare centres I worked in. This culture shock in some way “denaturalised” my English discourses and led me to question everything about English practice. This meant that when I went into English settings, I was able to see more as a partial outsider than I might have been otherwise, experiencing a kind of reverse culture shock. In particular I was struck with the speed at which events moved in England. The children were moved from activity to activity very quickly. It was not that I felt positively or negatively towards the differences, it was that I saw them as if for the first time. This is reflected in the notes I made, observing situations that, had I not experienced Finnish practice, would not have appeared significant, and is consistent with my intention to reflexively consider my positionality throughout the process. To mitigate potential bias, I reflected in the evenings on what I had found notable, and why this was so. This process led me back to entries I made in my reflexive journal while in Finland to compare what I had felt then and consider how I understood those reflections in the light of these new thoughts. This was the beginning of an iterative process that continued through the analysis and writing process.

Powdermaker (1960) argued that participant-observation requires both involvement and detachment. Tools such as a reflective journal and a careful internal dialogue were helpful (Russel and Kelly, 2002). In hindsight, had I conducted my research in England first, I would have achieved less detachment. By happy circumstance, by researching in Finland first, I achieved an element of reflexivity that I might not have otherwise. This was aided by the field notes and reflective journal entries from my time in Finland which reminded me of my reactions to Finnish settings and practice. Therefore, although I did not conduct my research in a completely unfamiliar context, I argue that my familiarity coupled with (reverse) culture shock enabled me to experience the data-gathering process as iterative and developmental, rather than as fulfilling pre-set criteria. Some of the implications of this are addressed in the next sections.

Semi-structured interviews

Alongside participant observation, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with practitioners and managers in their settings, at a time convenient to them. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the best means of interviewing because they allow a fluidity to the conversation and gives both participant and researcher the opportunity to talk more about significant topics, whilst also beginning with a loose structure of the topics that might be covered (Cockburn, 1991). In Finland I recorded three interviews, one with two practitioners together, at their request. In England I conducted four interviews (see below for more details). The interviews lasted between fifteen minutes (there was an emergency and Shelley had to go back into

the classroom) and one hour. The interview schedule is included in Appendix 1. As time was a consideration, with settings being observed for between one and five days, semi-structured interviews were a practical solution. They enabled me to explore situations and occurrences observed in the setting and gain insights from the practitioners about the reasons for them. Other data gathering methods such as formal interviews or questionnaires (Bryman, 2012) would not have allowed this flexibility and I decided against focus groups because I was aware of how a dominant voice in a group is able to shape the opinions of others and I was interested in how each practitioner expressed their experiences (Acocella, 2012).

Critical discourse analysis

The final part of the research design is the interrogation of relevant policies. Policies form the landscape that early years settings must situate themselves within. Every circumstance in a setting is constructed through reference to policy, therefore the relevant policies of England and Finland play an active role in shaping environments, activities and practices.

Policy data was from the English policies, Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2024), Development Matters, which is non-statutory guidance but was used by all three settings (DfE, 2023), Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2023) and Ofsted Early Years Inspection Handbook (Ofsted,2024). The Finnish policies included were the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (FNAE, 2018), The National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary curriculum (FNAE, 2014a) and the

Guidelines and Recommendations for Evaluating the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (Vlasov et. al., 2019).

One issue that I faced was that I was reading the Finnish policies in English. Fortunately, they are all published in Finnish, Swedish and English by the Finnish National Agency for Education (FNAE, 2018, 2014) and the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (Vlasov et. al., 2019). I also met Janniina Vlasov at in Helsinki and met many of the writers of the evaluation guidelines. I am therefore confident that the translations are effective and verifiably true to the originals. I do acknowledge that there is always the possibility that words might carry meanings not fully transferrable.

I wanted to explore how policy was an expression of dominant discourses, and of the layers of discourses that are present in policies that have built up over time. I was interested in exploring how far the attitudes, beliefs and thoughts of practitioners were shaped by the consistent use of certain words, phrases and language that were inherent in policy without being overtly stated, and the impact that these regimes of truth had on practitioners' positionality and performative reproduction of dominant discourses. Therefore, a critical discourses analysis (Fairclough, 1995) along with thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2022) is included in the research design. This was used to analyse data from policies, interviews and field notes to identify how discourses are expressed, reproduced and enacted or challenged.

Design limitations

Time limits on this research meant that I could spend relatively short amounts of time with each setting. I had to decide between a range of settings and spend less time with them or choose to spend longer with one setting. I decided to conduct fieldwork in three settings in each country because I knew that in England the type of setting influenced important considerations like the qualification levels of practitioners, resources and funding and socio-economic backgrounds of children. I arranged to observe in settings that contrasted in Finland, as a mirror to the English situation, and to see if Finland has similar issues. On reflection, I think I made the right choice, but in the future there is scope to conduct a more traditionally ethnographic study in a smaller amount of settings for a longer time.

In addition to choices I made, I was also constrained by the dictates of state responses to Covid-19. I was in Finland between 16 January and intended to return home on March 30. However, I had to leave Finland before the airports closed as all travel was banned, and so I left on March 14. Although I did manage to observe in all three settings over a two week period in February my intention had been to return to them in March and conduct more interviews. Unfortunately, due to Covid-19, the University of Jyväskylä closed on March 12 and the daycare centres stopped allowing visitors from March 2. As a result of this unforeseen limitation of access, I was not able to conduct as many interviews as I would have liked in Finland. I had planned at least three more but have had to fall back on notes made while talking informally. This means that my interview sample is smaller in Finland than I had hoped. I intended to conduct more interviews online from England. However, personal circumstances when I returned home prevented me from doing so. I had to

intercalate for some time in 2020 and when I returned to my PhD I decided to continue. I acknowledge that more interviews would have been beneficial.

The situation in England was similarly affected by Covid-19. I had originally planned to gather data in April-July 2020. It was not until September 2021 that settings were allowed to have visitors and I found it difficult to attract settings to participate. I managed to find three settings through personal contacts but access was limited to between one and three days because fear of Covid-19 infection led settings to restrict visitors. This meant that interviews were limited by time to only one or two per setting. [I had to intercalate for a second time during 2023 and therefore decided to analyse the data I had from both countries.](#)

Tables 1 and 2 below set out the participants from England and Finland. In Finland I recorded three interviews and took notes during a fourth. In England I recorded four interviews. In both countries I took notes during or immediately after informal conversations with practitioners that took place during participant-observations. While I acknowledge this is a relatively small amount of data I feel it can be justified by its depth which allows for rigorous analysis. The settings and participants in both countries represent a wide variety of backgrounds, educational approaches and contexts which provide a range of experiences and opinions. As my aim in this thesis is to interrogate how the accountability discourse is embedded, produced, reproduced and practiced I do not find the relatively small amount of interview data problematic. As I also included field notes and reflexive material as material to be analysed, I contend that I am able to draw justifiable conclusions from my data.

Conclusions drawn from this data include contributions to the field regarding new insights into the role of Ofsted in England and the conflict that practitioners experience between competing ideologies and practices in Finland. Overall, I argue that this thesis adds to the literature regarding the accountability discourse in early years education, despite the relatively small amount of data.

Finally, although the accountability discourse is mediated by practitioners, the outcomes of it are also felt by children. For reasons including time, ethical considerations and resources I did not include children in this study. However, I do feel that children's voices and experiences are missing, and that future research should include involving children as participants.

4.3 Fieldwork

Sampling framework

The sampling framework was a combination of purposive and convenience sampling (Bryman, 2016) as my time and resources were limited. I sent advertising posters (see Appendix 2) and emails to settings in advance asking for practitioners and managers to volunteer to be interviewed. When I was in the settings, I was able to explain to practitioners what my research was about and arrange interviews in an ad hoc manner. Interviewees participated on the basis that they volunteered. I found that some practitioners were unsure about interviewing but were happy to chat. I was conscious through the perspective of the ethics of care, that my position of researcher put me in a position of power. Therefore, I was careful to make it clear that interviewing was voluntary and only if people were comfortable with it. I

prioritised relationality and care for practitioner's comfort, over collecting data. Possibly partly because of this, I did not get the breadth or variety of participants I would have liked. My intention was to use the snowballing method (Bryman, 2016) once I was in settings and arrange to meet practitioners at a later date if there was no time while I was doing field work, but in Finland this was not possible due to restrictions put in place by the government at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. For instance, I did not interview a manager or pedagogical lead in Finland as I had intended. Similarly in England, I was only able to interview the manager or EYFS lead teachers and did not have the opportunity to interview teaching assistants or practitioners with less responsibility.

This means that my sample is biased towards practitioners in positions of responsibility. The outcome that my interview data is more indicative of the concerns of practitioners in positions of leadership, than of the experiences of practitioners not in positions of power. This is also a consequence of the self-selecting nature of asking practitioners to volunteer to be interviewed. Many were not comfortable with the idea of interviews, perceiving them as formal and intimidating. I did not have time for them to get to know me and potentially feel more comfortable about being interviewed. This is a weakness of the study that could be addressed in the future. In general, research concentrates on the experiences of those in positions of leadership; an analysis of the experiences of those in lower positions has the potential for new and interesting conclusions.

Selecting and contacting settings

I based my fieldwork in Suffolk in England, and the Municipality of Jyväskylä in Finland. This was largely because I live in Suffolk and therefore had personal contacts and the University of Jyväskylä Department for Early Childhood Education (through which I was doing my research in Finland) arranged fieldwork on my behalf. The advantage of both arrangements was that in each country all three settings were subject to the same local authority or municipality. It was my intention to select contrasting settings to ensure a wide spread of different experiences and outlooks.

After getting ethical approval from the ethics committee board in England I began the process by sending emails to the manager who acted as gatekeepers (Aull Davis, 2008) in every setting in Ipswich that had an Early Years Foundation Stage. This included state and private primary schools, day care nurseries, playgroups and a state nursery. One playgroup responded positively, but concerns about Covid-19 infection prevented arrangements from being finalised. I had originally intended not to include any settings I had worked in, but when I had such an unproductive experience in recruiting through usual means, I decided to approach the nursery I had worked in and the manager and owner agreed to take part. The pre-school manager was a friend of a PhD colleague, and through this contact I secured their participation. Finally, I approached the headteacher of the primary school that my mother had worked in for several years and asked him directly to participate. Therefore, due to the circumstance of Covid-19, which made gatekeepers more guarded and careful than usual, I had to rely on connections that were personal. These relational connections are acknowledged here, as drawing on these personal associations

undoubtedly made this research possible at that time. It was more by chance than design that I recruited three contrasting settings, as I had intended.

The English settings were therefore recruited through personal contacts which had implications for my positionality in these settings. Rather than simply being a researcher with the additional positionality of being an early years practitioner, I had an additional layer of connectedness, as friend-of-a-friend, child-of-a-colleague and ex-employee. These positionalities did have ramifications. Only my relationship with Hilary, the manager of the day-care nursery I had worked at was a personal one; Hilary had been personally and professionally supportive of me and my family for several years. It meant that during fieldwork I had to ensure I was conscious of the possibility of being familiar with Hilary, the practitioners and the setting and was aware of my responsibility to them to allow their voices and opinions be heard authentically and not impose what I believed they were telling me based on past experiences. Reflexivity and the ethics of care were central to maintaining a balance between familiarity and professionally honouring what they were saying. In the school, where my mother had worked a member of staff remembered my mother and came to say hello, emphasising the importance of relationality. Similarly, in the pre-school I felt my positionality was professional, but I was aware of a further responsibility towards my friend, a fellow PhD student. I did not want my actions to have ramifications for her friendship with the manager, Stephanie. In all three settings, the feminist ethics of care and reflexivity were useful tools in ensuring that I maintained awareness of these additional layers of relationship that existed outside

of the research paradigm. The care of the participants was my primary concern, so balancing personal and professional needs was necessary but I felt, possible.

The Finnish fieldwork was arranged through the Department for Early Childhood Education of the University of Jyväskylä. I was in email contact with the Department of Education and Psychology through my sponsor, Professor Maarit Alasuutari. The department, which acted as gatekeeper (Aull Davis, 2008) have contacts with many early childhood education settings as part of their teacher training course and therefore were able to easily include me in the programme of student observation, work experience and research. I asked for three paivaköti (day care centres) of differing sizes and that contrasted in order to represent the widest possible examples of children's backgrounds and parental socio-economic status. The three settings were arranged on my behalf and all were participants in the University's teacher training programmes and research programmes and were therefore happy to accommodate my research. I spent ten weeks in Finland from January until March 2020.

4.4 Details of the Settings and Participants

All the interviews were conducted in the settings at times requested by the participants and had to be fitted into the time available during the teaching day. This was problematic because on two occasions (with Sofia and Aurora in Finland and Shelley in England), the recording had to be stopped due to the practitioners being needed because of emergencies happening in the class/group room. I recorded the

interviews on an app on my phone which was password protected. I then transcribed the interviews afterwards.

Finland

The Finnish settings were all municipality run daycare centres in the municipality of Jyväskylä. This is significant as local curricula are written to reflect local needs and contexts; being in the same municipality meant that all three settings were under the jurisdiction of the same local curricula. In Finland, children usually go to the closest setting to where they live. The Finnish settings are referred to as setting 1, setting 2 and setting 3, allowing the reader to differentiate them from the English settings which are referred to by type.

There were factors that were the same across all three settings that struck me as significant. These included resident housekeeping staff, who cleaned the setting after lunch and again in the evening. Whether meals and snacks were eaten in the group rooms or in a canteen, they were prepared in the kitchen and cleared away by kitchen staff. All children and staff ate the same food, with dietary accommodations. I was asked to eat my packed lunch in the staff room to avoid children from seeing a different meal. This was because meals are free (and in schools) and culturally it is important to eat the same food together as it is considered to promote equity, equality and participation. Children of all ages (1-6) had a rest in the pull-down bunk beds (or cots) after lunch. Any planned activities happened in the mornings while afternoons were reserved for free play. Children were expected to spend at least three hours a day outside unless the temperature went below minus 18 degrees.

Until minus 20 they were limited to one hour, and below minus 20 they stayed indoors. Babies slept outside until about minus 17. I consider these factors as significant and worth mentioning because they appeared to be common to all settings and therefore constituted normative practice. Rather than remark on them three times, these factors are included here as an indication of normative practices and contextually important, even where none of these factors are referred to in specific settings.

Table 1. The Finnish Participants

Setting information	Name	Role
Setting 1 Urban. Predominantly Finnish, a small number of immigrant children from Syria	Sofia	Pre-school teacher. Sports specialist. In practice for over 20 years.
	Aurora	Pre-school nursery nurse. In practice for over 20 years.
	Ilona	Pre-school teacher. English specialist. In this setting for 15 years.
Setting 2 Urban. Large purpose-built daycare centre beside a major hospital. It had an overnight facility for children of hospital workers on shift. Some children stayed for up to	Aino	3-5 teacher. Music specialist. Special educational needs specialist. In practice for 40 years.

3 nights at a time. A wide variety of family backgrounds, including Chinese, Somalian, Syrian, Russian and Estonian.		
Setting 3 Semi-rural. 45% of children spoke Finnish as a second language. Children came from Somalia and Syria in the main. Also some Russian and Estonian families.	Pihla	Pre-school teacher. Special educational needs specialist. In practice for over 20 years.
	Aava	Pre-school nursery nurse. In practice for over 20 years.

England

In England the settings were more widely spread but I was able to drive so this was not an issue. Parents have choice about which setting to send their child to, and make this decision based on factors such as opening hours, cost and availability during school holidays. The settings are referred to as the pre-school, the nursery and the reception class. This is to quickly differentiate the type of setting, and to reduce the need to refer back to which country a setting is in, especially in the analysis and discussion chapters.

A significant difference between the pre-school and nursery and the reception class was alongside their education and care duties the practitioners also had food

preparation and housekeeping tasks that sometimes needed to be done concurrently with their education and care roles. This is meaningful because it meant that during the day practitioners had to balance the needs of the children alongside time-critical tasks such as preparing lunch; sometimes the balance had to be in favour of the task rather than the needs of the children.

Table 2. The English Participants

Setting information	Name (all names are pseudonyms)	Role
The preschool. Rural. Mix of private and social housing. 2 children speaking English as a second language. Some 2 year old funding.	Stephanie	Manager and key person. Main contact
The nursery Suburb. All private housing. Working parents. No English as a second language speakers. No 2 year old funding.	Hilary	Manager and previously Lead practitioner of the pre-school room. Main contact
	Shelley	Lead practitioner of the baby unit. SENCo.
The reception class Urban. All social housing. A small number of children speaking English as a second language.	Jessica	Lead of EYFS and reception teacher. SENCo. Main contact

For a narrative description of each setting see Appendix 7.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

This research was passed by the University of Suffolk ethics committee and is fully compliant with their requirements. In addition, the Finnish research was conducted according to the requirements of The Municipality of Jyväskylä and was fully compliant with the ethical requirements. A Tutkimuslupahakemus (Application for a research permit) was applied for on 8.1.2020 and granted on 13.1.2020. This was supported by Professor Maarit Alasuutari of the University of Jyväskylä. In Finland, ethical approval is given by the municipality in which the research is being carried out, rather than by the university supporting it (see Appendix 3).

The research was conducted on the basis of informed consent. Identical information documents were made in English and Finnish. Information sheets were given to all participants outlining the research questions (see Appendix 4). The information sheets included details of my PhD student status at the University of Suffolk and my supervisors' contact details in case they needed additional information or to make a complaint. I agreed the plan for each setting with the main contact and obtained verbal agreement to observe in class/group rooms from the head teacher or manager of each setting. I provided posters explaining who I was to parents, but only one setting in Finland displayed it and none in England considered this necessary as children were not interviewed and my focus was on practitioners. The head teachers/managers gave their verbal consent to this. In England participants signed consent forms (see Appendix 5). In Finland standard practice for gaining is through oral consent, which was recorded at the beginning of each interview. A consent form

was offered but not taken up by Finnish participants. The participants were reminded they could withdraw at any time, until the point at which the data was analysed. They were informed that they could choose not to answer a question if they did not wish. I explained that recordings would be held on password protected devices and in password protected files and would be destroyed once the PhD was concluded. I had a DBS certificate which I offered to settings as reassurance. As I was not alone with the children, I did not need one for each setting. I wore identification in English settings, but this was not required in Finnish settings.

Participants were informed that their names would be anonymised and pseudonyms used, as would their setting's name. Identifying features of the setting have been omitted. Aull Davis (2006) warns that simply anonymising and using pseudonyms may not prevent participants or settings from being identified, especially in research with a small pool of settings and participants such as this. Accordingly, I included this in verbal discussions about consent, and this dissuaded one potential participant from proceeding. All the participants who did record interviews were aware of this warning. The recordings of the interviews are stored on a device opened with a password and deleted at the end of the PhD process.

Throughout the process of analysis, the feminist ethics of care was used as a frame to ensure that, as Macfarlane (2010) contends, ethics is something that a researcher *is* rather than something they *do*. To this end, the "virtue based approach to ethics" (Macfarlane, 2010, p. 24) was relevant to this study. In practice, this related to how the data was gathered, as discussed above, but also to how it was analysed. Care was

taken to ensure that data was not mined without context, and that the intention to use the participants understanding of their situation as the lens through which their experiences were understood was carried through. This was an aspect of the research that was important to me. To this end, where I could, I was aware of what I might be able to offer to the setting at a different time. I visited both the pre-school and the nursery with my violin at a separate time to collecting data and played to the children. Stephanie came to the University of Suffolk to give a presentation about In the Moment Planning (Ephgrave, 2018) to my first year Childhood Studies students. In this way, I attempted to see the settings and the participants as places and people, rather than data to be mined.

I intended to have a native Finnish speaking researcher, Iiris, at all the interviews in Finnish settings. However, in Setting 1 all three participants, Sofia, Aurora and Ilona felt this was not necessary. In part this was due to logistics. Ilona is English and therefore a translator was not necessary, and Sofia and Aurora decided to be interviewed together. In the event, we had to fit Sofia and Aurora's interview in during a lunchbreak and there was no time to organise for the translator to join us. Only Aino in Setting 2 felt she wanted to have one present. Aino's English was good and during the interview we swapped back and forth so that sometimes she answered in English. When she wanted to give a longer, or more detailed answer, she spoke in Finnish to Iiris, which resulted in some of her answers being given in Finnish and translated into English. Importantly, we had already established a rapport (Leiblich, 1996) while I was a participant-observer with her group, characterised by category entitlement (Richards, Clark and Boggis, 2015) whereby Aino constructed

me as a fellow-practitioner. Therefore, we were able to co-construct (Pym, 2012) meaning between the three of us. Reflexivity is central to the process of making meaning of what is reported back in translation,

“What is told, as well as the meaning of what is told, is shaped by the relationship. The field texts created may be more or less collaboratively constructed, may be more or less interpretive, and may be more or less researcher influenced. It depends.” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, pp. 94-95)

We established what Aino intended as her meaning through a back-and-forth conversation in English and Finnish. In this I attempted to bear in mind Robert’s warning not to reinforce “the power of English to represent everyone and everything.” (Roberts, 1997, p. 170). I was careful to bear this in mind in the interviews conducted in English; to assume that participants’ English conveyed their intended meaning would be arrogant. I therefore combined the interviews with the field-notes and reflexive journal entries to try, as far as is possible, to ascertain the meanings of the answers.

4.6 Analytical Framework and Process of Analysis

The policies, fieldwork and interviews generated a large amount of data. In addition to the notes made while I was in the settings, there are also the notes that I made in the evenings. The English policies included in the analysis are the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2024), Development Matters (DfE, 2023), Education Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2023) and the Early Years Inspection Handbook

(Ofsted, 2024). The Finnish Policies included in the analysis are The National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (FNAE, 2018), The National Curriculum for Pre-primary Education (FNAE, 2014a) and The Guidelines and Recommendations for Evaluating the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (Vlasov et. al., 2019). In this study policies are treated as participants, in the context of their own worldview (Charmaz, 2014) in the same way as the human participants. Using policies in this way provides more than simply context; they have important, authoritative voices that provide much information about how and why certain attitudes, practices and discourses are authoritative (Mayo, 2015). As participants, policies hold the key to understanding the entirety of the contributions of all the human participants. In particular, the making visible of the conflict in worldviews between policies and practitioners is key to understanding how policies and policy enforcers hold powerful positions compared to policy enactors and the struggle that the powerless are subjected to. Policies are often treated as neutral in research about the impact of policy, often positioned as contextual rather than active, thereby removing the illusion of neutrality and exposing their powerful and performative nature.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a multi-disciplinary approach that allows the researcher to identify and analyse significant means of communication used within an organisation, policy or community (Fairclough, 1995). CDA in itself is not a method (van Dijk, 2015), but utilises any techniques that provides the researcher with the means by which to analyse an organisation. An analytical framework can be

constructed from a 'toolbox' of techniques, concepts and theories (Ball, 1994). This research is informed by a range of discursive theories and concepts, especially Foucauldian discourse analysis, governmentality and biopower and Butler's performativity.

The relevance of CDA is that it is not merely a description of the discourses of organisation, institution or nation. It offers a critique of the social problems and political issues that arise from the dynamics of power and ideology that operate across many social and political spaces (Cooren, 2015). CDA takes a step further than the mere observation and recording of the social and political attitudes, practices and texts it uncovers, but is critical of the consequences it identifies. It focuses on how the organisational discourse "confirms, enacts, legitimises, reproduces or challenges relations of power and/or abuse" (van Dijk 2001, pp. 352-371) and offers a fundamental concern for social change (Fairclough, 1995). This concern for social change is what legitimises its use in this thesis, which challenges the hegemony of the accountability discourse in early years education.

Drawing on Ball's (1994) idea of the toolbox, I used elements of Hyatt's (2013) Critical Policy Discourse Analysis framework in my analysis of policies. Hyatt (2013) sets out contextualising policy and deconstructing policy as the two strands of analysis that form this framework. While I do not use this framework as a set of instructions, I do draw on elements, including identifying the justifications, or warrants that policies use to authorise themselves, discussed next.

In this analysis I draw on the contextualisation of policy to identify the drivers and levers, by which Hyatt means the intended aims or goals of policy and the instruments the state uses to achieve these goals and aims. The aims are articulated through ministerial statements, policy documents and legislation. I concentrate on the policy documents and supporting documents as these are what the managers and practitioners used to shape their settings' policies and practices. I also, where relevant, include ministerial statements and speeches where these clarify a goal or aim. The levers or means by which these aims are achieved are identified by Hyatt as, for instance, target setting, inspection and funding. These levers facilitate the implementation of the goals and aims, either explicitly by directing and managing practices, or implicitly by shaping attitudes, opinions and practices by making some valued and rewarded.

Hyatt's (2013) critical policy analysis allows the identification of drivers and levers which is central to understanding how policy develops and is interpreted in different contexts such as time, levels of qualification, local ecologies and situations. Thus, different institutions will embed different interpretations and recontextualisations into setting policies and practices.

In addition to drivers and levers, I used Hyatt's tool of warrant to identify how these aims and goals, and the means by which they were realised is justified. Although Hyatt identifies three warrants (evidentiary, accountability and political) my analysis concentrates on the evidentiary and accountability warrants. Evidentiary warrants include research, reports and evidence which is used to justify the inclusion of

particular practices and the exclusion of others. Hyatt argues that policy claims of evidentiary warrants are never neutral. They are the production of selections, omissions and interpretations of evidence and are imbued with values and embedded in ideology. The identification of particular models of, for instance, child development or pedagogy is therefore necessary, through this process of analysis, in order to identify what is included in policy and what values and ideologies are reproduced. Policy presents evidentiary warrants as factual and indisputable. Where opposition challenges these claims they are constructed as inaccurate, incomplete or lacking in credibility. The accountability warrant justifies the evidentiary warrant through research, reports and evidence based on results and outcomes, especially numerical and statistical data which can be manipulated to show that particular policies have beneficial and measurable outcomes. Inspection and evaluation judgements, league tables and assessment results are examples of the accountability warrant. The second part of the Hyatt (2013) critical policy analysis draws on Critical Discourse Analysis to engage with text and discourses using a number of lenses. This process is described below. Therefore, the analysis of policy was conducted in two stages, the first identifying the drivers, levers and warrants described above, the second as a discourse analysis, described below. This was then followed by a CDA of the field data.

A criticism of CDA is that it is subjective, that researchers analyse texts through the lens of their own bias (Al Khazraji, 2018). To address this, I have been transparent about the systematic analytical processes used. The policies analysed are clearly identified above and throughout the thesis where it is referred to. These policies

were chosen because they provide the statutory framework that practitioners work within. While Development Matters (DfE, 2023) is not statutory all three settings in England used it as their curriculum framework and it therefore acted as if it were statutory, which I felt justified its inclusion. I acknowledge that policy is a process (Taylor et. al., 1997), which is “value-laden, multi-dimensional, resulting in intended and unintended consequences and interactional in nature (with other policies, institutions, actors and contexts)” (Hyatt, 2013, p. 838). To ensure that I do not simply criticise (or valorise) policies as coming from particular political standpoints I used the iterative process described below to go back and forth between the interviews, fieldnotes and policies to bring them into communication with each other. This iterative process extended throughout both the data-gathering and analysis with the result that as I deepened my critical engagement with the subject, I was able to extend my analysis and understanding.

Ethical considerations that are addressed specifically in relation to CDA relate to the respectful way I approached analysing the interviews. CDA involves exposing hidden power dynamics and ideologies within discourses which are articulated through speech and practices (Ball, 2003). There is therefore the risk that the analyst appears critical of people, groups or settings and in the process fail to fairly represent their voices. I remained vigilant about balancing critical insight with respect, never forgetting that I am striving to expose the discourse, not criticise the individual (Steer et. al., 2007).

Processing the data

A large amount of data was generated through field notes, interviews and policies. Field notes and additional reflections were typed up each evening on the day of observation. I transcribed interviews myself, as part of becoming familiar with the text. As I transcribed, I changed names to pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

Once I had transcribed the interviews, I began coding the texts. I began with the interview data and then realised that this was a mistake; I needed to know what the drivers, levers and warrants of policy were before working through the field data to see how they were reproduced or opposed in practice. I did this in the old-fashioned way, using post-it notes, highlighter pens and large pieces of paper. I decided not to use a programme such as NVivo because I was not looking for themes based purely on language or according to key words. Instead, I felt that I needed to get to know the data intimately through close reading (Braun and Clarke, 2022) which would mean I began to recognise discourses even where the language might not immediately suggest it. I coded the interviews first, creating Excel sheets for each country. Having coded the policies, I returned to the interviews and field notes and repeated the process (see Appendix 6 for final codes). Drawing on a 'toolbox' (Ball, 1994) of CDA I considered the ways in which policy positions and constructs practices, practitioners and children. Across the data I looked for examples of how policy constructs the discourses that practitioners are impelled to reproduce through governmentality and biopower and that they performatively fulfil. This was an iterative process that took more than a year and included many moments of frustration when I felt that I had got it all wrong and would have to start again. In fact, when I returned to the interviews and field notes having processed the policies, I

felt that I had indeed, started again. However, in hindsight, I do not regret the mistake of starting with data from the field as it meant that I knew it intimately. As I analysed the policy, I was able to make links between the discourses and performative requirements in policy and interviews or observations that I had not previously made.

Reflexivity was a key part of this process, whereby I was aware that my positionalities as an early years practitioner, mother of children in the system and researcher holding particular theoretical and discursive perspectives had the potential to make discourses operating in settings and policies to be so normal to be that I failed to see them. Using different theoretical and analytical frameworks would have resulted in different conclusions. I have therefore attempted to be conscious of my own constituted subjectivity, and aware of how this might affect how I conducted research, analysed data and discussed the results. Additionally, as part of the supervision process, my positionality and reflexivity was challenged as my supervisors provided feedback.

This chapter has outlined and justified my methodological framework and discussed the importance of reflexivity on all aspects of data collection and analysis. I set out my feminist ontology and constructivist epistemology, including the feminist ethics of care. An ethnographically influenced multi-stranded research design was set out, consisting of participant observation, semi-structured interviews and critical discourse analysis.

The design limitations were discussed, pointing out that Covid-19 restricted time and resource limitations even further than already allowed for, meaning that I could not return to settings to conduct more interviews in Finland, or spend as much time in English settings as I had in Finland. One consequence of this was that practitioners who are less confident did not feel able to participate, because they did not have the time to get to know and trust me. This appeared to have precluded practitioners in lower positions of power and these voices are missing from this account. In addition, I conceded that the voices of children, who are also impacted by the accountability discourse, are missing from this research.

Data collection methods and details of participating settings and practitioners were discussed, including how settings and participants were recruited. Ethical considerations, including positionality and category entitlement were considered in relation to my positionality and my relationality to participants. Finally, the analytical framework was set out, discussing how a 'toolbox' of concepts, theoretical positions and analytical tools were used to analyse field notes, interviews and policies. With an awareness of these concepts and issues, the following chapters set out my results, analysis and discussions.

Chapter 5. A critical policy analysis of accountability in the EYFS of England.

Introduction

This chapter addresses my first research question, “What are the ideological and educational discourses that construct the accountability discourse in early years education in England?”. A critical analysis of policies, interviews and observations in three early years settings is employed to identify these discourses. This chapter identifies the ideological positions of the EYFS and the Ofsted inspection framework to question the assumptions and political positions that shape accountability in the EYFS. Evidence to support my claims is drawn from key policies, interviews and observations across three settings in England. This study offers an interpretation of the accountability discourse that fuses analytical and qualitative traditions of data analysis. Consequently, the arc of the discussions in these results and analysis chapters stretch from policy intentions through practitioner actions to outcomes.

Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2024) is statutory for all settings providing care and education for children aged 0-5, Development Matters (DM) (DfE, 2023) is non-statutory, but all the participating settings referred to it as key guidance. The School Inspection Handbook (Ofsted, 2024a) and the Early Years Inspection Handbook (Ofsted, 2024b) are intended as guidance for inspectors but are made public and were both referred to by managers, practitioners and leaders. Therefore, I made the decision to include both Ofsted inspection frameworks as key policies that shape the accountability discourse in early years education. These four policies form the accountability framework through which the accountability discourse shapes the

practices, beliefs and policies of settings and practitioners, meaning that the data drawn from observations and interviews is indicative of the outcomes of policy.

In the exploration of ideology and educational intentions a Foucauldian theoretical framework is used. In particular, the concept of regimes of truth (1966) is used to identify the underlying concepts, attitudes and ideologies that shape policy and can be observed in practitioners' conversations and practices. The metaphor of the panopticon (1977) is used to illustrate the levels of surveillance that practitioners and children experience and reproduce to fulfil the requirements of the EYFS and Ofsted. Governmentality (1991, 2007), through which this surveillance is achieved through subjectification of the self, completes the main Foucauldian components of this framework. These three key Foucauldian concepts of regimes of truth, the panopticon and governmentality allow the identification of discourses (1977) and how they are embodied and reproduced. In concert with this Foucauldian theoretical perspective, Butler's theory of performativity is used to show how practitioners are impelled to step into the roles created for them through policies, discourses and the reproduction of practices, attitudes and beliefs. Butler's assertion that gender is reproduced through repetition and ritual (Butler, 1993) is drawn on here to illustrate how the roles of "good" practitioners and "successful" children exist prior to the individual through constructions of roles in policies and are performatively fulfilled through the repetition of rituals and routines in daily life in the setting. The combination of the theoretical perspectives of Foucault and Butler allows a critically analysis that produces an understanding of how ideologies and educational

intentions work together to produce an accountability discourse that is particular to English early years education.

My Critical Policy Discourse Analysis (Hyatt, 2018) identified three key themes in policies, interviews and observations that are used to discuss the analysis of results. The three themes are *neoliberalism*, *school-readiness* and *Ofsted-readiness*. While the themes are separated into two chapters in order to interrogate the import and consequences of each on accountability in the EYFS they are inextricably linked. The pervasiveness of the three themes indicates how they have become embedded in the national and political discourses about early years education, shaping policies, opinions, beliefs and practices. Like all discourses, they are hard to identify, appearing in conversations and setting's policies as common sense or as evidentially true and disciplining practitioners' compliance. As Foucault contended, "Discipline is a political anatomy of detail" (Foucault, 1991b, p. 139). The details of accountability in the English EYFS are undoubtedly political yet are so embedded in what is taught to practitioners, the practices they are impelled to reproduce and the attitudes and opinions about childcare and education they have absorbed that they are hard to discern. The construction of practitioners and children is a concept that is returned to repeatedly throughout all three chapters, reflecting the ways in which policies and ideologies form regimes of truth regarding the ways adults and children are required to performatively fulfil their roles in order to be considered successful.

Neoliberalism is explored first because it is the overarching ideology shaping education, evident in New Labour, Coalition and Conservative iterations that have

contributed to the present policy. As discussed in Chapter 1, neoliberalism is an ideology that is both contested and nebulous, yet also identified as hegemonic throughout national and international policy. Analysis of the accountability policies and field data identified that neoliberalism is so fundamental to understanding how policy and practice are intertwined that it is also identified as a theme in this analysis; to have named the theme otherwise would have entailed using a descriptive moniker that created obscurity. As I have already clarified how I intend the term to be understood in Chapter 1 I feel confident in using it here, as a theme.

The discourses that underpin culture and society can be identified through genealogy (Foucault, 2007) to show how power passes through systems such as policies and laws to reproduce ideologies regardless of the party in government. As Foucault claimed, "This kind of method entails going behind the institution and trying to discover in a wider and more overall perspective what we can broadly call a technology of power." (2007. P. 117). The technology of power in the EYFS is embodied in the accountability discourse, made concrete in the EYFS and Ofsted inspection frameworks and reproduced through the performative routines and rituals of practices in settings.

Building on the analysis of the neoliberal ideology that underpins the early years accountability policies, the second section interrogates the educational intentions of the EYFS. Participating settings reflected the mosaic of provision in England. Therefore, some sections concentrate on the interviews and observations of particular settings because they provide insights into issues that other settings did

not experience. The ideology and educational intentions of the EYFS are created by and judged through the lens of “quality”. The third section of this chapter analyses the concept of “quality” to understand its impact on the accountability discourse in early years education in England. This chapter begins with an interrogation of the ideology of the accountability discourse in the EYFS.

5.1 Neoliberalism; “We know the key skills”. Outcome based accountability

The early years accountability discourse in England has been driven by an international,

“shift in education policy discourse, from a focus on content, resources and processes, to governance through outcome-based accountability, characterised by standardised measurement of performance, and the evaluation and incentivisation of this performance” (Högberg and Lindgren, 2020, p. 2).

The EYFS reflects this emphasis on outcome-based accountability by positioning assessment as the primary practice in constructing practitioners’ understanding of children’s development,

“Assessment plays an important part in helping parents, carers and practitioners to recognise children’s progress, understand their needs, and to plan activities and support. This section sets out the assessment requirements

group and school-based providers must meet, as well as guidance on assessment” (DfE, 2024, p. 19).

Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) claim that this is due to a,

“gravitational field of a powerful force, a political ideology that has become increasingly influential across the world since the 1980s; the ideology of neoliberalism” (p.1).

The emphasis on outcome-based accountability and standardised measurement of performance is evident in international publications such as the *Starting Strong* series (OECD, 2001, 2006, 2011, 2015, 2017, 2021). The OECD (2017) report claims,

“According to recent research, a balanced curriculum with roughly equal emphasis on play, self-regulation and pre-academic activities is related to the highest observed quality of staff-child interactions.” (p. 121)

More recently, the International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS) (OECD, 2020) (also known as the “baby-pisa”) has conducted a study with pre-school children examining the skills and knowledge that children are constructed as needing in order to start school and progress well through education. The IELS (OECD, 2020) focussed on the,

“aspects of development and learning that are predictive of children’s later educational outcomes and wider well-being. These are: emergent literacy, emergent numeracy, self-regulation and social-emotional skills” (OECD, 2020)

Although *Starting Strong* (OECD, 2017) discusses curriculum as well-balanced, this is contradicted by the prioritisation of literacy, numeracy and self-regulation/social-emotional skills in the IELS. Foucault’s concept of regimes of truth (Foucault, 1979) illustrates how these limited pre-academic and personal skills are presented as a balanced curriculum. The EYFS reproduces these neoliberal constructions of early years education,

“This section sets out what providers must do, working in partnership with parents and/or carers, to promote the learning and development of all children in their care, and to ensure their entire early years’ experience contributes positively to their brain development and readiness for Key Stage 1. The learning and development requirements are informed by the best available evidence on how children learn. They also reflect the broad range of skills, knowledge and attitudes children need as foundations for life now and in the future. Early years providers must guide the development of children’s capabilities to help ensure that children in their care will fully benefit from future opportunities.” (DfE, 2024, p. 8).

A key change in language in the EYFS 2024 iteration from previous versions (2008, 2012, 2017) is the introduction of the term “brain development”. This term

represents a shift from “learning and development” (DfE, 2017, p. 7), which has connotations of a holistic development that includes cognitive, physical and social-emotional development, to a reductionist conception of learning that separates mind from body and views the body as the vehicle for the mind. This conception of learning is linked to “cognitive load” (Avgerinou and Tolmie, 2020; Sun, Toh and Steinkrauss, 2020; Vaicuniene and Kazlauskein, 2023) whereby learning is situated in the child’s brain and conceived in terms of learning as instruction in universal skills and knowledge. The impact this has on early years education is seen in the priority given to instruction over experiential learning.

“As children grow older and move into the reception year, there should be a greater focus on teaching the essential skills and knowledge in the specific areas of learning. This will help children to prepare for Key Stage 1 (DfE, 2024, p. 17).

The specific areas of learning are Mathematics, Literacy, Understanding the world and Expressive arts and design. Many ELG’s are to describe similarities and differences between contrasting event, times, places, habitats and environments. Therefore, the “essential skills and knowledge” represent narrow, pre-academic skills. The “truth” that is presented as “essential” is constructive of early years education that has a teleology of school-readiness and ultimately the production of human capital. All areas of learning reproduce this regime of truth, that the focus is the cognitive development of the child’s brain, based on the theory of cognitive load. The manager of the pre-school, Stephanie reproduced this discourse of the EYFS,

“what we would like the children to achieve so that when they go to school, they are not just bombarded with – you need to write your name, you need to know 1-10. We need to make sure we are still doing the basics but also the life skills, the resilience, the confidence.”

While Stephanie makes an (arguably false) distinction between what she perceives the EYFS to prioritise as “the basics” of pre-academic skills and her personal priorities of “the life skills, the resilience, the confidence”, this comment is an illustration of how governmentality works to embed the dominant discourses of development. Stephanie’s reproduction of the key discourses of the EYFS and Ofsted shows how deeply she has absorbed the intentions of the policy and reproduced them as her own attitudes and beliefs. Rose contends that,

“The language of expertise plays a key role here, its norms and values seeming compelling because of their claim to a disinterested truth, and the promise they offer of achieving desired results.” (Rose, 1990, p. 84)

Stephanie exemplifies “the language of expertise”, using phrases such as “what we would like the children to achieve” to indicate her knowledge as an experienced practitioner. In describing the academic skills such as writing names and counting to ten as “the basics” she identifies life skills, resilience and confidence as being protective against “being bombarded”. The distinction Stephanie makes between academic skills and soft skills is that the Pre-school is giving something extra to their

children by ensuring they have these abilities, despite all of these skills being ELG's.

The "disinterested truth" of the EYFS is the developmental, universal structure of the framework, which constructs the desired results of the school-ready child, human capital in the making, pre-loaded with cognitive and behavioural acquisitions.

Stephanie gave an example of how she viewed education as an input/output procedure that reflects the cognitive load theory that underpins the EYFS,

"So how best to get something out of the child than through their learning, through their play, to get that end goal?"

And a little later she added,

"What are we going to add, what are we going to put out to try to get some learning, to see what they know, to see what to develop, to stretch, what we can add for them to gain more knowledge basically."

Stephanie's construction of development can be seen to be shaped by the Piagetian (Piaget, 1952) model that views children as empty vessels that are filled with knowledge and skills. Knowledge is viewed as moving from concrete to abstract through a series of universal stages; information is put in and knowledge is the output. Therefore, Stephanie's practice of observing each child to see what they already know so that she can create activities that provoke the next sequential step of learning, reproduces the practices and beliefs of the EYFS and Ofsted.

Stephanie used my positionality as a fellow practitioner to include me in recognising her the skills she assessed the children needed to be school-ready. In this she assumed my prior knowledge of the curriculum and that I agreed with her position. She used category entitlement (Richards, Clark and Boggis, 2015) to recognise me as a fellow lead practitioner who would therefore have the same in-depth knowledge that she did. This is seen in her using languages that asserts these facts as common-sense. In doing so she signals a powerful dominant discourse, both in reproducing it, and in expecting my acquiescence.

The Ofsted early years framework evaluates how well,

“practitioners ensure that the content and sequencing for each of the areas of learning are clear, allowing children to progress towards appropriately ambitious outcomes.” (Ofsted, 2024b, Paragraph 185)

The EYFS requires that practitioners,

“ensure that the content and sequencing for each of the areas of learning are clear, allowing children to progress towards appropriately ambitious outcomes.” (DfE, 2024, p, 16).

This study confirms Wood’s (2020) discourse analysis of the EYFS that finds that it is constructed from a selective appropriation of development theories and government

funded research, relying on Piagetian models, that development leads learning. Additionally, Wood (2020) found the discursive regime of the EYFS impelled practitioners to fulfil multiple performance criteria including assessing outcomes, evaluating standards and defining quality. I contend that participants in my study enacted behaviours and attitudes that Wood's discourse analysis identified, meaning this study adds to the existing evidence. Far from being a neutral and natural description of early years education, the EYFS and the Ofsted framework are political and ideological, constructing reductionist, performative roles for children and practitioners.

Stephanie's positioning herself to me, as a fellow practitioner, as performatively knowing and reproducing these requirements in her speech and practice is significant. This shows that in the situation of being observed (or inspected) she had so internalised these discourses that as a "good" practitioner she was able, and desired, to reproduce them and "prove" that she was meeting the standards of the EYFS and Ofsted. The panoptical nature of accountability in early years settings is discernible in Stephanie's descriptions. She consistently uses the pronoun "we" to indicate that all "good" practitioners are impelled to follow these practices and hold these opinions. She drew me into the panopticon by including me in the category of fellow professional who understood and (she assumed) agreed with her beliefs. I was careful not to disclose my feelings to her, not only because this would have potentially compromised the research, but more importantly because I did not want to hurt her feelings.

The discourse of the value of early childhood as a site for ensuring the right learning styles, behaviours and kinds of knowledge and skills is transfused throughout Stephanie's interview. As she says, it all comes down to,

“what we want them to learn before they go to school.”

These ideas of early learning as foundations for life, learning and school readiness are steeped in the neoliberal concept of human capital. While the term human capital is not used in the four policy documents, the key concepts of human capital theory are visible, positioning early childhood education as a component in a nation's prosperity both present and future (Bandelj and Spiegel, 2023).

Human capital theory removes responsibility from the shoulders of government. The assumption is that the “well-rounded” curriculum, if properly delivered, will produce a successful future adult (Youderain, 2019). The EYFS claims that it will provide this outcome, given the right delivery,

“The EYFS sets the standards that all early years providers must meet to ensure that children learn and develop well and are kept healthy and safe. It promotes teaching and learning to ensure children's 'school readiness' and gives children the right foundation for good future progress through school and life.” (DfE, 2024, p. 7)

Societal issues such as housing, nutrition, unemployment and local stable or reliable employment are absent from what is considered necessary to provide children with equality of access to a good future life; the political discourse is that a good quality education is sufficient. Thus, this regime of truth, places considerable responsibility for a good start in life on the early years education system (Griffen, 2024). Stephanie explained how she reproduced this responsibility,

“They [the EYFS] are the standards. That’s what we should be working towards. It’s to make sure, and that is because, the standards are there to make sure the children get the very best.”

Hilary also pointed out that the EYFS is impossible to challenge,

“I have to look at the new EYFS, I have to. It no use me disregarding that because that’s what they are coming to look to see, if you are delivering that. So you’ve got to deliver it.”

Stephanie and Hilary both used language denoting the imperative nature of delivering the curriculum. The outcome-based curriculum and Ofsted inspections ensure that practitioners feel this impossibility of doing otherwise, internalising the discourse of self-surveillance to deliver policies. Jessica spoke of the stress she felt daily in ensuring every child in her reception class was progressing,

“So, a little more pressure of trying to make sure that I work with all of the children so I’ve got that really secure knowledge of who they are and what they can do so we can continually keep moving them on.”

While Shelley explained how in the baby room they were trying to implement the new Ofsted guidance to make less paperwork but still do good observations,

“How are they [the babies] going to mark make, or paint, blowing bubbles, are they going to blow themselves, reaching to catch them and pop them? So, it’s what you are looking for. And then the reflection on the back [of the planning sheet] is what used to be a session plan. So that’s getting rid, trying to get rid of some paperwork to lessen the paperwork load a bit because I know that’s what the changes in the EYFS is looking for.”

However, while Shelley’s account of observing shows she was aware of the change in processes in an Ofsted inspection, her practice was not significantly changed because she was held accountable for children’s progress; the only way to offer proof was through a data trail. Therefore, Ofsted’s reform of relying more on their own observations of how curriculum is implemented and “learning walks” whereby inspectors observe the setting and engage practitioners and children in conversation about what they are doing does not have an impact on the data generated daily. Instead, Shelley’s account of “trying to get rid of the paperwork” while also keeping children’s files fully up to date is of a dual performativity. A “good” practitioner does not need a lot of paperwork because she “knows” her children, reflecting the

maternalistic (Mezey and Pillard, 2012; Brown, Sumison and Press, 2011) constructions of the workforce. Yet, a “good” professional practitioner also keeps her children’s paperwork up to date, proving the journey towards school-readiness. Thus, competing discourses about practitioners produce contradictory performative actions, all of which must be fulfilled. The practitioner of the EYFS is constantly and simultaneously a knowledgeable practitioner and a technician who produces less paperwork, is accountable for key children’s progress that is both recorded and memorised. All these processes are part of the “thick” accountability regime (Högberg and Lindstrom, 2018).

To conclude this section, this study demonstrates the ideology of early years education in England is dominated by neoliberalism. Regardless of political party, since its inception in 2008 under the Labour government, the key concepts of individualised, developmental goals and the production of human capital has underpinned the curriculum and inspection guidance. New iterations of the policy in 2012, 2017 and 2024 have seen the policy draw further on international discourses of school-readiness and the production of human capital, prompting ever “thicker” (Högberg and Lindstrom, 2018) accountability practices. Practitioners are required to fulfil different performative roles depending on who is watching in a manner reflecting the panopticon (Foucault, 1977), but all of them must be maintained continuously. The powerful neoliberal discourses of school readiness and human capital in the policies are reproduced in the practitioners’ words and actions, confirming neoliberalism as the ideology that dominates policy, beliefs and practices.

School-readiness and the production of human capital are identified as the key intentions of the EYFS. The educational outcomes are demonstrated in the form of ELG's. The attitudes and beliefs of policy are so deeply embedded in the practices and attitudes of practitioners that they are reproduced almost without question. The educational intentions of the EYFS are the subject of the next section.

5.2 Educational intentions: “A good level of development, or not”

English early years education policy is presented as a technical manual. It sets out the requirements as what “must” and “should” be done by settings and practitioners. The Introduction to the EYFS begins with a statement that aligns the policy with the ideological beliefs that are seen in international discourses,

“All children deserve the care and support they need to have the best start in life. Children learn and develop at a faster rate from birth to five years old than at any other time in their lives, so their experiences in early years have a major impact on their future life chances. A secure, safe, and happy childhood is important in its own right. Good parenting and high-quality early learning provide the foundation children need to fulfil their potential.” (DfE, 2024 p. 7)

This policy draws on the discourses of the OECD (OECD, 2020) that learning and development between birth and five have significant consequences for later education and life chances. Universal claims about the significance of the first thousand days of life for health and development and the first five years for early years education, position children as vulnerable, individualised and developmentally

time limited. The claim is justified through the developmental claim that children learn and develop at a faster rate than at any other time of their lives (Raghavan and Ruta, 2022) creating a fear of failing to establish their learning (Kimball, 2016), this fragile development is positioned in these policies (DfE, 2024; DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2024; Ofsted, 2023) as happening within the family and the early years educational setting.

The following paragraph sets out how children’s learning and development is constructed,

“The EYFS is about what children learn, as well as how they learn. Effective practice is a mix of different approaches. Children learn through play, by adults modelling, by observing each other and through adult-guided learning.”
(DfE, 2024, p. 7)

This construction of learning is narrow, limiting children to what adults provide. Play as a vehicle for learning in the EYFS is challenged by Wood (2019); she identifies it as a less formal type of teaching, rather than the target-free, unlimited and joyful activity that is associated with the term.

However, it is the paragraph already referred to in the previous section that outlines the policy’s educational intentions,

“The EYFS sets the standards that all early years providers must meet to ensure that children learn and develop well and are kept healthy and safe. It promotes teaching and learning to ensure children’s ‘school readiness’ and gives children the right foundation for good future progress through school and life” (DfE, 2024, p. 7).

Ultimately, the EYFS has the intention of producing “school-ready” children with the “right foundation” for success. These statements act to position the policy as providing the guidance necessary for these aims to be achieved. However, responsibility is delegated to settings, practitioners, parents and ultimately, children themselves. Therefore, accountability is held by those who enact policy, not by those who formulate or write it. The potential for policy to be scrutinised and found wanting is made unavailable to practitioners who must “plan, design and implement the EYFS curriculum” (Ofsted, 2024b, p. 31). The EYFS therefore represents a disciplinary tool that is enacted on practitioners’ and children’s bodies, thoughts, opinions and actions.

The previous section concludes that neoliberal ideology is not unique to a particular political party. Rather, the construction of early childhood as both a site of opportunity and of risk is visible in policies from all major political parties from the inception of the EYFS (DFES, 2008; DfE, 2012; DfE, 2017; DfE, 2024). The conception of early childhood education as a foundation for future growth and learning and ultimately of human capital is common to all political parties. This “truth” appears to be apolitical, which renders it all the more powerful and hard to challenge.

Hilary reproduced this human capital view, saying,

“It’s not about what they need to be ready for school; it’s what they need to be ready for life.”

I contend that the hegemonic constructions of early years education, practitioners and children are far from apolitical but rather reflect the neoliberal regime of truth of all governments over the past twenty years and therefore constitutes a cultural discourse of England.

The means by which the “truth” of early years educational intentions is enforced is through Ofsted inspections. Ofsted is a non-ministerial government department that is guided by, and answers to, the Minister for Education which inspects and makes judgements about the quality of settings educational provision. The lack of accountability of Ofsted has become problematic recently, brought into focus by the tragic suicide of head teacher Ruth Perry on 8 January 2023 following an Ofsted inspection that downgraded her school from Outstanding to Inadequate. It is reported that there were concerns about how the inspection had been carried out and the lack of care shown towards Mrs Perry (Guardian, 2023). Perryman et. al. (2023) concluded that Ofsted was no longer fit for purpose and proposed a new system and organisation, both of which have been ignored by the government (Education Committee, 2024), Ofsted and the Minister for Education, Gillian Keegan. Waters and Palmer (2023) found that female head teachers of primary schools were

at a higher risk of suicide following Ofsted inspections. This is significant to this study as all the participants, including two managers and one EYFS lead were female. Water and Palmer (2023) concluded that a lack of accountability in Ofsted and other relevant authorities for the health and wellbeing of those being inspected was a significant factor in this higher risk factor. Pressure to prove educational intentions were met did produce anxiety at setting level, as Hilary pointed out,

“The number of times Ofsted, the word Ofsted comes out of my mouth is huge. So yes, that is, it has a huge impact because I have to look at the new EYFS, I have to. It’s no use me disregarding that. So you have to deliver it. What I have started to do is push that down to the practitioners. It’s no good only the manager knowing what Ofsted are coming to look at. Se even the inspection handbook, they need to know, because actually, they are going to be observed more than me in that regard. So I have to.”

Hilary had internalised the requirements of Ofsted and reproduced them. She said, “It’s no use me disregarding that” about the new EYFS but then immediately referred to the Ofsted handbook as something that not just herself, but the practitioners must know. The performative repetition of the phrase “I have to”, which she used three times illustrates the responsibility she felt for understanding the requirements and ensuring her staff also understand them. In the toddler room, the practitioners spoke of how Hilary “tapped them on the shoulder” and asked them Ofsted related questions, fulfilling the expectation that practitioners should be able to answer such questions immediately. The cascade of responsibility and accountability is directed

ever downwards towards the practitioners with the least experience and qualifications. They are most likely to have to bear the responsibility of answering the inspector's questions, because they are the practitioners most likely to be observed during an inspection. The repeated use of the phrase "I have to" also points to the impossibility of challenging either the EYFS or Ofsted at the level of practice.

Parallel to the Ofsted inspection regime which enforces the educational intentions of the EYFS to produce school-ready children and future human capital, is the structure of the Development Matter statements and the ELG's. These statements underpin the curriculum that each setting is required to create or adopt. Therefore, while Ofsted, the EYFS and Development Matters claim that the implementation of the ELG's and Development Matters statements are not inspected, it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise,

"There are seven areas of learning and development that set out what providers must teach the children in their settings. All areas of learning and development are important and inter-connected." (DfE, 2024, p. 8)

"Development Matters... can help you to design an effective early years curriculum." (DfE, 2023, p. 4)

"When reaching a judgement on quality of education, inspectors will work with leaders and managers to understand how the curriculum as a whole is

structured and where they can find evidence that the quality of education criteria are met.” (Ofsted, 2024b, paragraph 81).

While there are alternatives to Development Matters, notably Birth to Five Matters (Birthto5matters.org, 2024), the developmental, ages and stages structure is universal. The seven areas of learning are statutory therefore it is difficult to imagine how a curriculum could be created differently. Thus, a structure of developmental “check points” from 0-4 and the ELGS’s for the reception year create a de facto curriculum that is used to judge the quality of education by Ofsted. The following section explores the disciplinary power of DM and ELG’s in shaping both practitioners’ educational intentions and their construction of children.

The Disciplinary Power of the Curriculum

The EYFS profile is made up of the ELG’s which forms an outcome based summative assessment of a child at the end of the reception year. The ELG’s are not intended to be used to create the curriculum,

“The ELGs should not be used as a curriculum or in any way to limit the wide variety of rich experiences that are crucial to child development. (DfE, 2024, p. 11).

Yet every child is judged against the ELG’s in May of their reception year. It is hard to imagine how, given the stress that Jessica felt under to support as many children as

possible to gain a Good Level of Development (GLD), that they could not constitute a de facto curriculum.

Children are observed by their reception teacher and assessed as to whether they meet the goals or not. If they meet enough ELG's they are judged to have reached a GLD. Jessica told me how she passed this information on to the Year 1 teachers,

“I don't find they (ELG's) always set the children up to succeed because it's very much a good level of development, *or not*. You want that story, which we do pass on to the Year 1 teachers with the characteristics of effective learning, but it just almost doesn't give the child credit for everything they have achieved.”

While Jessica does not challenge this accountability discourse of measurement and judgement in this statement, she appears ambivalent about it, seen in her attempts to qualify her feelings, evident in the phrase, “just almost doesn't”. This discomfort with the educational intentions was also seen in her answer when we discussed how appropriate the ELG's were for children of this age,

“I do think the inclusion of self-regulation is really important because I think that's a really big tell, or a big indicator of how successful a child is going to be when they move through the school.”

At another point in the interview Jessica said, “You never want to write a child off, but...”. Jessica’s experience as a reception teacher in a deprived area clearly complicates her feelings about the ELG’s and the impact they have on children as they continue through the school. On the one hand she is impelled to consider them important; she acts as a “good” teacher to ensure her children attain them. On the other hand, there is a defensiveness about how they are not the full story of a child. What she calls the “full story” was previously shown on the child’s EYFS profile as a record of their whole time at the setting. The new profile only includes the end point. As Jessica says,

“It’s very much Good Level of Development, or not”.

While the ELG’s shaped learning in the reception classroom, with younger age groups, Stephanie and Shelley worked with Development Matters as the de facto curriculum. Stephanie was ambivalent about the new framework,

“It’s so broad, which I think to a degree, makes it difficult for staff to then learn the concept but like I keep saying to them, don’t forget about what was in the old Development Matters because it doesn’t mean that document has gone and we can’t use it. These are supporting documents to support what we know children need to develop and it’s just getting to those check points.”

In fact, the new Development Matters is significantly different to the new document, so Stephanie's advice to her staff to use the old one was problematic. She also contradicted the direction given in the new Development Matters,

"It is not designed to be used as a tick list for generating lots of data." (DfE, 2023, p. 4)

Stephanie said,

"So now, using that document, looking at it. Oh, so my child, actually, that tick list, they are not quite there yet. What do I need to do to support it?"

This is similar to Shelley's description of,

"...some staff that perhaps don't cover all areas on their observations of their key children and you can see some big gaps"

In Stephanie's account, children's development was being ticked off, where-as Shelley was under pressure because her staff were not ticking off the developmental statements, but they both tell the same story of practitioners who, despite the statutory guidance that Development Matters does not constitute a curriculum were impelled to act as though it was. These developmental statements, and Stephanie and Shelley's anxiety about fulfilling them constitute dataveillance (Bradbury (2018), by which children's development is rendered into data and this data is acted on, to

ensure that good progress can be shown. The Ofsted inspection framework has the aim of ensuring that “the setting’s curriculum (educational programmes) intentions are met and it is appropriately ambitious for the children it serves” (Ofsted, 2024b, paragraph 185). Practitioners appeared unsure about what this meant, conflating and confusing Ofsted inspection frameworks, the EYFS and DM. Their ideas of what was implied by the term “curriculum” were confused (see Chapter 6) making accountability challenging to achieve but they were in no doubt about the consequences of failure.

Therefore, at the heart of the discourse about the educational intentions of the EYFS lies a conflict. The EYFS constitutes a framework for a curriculum that each setting is required to construct (or adopt via an external source). This curriculum must ensure that children reach a good level of development by fulfilling the ELG’s, yet they are not intended as an entire curriculum. However, Jessica describes the ELG’s as “challenging” and her timetable was shaped by the acquiring of the ELG’s. The EYFS is supported by Development Matters, which does not constitute a curriculum, yet the use of checkpoints makes it inevitable that younger children are taught to achieve them. This constitutes a contradiction that has serious implications for settings in the question of educational intention. I contend that the contradiction is clearly seen in the experiences of the practitioners and results in conflicting opinions and practices as they struggle to fulfil the different “truths” that they are required to achieve in order to be judged as performatively providing Good or Outstanding educational outcomes. This raises the question of what is meant by “good” or “outstanding”

which are judgements of quality. The next section addresses the problem of what is meant by quality in the EYFS.

5.3 “All children deserve high quality education and care”: A Question of Quality.

Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, (2024) contend that quality is a socially constructed concept, subject to cultural, social and political constructions. The EYFS states “All children deserve high quality education and care” (DfE, 2024, p. 17. The Ofsted early years inspection framework refers to quality 78 times. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2024, no page number) assert that quality in English early years education implies “conformity to expert-derived norms that are presumed to be universal, objective and stable”.

Table 3. The number of times "quality" is used.

Document	Number of times “quality” is used
EYFS	50
Development Matters	128
Early years Ofsted inspection framework	78
Ofsted Schools inspection framework	119
Total	375

Quality is used to refer to care, education, teaching, learning, leadership, behaviour and many more entities that are observed, judged and the judgement made public. Despite the constant use of the term “quality” there is no definition of what quality

consists of. Elwick et. Al. (2018) identified the disquiet that early years professionals feel about how ideologically driven these judgements are, which was in no small part due to the disconnect between policy writers and the early years education sector (Rudnoe, 2020).

Here, in order to understand what Ofsted mean by the term “quality”, quality of education is analysed. Ofsted inspects four categories: quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development and leadership and management. Education was chosen as the category most addressed by the participants of this study; it is, however, indicative of the overall intentions of Ofsted. I identified a series of steps that describe the process by which quality is realised through. These steps are used as a foundation to interrogate the discourses that shape practices, attitudes and pressures that affect practitioners and settings.

Figure 1. The four steps of Ofsted in judging quality in EYFS

- 1. Construct a curriculum that conforms to expert-derived norms**
- 2. Practitioners implement the curriculum.**
- 3. Children develop in universal and measurable ways. Children who fail to develop normatively are pathologised.**
- 4. School-ready children with appropriate human capital are produced.**

These four steps are explored in this section. The first step involves constructing the curriculum. The question of what underpins a quality curriculum is never addressed in policy. As Moss says the underlying expectation of neoliberal policy is that there is no need for debate,

“Leave it to the experts to define standards and determine how to measure performance; then let managers use that measure to govern services, and the children and adults within them.” (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2024, no page number)

The responsibility to construct the curriculum is devolved to the settings, reflecting the neoliberal and New Labour ideal of the original 2008 framework (DCFS, 2008). The EYFS is a knowledge focussed framework with the intention to create “school ready” children (Burgess-Macey, Kelly and Ouvry, 2020). “Quality” therefore has an unspoken political, ideological underpinning. Far from being a benign or neutral term, it imparts power to Ofsted, and imposes ideological, educational and physical limitations on practitioners and physical and cognitive limitations on children (discussed below). The EYFS therefore constitutes a regime of truth (Foucault, 1966) that gives power to the dominant discourses that practitioners and settings are impelled to reproduce.

The implementation of the curriculum was a key focus for all the practitioners. It is therefore significant that I observed the curriculum being constructed in fundamentally different ways, despite all three settings adhering to Development Matters. The reception class essentially used the ELG's as a curriculum. The nursery had the Montessori philosophy which shaped the environment according to its beliefs. Most interestingly, the Pre-school interpreted the curriculum for each child according to their destination primary school. Stephanie explained how they grouped the children according to school and prepared them differently, concentrating on the skills that each reception teacher had identified as key. Therefore, one group concentrated on learning to write their name correctly, while another group practiced getting changed for PE. The consequence of this triaging was that children experienced significantly different learning experiences and expectations based on extrinsic factors. Stephanie explained,

“So really, it's about the child, the individual child. That is our curriculum.... That's our ethos, is, we want children to learn, we want them to play, we want them to grow and develop. So that's really, really our ethos. So, the centre of it all is the child. What we know they need to learn before they go to school.”

Ultimately, the intention of the EYFS is to produce school-ready children. Arguably Stephanie simply took that intention to the extreme by ensuring that her children were ready for their destination school. She did as the policies intended, implementing the curriculum, with the intention of adhering to the standards.

The second step is that of quality produced by the performativity of practitioners, through actions, behaviours, attitudes, practices and even voices. Practitioners are viewed as a human technology; that is, a disciplinary force that acts upon the body to produce a subjectified practitioner as,

“technologies of government ... imbued with aspirations for the shaping of conduct in the hope of producing certain desired effects and averting certain undesired events” (Rose, 1999, p. 52)

Foucault writes of discourses entering the soul of the subjectified subject and being reproduced as if it were a natural phenomenon (Foucault, 1991a). The required performativity of practitioners is judged according to specific ways of thinking, behaving and speaking.

The EYFS and Ofsted together act like a panopticon (1966), holding practitioners and children in their gaze, compelling certain ways of being and making each practitioner subjectify themselves and hold themselves and each other accountable through governmentality (Archer, 2022). The nursery manager Hilary spoke of “pushing down” the responsibility of knowing the expectations of the inspectorate to the practitioners. Stephanie described how the expectations were “in our brains” and Jessica described how she did not yet know all the requirements of the new EYFS and felt this as “pressure”.

For instance, in the “good” category, the seventh criteria is,

“Practitioners ensure that their own speaking, listening and reading of English enables children to hear and develop their own language and vocabulary well. They read to children in a way that excites and engages them, introducing new ideas, concepts and vocabulary” (DfE, 2024, paragraph 192).

Practitioners are therefore required to subjectify their minds and bodies. Inherent in this criterion is a distinction between a culturally imposed “correct” way of speaking and other, “incorrect” ways. While it is not overt, the implication is that regional or foreign accents, lexicons and grammars are inferior to middle-class, received pronunciation, lexicon and grammar. Even the way that practitioners read to children is controlled. This requires practitioners to performatively step into a role that pre-exists them, to engage in what Butler called rituals, such as reading “to children in a way that excites and engages them” and routines that involve introducing new vocabulary. By rituals, Butler was referring to the ways in which the female body was recognised through ways of moving that were practiced over time and became routines that were recognisably female within the body (Butler, 2006). It is this performative conceptualisation of ritual and routine that is applied to practitioners’ bodies, that they also, over time learn how to move, act and speak in prescribed ways that denote an early years practitioners.

Within the panopticon of the EYFS requirements and Ofsted inspections, practitioners engage in disciplinary actions such as supervisions, peer observations

and day to day surveillance that ensures they subjectify themselves and constantly scrutinise their colleagues. Hilary felt a particular need to employ these techniques because her challenge was employing enough staff for the setting to remain viable,

“Just to be able to staff it. And that’s just staffing it, nothing more than that.

Nothing more....”

Hilary therefore felt that the staff she was able to employ were not of a high standard of professional knowledge, experience or ambition,

“We’re changing things that have been fundamental to this nursery which have been what we built our reputation on and you know, nothing is sacred any more. Nothing. It doesn’t matter that that is what worked for us and that was really good. It’s, so I think our whole focus has changed. I feel like I can’t manage the nursery as I want to manage it”

Supervisions were a way for Hilary to input the knowledge and impel practice that she considered missing. In the baby room Hilary explained the three full time staff had,

“Outstanding knowledge, OK knowledge and unacceptable knowledge.”

This was also due to experienced staff leaving to take jobs in related areas such as family support or teaching, where pay and conditions were much more favourable. The new staff were less qualified, but in a position of power because,

"You know, because it's such an employees' market out there. They can get up and go and get a job somewhere else if I start putting too much pressure on or have that expectation of what I want."

Hilary's recent experience of management was that some practitioners were unable or unwilling to work in ways that Hilary valued as good practice and high professional standards. In terms of inspection, the lack of motivation worried Hilary,

"I mean, if they don't even want to improve their own practice how are they going to achieve a higher level even?"

The story of quality in the nursery was therefore, from Hilary's perspective, one of pressure. Working conditions of long hours and low pay are responsible for some practitioners leaving the industry altogether, as evidenced by the Early Education and Childcare Coalition's report, *Retention and Return: Delivering the expansion of early years entitlement in England* (Hardy et. al., 2023) while those who stay are less likely to have the intrinsic motivation to accept the performative roles of high-quality educator and care giver. As Hilary said,

"They have the enthusiasm, the commitment to want to do nothing."

She continued,

“And you know, you can’t honestly blame them. They work a long day, this room is very physically demanding, but there’s no desire.”

The high levels of responsibility coupled with poor working conditions, which are the expectations and practices of the industry, nationally, had created a situation that was, in Hilary’s words, “It is horrendous, It’s really bad.” The situation in the nursery reflected the findings of the Coalition report (Hardy et. al., 2023) of experienced practitioners leaving the industry and not enough apprentices joining. The discourse of ‘quality’, with its high stakes accountability with little support must be recognised as constructive of this situation. The neoliberal technique of creating a technical framework of accountability while sidestepping the democratic involvement of the practitioners, parents and children it holds responsible is beginning to be revealed as brittle and unfit for use. As Moss (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2024 (no page number available) says, “Quality is a choice, not a necessity”. Hilary’s experience provides evidence that policy enactment (Ball, Maguire and Braun, 2012) is dependent on the context of the setting. Hilary, struggling with professional factors, including the commitment and retention of staff, turned towards post-panopticism, whereby she normalised constant, intense, inspection-like scrutiny in an attempt to keep the setting performing at a ‘good’ standard. My study adds to the evidence that shows not only that it is a choice we need not keep making, but that it is a choice that cannot even fulfil the neoliberal mantra of “what works”.

Hilary's experiences as a manager of a Montessori day nursery came from distinct perspectives. The deteriorating working conditions for practitioners had resulted in the loss of respected staff and left Hilary with little choice but to employ people she would have not previously given an interview to. From Hilary's perspective, the alignment of quality with the performativity of staff was problematic, because she could no longer guarantee that the practitioners in the room were any more than "bodies, just bodies" to ensure ratios were observed.

When speaking of qualifications Stephanie suggested that there is no point in gaining the higher levels,

"Sadly, there is no motivation to go that bit further anymore, because you don't get additional funding for being those levels."

Most early years practitioners who are not working in schools earn minimum wage, or slightly above (Hardy et. al., 2023). As Stephanie pointed out, small settings like hers cannot afford to pay their staff more. The level 6 top-up degree that she was intending to start in September would increase her personal debt but not her wages. These findings corroborate the Early Education and Childcare Coalition's report, (Hardy et. al., 2023). While the evidence suggests that higher qualifications do contribute to a more professional practitioner body (Manning et. al., 2019), this study points to the lack of motivation for practitioners to pursue this, and the clear refusal of many practitioners to do so. This points to problems with the concept of quality

practitioners; the construction of practitioners as both experienced and valuable, yet unqualified and providing a babysitting service has been problematic for years (Tickell, 2011). As Hilary found, high levels of responsibility coupled with low levels of pay and long hours has resulted in a recruitment crisis. The nursery closed, ten months after the setting participated in this research.

The third step is that of the construction of children by practitioners. The same performative and disciplinary forces seen in action working on practitioners, are imposed through practitioners onto children. Personal, Social and Emotional Development "is crucial for children to lead healthy and happy lives and is fundamental to their cognitive development" (DfE, 2024, p. 9). The focus on cognitive development as a priority is reductive of children's happiness and good health to a means of achieving human capital. Children's behaviour is therefore a signal of the quality of the curriculum because learning is constructed as what happens when children concentrate on what is being taught. Therefore, the practitioner's construction of a child's behaviour is shaped by this need to coerce a child into behaving in order to impart the necessary knowledge.

In the reception class, the day began with a lesson for the whole class, that lasted 45 minutes. A child began to get restless and roll on the carpet. Jessica asked him, "Do I have to use my cross voice?" When this did not have the hoped-for consequence of the child sitting and learning, Jessica threatened to move his name down on the behaviour chart on the wall. The ELG's for Self-regulation include,

“Give focused attention to what the teacher says, responding appropriately even when engaged in activity, and show an ability to follow instructions involving several ideas or actions.” (DfE, 2024, p. 12).

Jessica acted as a conduit for the EYFS in requiring the child to sit quietly and control his actions. According to the Ofsted model of quality education, Jessica fulfilled her performative role as a quality practitioner, by imparting knowledge about how to behave and what to learn. Jessica needed this child to behave in the sanctioned manner to validate her worth.

According to the Ofsted criteria for Outstanding and Good judgements for quality of education children are expected to learn and develop in cumulative, consistent and coherent ways. All three settings adhered to this construction of children’s learning.

Shelley gave an example of a “full-timer” (a baby who attended nursery 5 days a week),

“At the minute we have a child who is loving the Gruffalo and talks about the Gruffalo a lot and likes to sing the Gruffalo!

(Researcher): I noticed! Is there a Gruffalo song?

(Shelley) Not that I know of! But then we are going to do a Gruffalo display for him because it’s what he is really into at the minute. He’s talking about it all the time, he can recite it, so that’s where it’s coming from there.”

Shelley's example shows how she had observed the child's enjoyment of the book, encouraging the different skills the child displayed in talking about it, reciting it and making up a song about it. The display (on a high board) was therefore performative on Shelley's part (especially as the child could not interact with it independently), in making visible her observation of the child's enjoyment of the Gruffalo and her professional ability to "follow those interests fully". The child demonstrated his proper development by displaying his skills in reciting, talking about and singing.

Children are required to demonstrate not only consistent development, but they are also required to performatively show enjoyment in their learning, "Children enjoy, listen attentively and respond with comprehension to familiar stories, rhymes, and songs that are appropriate for their age and stage of development." (DfE, 2023, paragraph 192). This places a burden on the shoulders of children, not only to learn and develop in particular ways, but also to demonstrate specific behaviours. It is significant that the above extract is from the Ofsted early years inspection handbook, not the EYFS. This is an example of how Ofsted adds a further layer of accountability to the already "thick" (Högberg and Lindgren, 2020) accountability framework. As is discussed further in the next chapter, Ofsted has a significant impact on daily practice.

The required behaviours must be consistent, but also must be exhibited on the day of the Ofsted inspection. My professional experience of any type of observation is that children respond in unpredictable ways to unknown adults in their environment and that observation can produce unusual results. Therefore, the judgement of quality

ultimately rests on the shoulders of children who do not understand the importance of inspection yet are required to demonstrate behaviours and skills that are “challenging”, under circumstances that are likely to cause their adults’ stress. Therefore, I conclude that quality is productive of a narrow range of behaviours from children that are not necessarily in the child’s best interest, nor materially add to their learning experience. Even young children are expected to subjectify themselves to reproduce cultural norms for high stakes consequences. However, the construction of the child adhering to particular behaviours and learning particular knowledge and skills does not answer the question of what quality entails.

Finally, a quality education is judged by its ability to produce school-ready children. The EYFS characterises school-readiness as behaviours such as concentration, using new vocabulary and reproducing learning on demand. Bradbury (2020) found that this level of formalisation of curriculum at such a young age is unusual internationally. Additionally, she finds that the imposition of such measures as assessment and standardisation of curriculum produces “schoolification” – the adoption of school-like practices in pre-school learning environments. Neoliberalism is so pervasive in the educational culture of England that the concept of school-readiness is accepted as a kind of discursive common sense (Foucault, 1991b). School-readiness is the subject of the next chapter, therefore the issues arising from it are addressed there. However, this does not answer the question of what a quality education is, only what it produces.

I argue here that that the term “quality” is found to be productive of the four steps that are believed to create quality in early years education. They are *implementing the curriculum*, which is brought about by *practitioners’ performativity* that creates a *construction of children* that is universal and developmental, acting concert to produce *school-ready children*. However, this still does not constitute a definition of “quality”. It is weaponised to impel behaviours, attitudes, practices and beliefs that are subject to shift and change according to political and cultural changes.

Ultimately, quality as a term has no meaning. Therefore, I make the claim that the accountability discourse in early years education in England is built upon a vacuum. The only way to counter this is to begin with this conclusion – that the term cannot be taken at face value but must be contested until the discourse about “quality” itself is sufficiently challenged that it is abandoned.

Conclusion

The Early Years Foundation Stage policy is a neoliberal educational policy that is shaped by international dominant discourses of normative development with the aim of producing school ready children who ultimately attain the skills and knowledge to become human capital. The most recent iteration of the EYFS (DfE, 2024) represents a clear reinforcement of this position, with the emphasis being on cognitive development being supported by other, less valued types of development. Cognitive load (Griffen, 2024), by which the human learning is conceived of as occurring in a brain that is separate from the body, emotions or the environment is the discourse that dominates the EYFS and is reproduced in practice by practitioners.

This study confirmed the findings of research (Wood, 2019, 2020) that suggested that the EYFS is constructed through the selective appropriation of developmental theories and government-funded research to produce politically and ideologically shaped educational outcomes. This study claims that the opinions and discourses of the EYFS are performatively reproduced by practitioners to ensure they represent themselves as “good” practitioners in the eyes of Ofsted inspectors. Practitioners were found to self-govern and govern each other, using surveillance and reinforcement of practice suggestive of Foucault’s panopticon.

The developmental criteria of the EYFS (DfE, 2024), Development Matters (DfE, 2023) and the ELG’s (DfE, 2024) were drawn on by practitioners as a de facto curriculum. However, this was against the advice of the EYFS and Development Matters, which made clear that settings must construct or adopt a curriculum. Thus, at the heart of the question of the educational intention of the EYFS is a tension between the stated intentions of the EYFS and Development Matters and the practices observed in all three settings. This tension lies between the educational intention of the EYFS for each setting to construct or adopt a curriculum that ensures children reach the ELG’s but is not made up of Development Matter statements or the ELG’s, and the actual practice of using them as a “tick list” to ensure that Ofsted is able to observe its implementation.

The question of concept of quality was found to be based on the neoliberal discourse of accountability but to be fundamentally empty of meaning. The term is applied to practice, education and care and linked to accountability, yet analysis of the policies

was unable to identify a definition. Therefore, even in the policies' own terms there is a vacuum at the heart of the concept. This vacuum was found to create in its stead a series of steps that the Ofsted inspection framework substituted in the place of a definition or discussion. These steps were *implementing the curriculum*, which is brought about by *practitioners' performativity* that creates a *construction of children* that is universal and developmental, producing *school-ready children*. Therefore, "quality" is a concept that has political and ideological intentions. Far from being a neutral term that denotes a fair and objective observation of practice, it is a loaded term that underpins the dominant discourses of early years education, both national and international. Rather than offering a definition of good practice, it acts as a constrictive tool that settings and practitioners must first work out. The steps are opaque and spread throughout the policy. This conclusion is significant because, as Moss (2019) points out, "quality" is a term that is often used without contest in both educational contexts, as in inspections and day to day assessments, but also in academic studies.

I therefore assert that researchers should challenge hegemonic terms such as "quality" as part of their research. To fail to do so is to inadvertently accept and reproduce the dominant discourses espoused in the policy and at a fundamental level, the research is biased.

The term "quality" is constructive of models of both practitioner and child that can be assessed and measured against universal standards that are given the appearance of being positivist and objective. However, I argue these models are subjective, based

on cultural and discursive ideas of normative development and professional performativity. They impel practitioners to think, behave and govern themselves and each other in order to fulfil requirements and avoid poor outcomes for themselves and the setting. In particular, the issue of dataveillance, whereby children's progress is rendered into data and this is acted upon to ensure the data shows progress and development, rather than the child's direct expression of their growth is found to be problematic. Hilary's evidence shows that some practitioners are choosing to leave the industry rather than continue with work that is increasingly high stakes, with high levels of responsibility but that is not recognised in terms of professional standing, pay or working conditions. Children are constructed according to normative models that Jessica, working in reception with a view of the whole primary career of children, divides children at the age of 5 into successful or unsuccessful.

This chapter forms the basis by which the following chapter can be understood. It interrogates two the types of "readiness" which are identified here as being the intended outcomes of the ideological and educational intentions, achieved through the application of "quality" outlined in this chapter. "School-readiness" has already been identified as a key intended outcome of the EYFS accountability discourse in this chapter. In the next, it is discussed in detail. Alongside this, a discourse of "Ofsted-readiness" is found in the policies, interviews and observations. The terror that Ofsted inspection produces in practitioners has been touched upon in this chapter. In the next, the ways in which a periodic inspection of one to two days impacts on daily life in settings is interrogated.

Chapter 6. School and Ofsted Ready

Introduction

This chapter addresses two problems identified in the previous chapter as being caused by a combination of the ideology, educational intentions and values of the policies that produce the accountability discourse. This chapter therefore answers the research questions, “How is the accountability discourse reproduced in policy and practice in early years education in England” and “What is the impact of the accountability discourse on the educational practices in early years education in England”.

School-readiness and Ofsted-readiness are two outcomes that practitioners and settings, I argue are, compelled to reproduce in beliefs and practices. The accountability discourse has already been found to act like a panopticon (Foucault, 1991b), constructing practitioners who self-govern, govern colleagues and govern children and families. In this chapter, the issue of the school ready child is interrogated first. Many studies (Broström, 2017; Wahlgren and Andersson, 2024; Ring and O’Sullivan, 2018) have critiqued this construction of children as limiting, delimiting and pathologising; in this study I add to the empirical evidence, identifying how, far from acting to provide all children with equality of access to education and a better future, I claim that this discourse acts to reinforce disadvantage and privilege. In this chapter I also explore how watchful adults monitor the processes and procedures used to produce the school ready child. These processes are necessary for settings and practitioners to hold themselves, and be held accountable. Routines

and rituals such as tracking of children's progress is used to make practitioners take responsibility for their key children's attainment; this is achieved at the weekly planning meetings and through regular supervisions with the managers or EYFS lead. This is also the knowledge that Ofsted expect practitioners to draw on when they "tap them on the shoulder" to ask about key children.

The developmental progress of children is routinely tracked (Bradbury, 2020). The settings participating in this thesis used online apps (Tapestry and My Montessori Child) (Nuttall et. al., 2023) to record activities with photos, videos and observations that were linked to Development Matters ages and stages statements (0-4) and Early Learning Goals (ELG's) (see Appendix 8). I argue that these apps form a panoptical surveillance tool that disciplines settings, practitioners, children and families. The apps "red flagged" children whose development was not normative, indicating that projected development was not in line with the intended "school-ready" child, with implications for children, families and practitioners. Surveillance is addressed in the second half of this section addressing the issue of school-readiness.

The problem of Ofsted-readiness is explored in the second half of the chapter. I find that the Ofsted-readiness discourse shapes the performative roles that practitioners are required to fulfil. Inspection includes routines designed to check the practices and attitudes of practitioners are internalised and reproduced satisfactorily. The rituals of inspection include learning walks, conversations with practitioners and observation of lessons which are assumed by policy only to happen during an inspection in the presence of an inspector. In fact, the high stakes nature of inspection meant that in

every setting, inspection was prepared for and rehearsed every day, reflecting the experience of Kay (2021) who described an Ofsted 'deep dive' into a secondary school geography department. Furthermore, I found that when all three settings referred to the Ofsted inspection handbook it was conflated with the EYFS and Development Matters (DM). This unintended use of the Ofsted inspection handbook had two interlinked consequences. This is not an observation I have found in research and therefore represents a new finding and an area for further research. I found everyday practice was shaped by Ofsted requirements; where these requirements conflicted with the requirements of the EYFS or guidance of DM, Ofsted over-ruled. This was true even in terms of curriculum. Therefore, I find that Ofsted over-reaches its intended remit of inspecting and evaluating how well settings teach the curriculum. In practice, Ofsted supplements and supplants the curriculum. Rather than evaluating implementation of the EYFS, it impels every practitioner to performatively become mini-inspectors of their colleagues and settings, ensuring that where conflicts are evident, they impose Ofsted over the EYFS, in their daily practice. I observed this in the baby unit of the nursery, where the practitioners changed an activity from babies seeing bubbles for the first time, to adding an intention they should reach for them, which would allow them to complete the intent/implementation/impact cycle they had applied to the planning cycle. This is discussed in greater detail below.

The theoretical framework of Foucault and Butler act together. Foucault's ideas of the Panopticon (Foucault, 1991b) and governmentality (Foucault, 1979) are particularly drawn on to build on the conclusions of the previous chapter

(neoliberalism, educational intentions and “value” form a disciplinary framework that shapes constructions of practitioners and children) to discuss how ideological constructions of the school-ready child and the Ofsted-ready setting form discourses that are powerful but invisible. Butler’s theory of performativity (2006) is drawn on to interrogate the ways in which practitioners are impelled to fulfil the roles required of them by the accountability discourse. Two aspects of performativity are identifiable in the data from this study: the first perspective, that cultural expectation produces the phenomenon it anticipates, is visible in the ways that practitioners’ roles are prescribed by policy and embodied by practitioners. The second, that performativity is not a singular action, but is achieved through routine and ritual, is identifiable in practitioners’ accounts of their daily responsibilities and practices. The idea of “ultra-preparedness”, evidenced in practitioners’ accounts of how daily practice is performed with Ofsted in mind, identifies how the role of the “good” practitioner pre-exists the individual and is embodied in the routines of the setting. The “good” practitioner is therefore one who not only ensures the fulfilment of the curriculum and preparing the school-ready child, but is also actively preparing, rehearsing and reproducing Ofsted inspection, every single day.

6.1 School Readiness: “That is what we are here for in the end, to make sure they are school ready”

The division of individual development into areas of learning is from the tradition of developmental psychology, most famously espoused by Piaget (1952) in his stages of development. The EYFS and DM reflect this understanding of child development, with learning and development located within the individual and dependent on the

environment to instigate and support learning but that situates development as compartmentalised, universal and internal.

Developmentality (Fendler, 2001) is a theoretical construction of children through which educators understand children's learning and their practice through the lens of normative development. Like governmentality (Foucault, 1979), the concept it was developed from, it is a disciplinary tool by which practitioners subjectify themselves to reproduce the attitudes, beliefs and practices that appear to them to be self-evident. Developmentality constructs the child who continuously builds on knowledge and skills that will eventually produce an adult with human capital (Romer, 1990), an autonomous individual, responsible for their own prosperity. Therefore, developmentality describes the process by which children are governed and grow to self-govern, which is perceived to be natural and universal (Wood, 2020; Eun, 2010). Studies (Anzures Tapia, (2020; Enelamah, et. al., 2024) with non-western cultures illustrate how international discourses of accountability and developmentalism conflict with regional and indigenous constructions of children and childhoods that require practitioners to balance the requirements of governments against the practices and attitudes of communities that have counter-constructions. The universal construction of the child is used to hold both practitioner and child accountable through the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, Ofsted inspections and dataveillance (Bradbury, 2018) tools such as My Montessori Child and Tapestry that explicitly link activities to Piagetian (Piaget, 1953) Early Learning Goals and Development Matters ages and stages developmental statements. This regime of truth is produced by the EYFS and DM to be reproduced by practitioners and children, converting the "normative 'you

should be' into the actual 'this is who I am'" (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021, p. 92). The English practitioners lack the alternative perspective of practitioners grappling with two conflicting discourses, and therefore in my study appeared to accept the neoliberal discourses as common sense and natural. Foucault described this modification of the ensemble of these tools into common sense as creating hegemonic order (Daldal, 2014).

Sonu (2022) argues that because developmentality normalises development according to the dominant norms of a culture, non-normative types of development become pathologised. Using a Foucauldian analysis, she further argues that this includes questions of race, whereby the circulation of knowledge constructs dominant cultural backgrounds as normative and excludes others as non-normative through the developmental curricula (Stirrup, Evans and Davies, 2017). While I do not address the question of race, the claim that developmental methodologies are inherently productive of systematic disadvantage is central to this chapter. School readiness and Ofsted's evaluation of education are judged according to normative criteria (Puttick, 2017). Jessica's experience of teaching disadvantaged children exemplifies how upbringing can be pathologised when it fails to produce children who are not ready enough to start reception already set up to achieve "school-readiness". In the iteration seen in the EYFS, development and learning are specifically understood as leading to becoming ready for school. The neoliberal construction of the subjectified (adult) citizen is reified as the citizen-child; one who is in preparation, not simply for school, but for neoliberal adulthood. Ofsted inspection

is the method by which settings and practitioners are held accountable for ensuring children finish the EYFS ready for school. Ofsted inspection can complicate the task of preparing children for school by adding an additional concern for practitioners, that of being ready for Ofsted.

Developmentality can be seen in Jessica's quest for "continually moving [the children] on" to achieve the acquisition of skills and learning which are needed by a school-ready child, reproducing the Ofsted Early Years Handbook criteria for 'Outstanding' quality of education that says,

"Children's experiences over time are consistently and coherently arranged to build cumulatively sufficient knowledge and skills for their future learning."

(Ofsted, 2024, paragraph 191)

Hilary's belief in the Montessori materials to fulfil the requirements of the EYFS demonstrates how she has absorbed the idea of the developing child,

"There's all those resources that you know and they are ordered and you know the sequencing of them and so it works alongside child development"

Stephanie's observation that, "We still need to have development in our brains and the EYFS and what we would like children to achieve" sums up developmentality succinctly. The structures by which practitioners and children are held accountable

through their development is measured are referred to as “standards” in the EYFS, explored in the next section.

6.2 “The EYFS sets the standards that all early years providers must meet”:

Discussing Standards

While the concept of school readiness is not overtly referred to in the Ofsted Handbook (Ofsted, 2019), inspection has the intention of ensuring that “there are no breaches of EYFS requirements” (p. 31). A key requirement of the EYFS is to ensure “readiness for Key Stage 1” (DfE, 2024 p. 8) Therefore, Ofsted inspection of EYFS settings, especially those with reception children, is instrumental in ensuring that settings reproduce the school readiness discourse. The standards that children must meet to be considered school-ready are set out in the Early Learning Goals. As a side observation, the language in the latest iteration of the EYFS (DfE, 2024) changes from “ready for year 1” in the previous EYFS (DfE, 2017, p.7) to “ready for key stage 1” (DfE, 2024, p. 8). The difference between year 1 and key stage 1 might appear minimal but carries a suggestion that merely being ready for transition to year 1 is no longer enough; the child must enter key stage 1 fully prepared and ready. This adds to the skills the school-ready child needs to be considered successful.

The EYFS (DfE, 2024) standards that are intended to ensure children are ready for school are contained in the first two categories, those of learning and development, and assessment. While Development Matters (DM) (DfE, 2023) is not statutory, all three settings used it as if it was. Where children were not yet at ELG levels of

learning and development the DM statements and checkpoints were used as indicators that standards were being met. Stephanie did not question the standards; she simply wanted to make sure that “we are complying with the standards set out in the framework”. Similarly, Hilary referred to the EYFS as “telling us what needs to be done”. Jessica was less sure that the standards were achievable, commenting “*Some* children meet the challenge completely”. The emphasis on the word “some” indicates that there were children in her class were not at the expected level; the use of the word “challenge” is indicative of Jessica’s underlying view that the new ELG’s were harder than the old ones. However, not one participant challenged the focus of standards on the individualised development of children with an end point of school readiness. Developmentality was a discourse that was entirely absorbed and reproduced as common sense, indicating a regime of truth (Foucault, 1972) with the accepted endpoint of school readiness. The settings’ use of online learning stories to track children’s development using the statements of DM (DfE, 2023) and the ELG’s (DfE, 2024) meant that they inevitably reproduced the standards. The learning stories apps created a panopticon (Foucault, 1991b) that was accessed by parents, practitioners and managers to discipline both normative development and standardised education. Such issues of surveillance is addressed below.

“We know the key skills”: Measurable standards

“This section sets out what providers must do, working in partnership with parents and/or carers, to promote the learning and development of all children in their care, and to ensure their entire early years’ experience

contributes positively to their brain development and readiness for Key Stage

1. The learning and development requirements are informed by the best available evidence on how children learn. They also reflect the broad range of skills, knowledge and attitudes children need as foundations for life now and in the future. Early years providers must guide the development of children's capabilities to help ensure that children in their care will fully benefit from future opportunities." (DfE, 2024, p. 8).

Furthermore, development is constructed as atomised,

"Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, relate to others, set their own goals and solve problems."
(DfE, 2024 p. 17).

Practitioners are required to,

"consider the individual needs, interests, and development of each child in their care, and must use this information to plan a challenging and enjoyable experience for each child in all areas of learning and development." (DfE, 2023a, p. 15).

Children are decontextualised from their social context, history and experience and their learning reduced to data. The context of the classroom and the relationships between children and with adults are reduced to transactional aids to learning and

development (Riddle and Hickey, 2023), in order to fulfil the ELG's and prepare for KS1, with high stakes for both practitioners and children. As Formen and Nuttal (2014) note, developmentalism constructs childhoods in ways that conflict with cultural norms. In their Indonesian study, international developmental norms created tensions between developmental and Islamic based early years educational discourses, highlighting how differing cultures have conflicting perspectives. For children in the EYFS this is seen in tensions between home cultures and setting expectations, resulting in the pathologisation and delimiting of certain children (Ang, 2010).

Regardless of whether settings had a reception class and therefore were working towards the ELG's in the next few months, or were educating babies, toddlers and pre-school children, all three settings were acutely aware of the need to ensure children were working in such a way that they would achieve the ELG's at the right time. In the baby room, Shelley was concerned about babies having gaps in their learning,

“It's making sure that we cover all areas of the curriculum, so not just thinking oh, um, this child is very physical and always planning physical activities for that child. You've got to make sure you're getting communication and language in there, and PHSE and obviously that's what we concentrate on in here. We don't go for the *specific areas* as much but it's just making sure that across the day or across the week, we are getting all those areas in to make sure they are not missing those areas.”

The stress that Shelley felt to ensure children are developing constantly is apparent in the above extract. Her familiarity with the different areas of development, and her anxiety that every child's development should be shown through assessment, observation and recording to be experiencing all the areas of the curriculum is apparent; her repeated use of the phrase, "make sure" underlines this worry and is an example of the performative role of "good" practitioners in reproducing the discourses. Shelley equates covering the curriculum with showing that a child is developing correctly. In her comments she shows that that, as in the Ofsted inspection framework, her construction of children's learning is that they should, normatively, reproduce teaching as learning. In this way, to Shelley, the child's development is visible through the records of planning that document that an activity has been presented and completed, therefore, learning and development can be shown to have taken place. This remark also betrays Shelley's construction of children, who are at risk of failing to reach school readiness due to developmental "gaps" being left unfilled. Stephanie also reproduced this discourse, saying,

"At the centre of it all is the child. What we know they need to learn before they go to school."

Stephanie unconsciously conflated "the child" with the knowledge and skills of the developmental curriculum. The neoliberal construction of the self as human capital is visible in Stephanie's comment whereby child-centredness is reimagined as the child's skills and knowledge. Therefore, dataveillance ensures the reduction of a child

and their learning experience to data which must be constantly assessed, updated and acted upon.

Similarly in the reception class Jessica explained that,

“We try to make sure we are including something each week for each area of learning as much as we can.... We do have a greater focus on phonics, communication and maths as the areas the children find more challenging. Also, these areas tend to find more content, so we plan to include these every day rather than sort of once or twice a week.”

Like Shelley, the stress that Jessica felt to ensure constant learning was taking place was apparent in the phrase, “so we plan to include these every day rather than sort of once or twice a week”. From the baby room to the reception classroom, the pressure to ensure children were meeting required development and learning was apparent. The hegemonic discourses of measurable, universal, developmental learning leading to school readiness was evident. Surveillance has already been mentioned as a key method of subjectification, this is interrogated in the next section.

6.3 Surveillance of children, practitioners and families

The neoliberal construction of the citizen, as the subjectified individual is particularly pertinent when considering how standards are met (Cornelius, 2023). The accountability discourse in England positions three sets of stakeholders as having a

role in producing material to be judged: children, settings/practitioners and parents. Children are positioned as producers of data and as the product (Bradbury, 2020), in the form of the school-ready child (McCarten, Roberts and Jordan, 2023). Settings/practitioners are both producers and enforcers of production and the product. They have an interest in the quality of the product, which is both individual children and the quality of the setting (Rudnoe, 2020). Parents are positioned as having an interest in the products, both their own children's progress and as consumer of the setting, seen in Ofsted's statement,

“Inspection provides important information to parents, carers, learners and employers about the quality of education, training and care. These groups should be able to make informed choices based on the information published in inspection reports.” (Ofsted, 2023, Principles of inspection and regulation)

However, where necessary parents are also drawn into the production role when they are judged by practitioners as failing to adequately support early years education in the home, seen in the EYFS's intention that practitioners guide parents,

“The range and type of activities and experiences provided for the children, the daily routines of the setting, and how parents and carers can share learning at home.” (DfE, 2024, p.39)

Under these circumstances practitioners are required to support parents in reproducing the work being done in the setting at home, for instance, lending the

child a story sack so they can read at home. In Foucauldian terms, governmentality ensures that all stakeholders hold themselves accountable and hold each other to account as a subjectified citizen, referred to as the “docile body” (Foucault, 1991b) through structures of surveillance. Paniagua-Rodriguez and Beremenyi (2019) identify family participation as a key feature of neoliberal governmentality, whereby participants are impelled to performatively demonstrate their inclusion by showing assimilation to the dominant culture through participation in events at the setting, such as parents’ evenings and information sessions. In the case of the EYFS, with its developmental framework consisting of assessment and judgement, surveillance is key to achieving both assimilation and assessment.

Surveillance is visible in the form of assessment and judgement, both for individual children via formative assessments (two year check, Reception Baseline Assessment and EYFS Profile), and of settings through Ofsted inspections. This type of surveillance is external and periodic. A second type of surveillance is identifiable in the interviews and observations of this study; that of governmentality, whereby practitioners continuously govern themselves and others in subtle ways that they are not aware of. Surveillance was often couched in terms of teamwork, supporting colleagues. The metaphor of the panopticon (Foucault, 1991b) is useful in illustrating how watchful adults police the process of producing school ready children (Ashton, 2014), through developmental measurement ensuring standards are met. My research made clear that not only are the children scrutinised through dataveillance using online learning journey apps; practitioners and parents and/or carers are also caught in their

unrelenting gaze (Nuttall et. al., 2023). The next section interrogates the ways that surveillance is built into the fabric of early years education.

The aim of the EYFS is to produce a school ready child, constructed through a limited understanding of developmental psychology that has been modified and harnessed to produce accelerated learning (Nicholson, 2019). The Anglo-American ideal of learning that assumes that if a universal model of development can be discerned then it is also possible to accelerate it through “better” teaching and learning environments (Roberts-Homes and Moss, 2021); Thai and Ponciano’s (2016) study using a digital learning resource is an example of an uncritical application of this belief.

In terms of accountability, the value of the EYFS environment is judged through what it produces, the measurement of which is attainment of the ELG’s, DM statements and check points and ultimately the school-ready child. These environments include a robust surveillance system with the intention that children learn at the required rate and those who fall behind are quickly identified. As Bradbury (2014) argued ten years ago, the complex interplay between assessment and issues of inequality is that the structure of accountability means children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds are set on a trajectory of educational failure from the beginning.

In all three settings I observed that children were under constant surveillance. Jessica explained how she observed the children to see what their interests were and used them to create activities,

“The children have been really fascinated with autumn and changes so we have got a table, a bit of an investigation table with leaves, conkers, a few books ... and they’ve been really interested in transporting things so we’ve included the little sort of tubes and ramps to roll the conkers into they could get a bit of physical in there with the investigation.”

Jessica’s account of observation shows how closely she monitors children’s interests as a means of including many areas of learning into one activity. On this investigation table activities to stimulate learning in maths (counting leaves, conkers), literacy and reading (the books), knowledge of the world (understanding seasons and experiencing the effect of gravity rolling conkers down the tube) and physical development in moving with increasing dexterity are included. If children worked together communication and language and PSHE could also be included. As Jessica explained,

“We are only trying to make sure that children perhaps get slightly longer observations that encompass multiple areas of learning but less frequently.”

The intention of the new EYFS (DfE, 2024), DM (DfE, 2023) and Ofsted early years inspection handbook (Ofsted, 2024) is to reduce the number of written observations. However, Shelley explained how in the baby room this was not feasible,

“Obviously, we are trying to do less observations, again, because the EYFS but we still said in the baby unit because you see a lot of them firsts, you see the first, you know, first words, the walking, the crawling.”

Shelley’s account demonstrates how the accountability discourse shapes practice; the inescapability of recording the developmental milestones is evident. This is despite the EYFS stating,

“When assessing whether an individual child is at the expected level of development, practitioners should draw on their knowledge of the child and their own expert professional judgement and should not be required to prove this through collection of physical evidence.” (DfE, 2024, p. 19)

In the toddler room the room lead, Sarah also reported they were still doing as many observations as before, specifically because the manager, Hilary required continued observations. Hilary clarified that this was because she did not believe practitioners could carry detailed information about 12-14 key children in their heads. However, Ofsted requires that every key worker can discuss any key child’s progress and challenges. In the handbook, inspectors are instructed to gather information by,

“talking to practitioners about their assessment of what children know and can do and how they are building on it.” (Ofsted, 2024, paragraph 77)

Drawing on the metaphor of the panopticon (Foucault, 1991b), this is an example of how Ofsted's intention of reducing paperwork, and the DM's assertion that practitioners should trust their professional experience are over-ridden by the dominant discourse of measurement and accountability (Kay, 2024) and dataveillance (Bradbury, 2018). This finding was evident in every setting; data that was collected to inform the practitioner about children's progress and to identify needs as they arose was diverted to become a measure of the practitioner's effectiveness in delivering the curriculum. As in Bradbury's (2023) study, this thesis finds that while practitioners are no longer required to gather data in the way they were formerly, their construction of themselves as a professional and their work to show children's progress through data is not changed. Conversely, they continue to gather data despite not being required to because they cannot conceive of an alternative way. Therefore, the discourse of datafication is firmly embedded in their conception of their own performativity as a practitioner.

Jessica felt confident enough to reduce the number of observations she recorded,

“So we're trying to observe each child once every fortnight so they might have an observation that links to three of four areas because we've watched them for an extended period of time.”

While this suggests less time is spent observing and recording children's activity, I observed this to be illusory. The process of setting up an activity with multiple areas covered together required significant time analysing the data and referencing the

EYFS and DM for next steps and check points (Huber and Skedsmo, 2016). Jessica and Shelley both carried notebooks with them to record quick, informal observations. The baby unit had sheets of paper on the wall to record next step ideas following an activity. The pre-school had whiteboards on the wall where practitioners could jot down ideas based on observations. In all settings I saw that these notes were added to constantly, indicating that children must be constantly observed in order to generate them. These informal pieces of data were used to inform weekly sessions where the adult-led activities and free-access activities for key children were planned.

Shelley explained how they used the weekly planning sessions in the baby unit,

“So obviously we use the laptop to type it [the plan] all up and we have ideas sheets that are up all the time so when you write an observation and you put the next step in there it goes on the ideas sheet which you write, um, the idea that you want. So it might be painting, the children it’s planned for and the day that they do so that it’s easy just to pop that into the planning table really.”

Similarly, Jessica explained that while activities did not need to be recorded formally as before, the information was needed to support planning, therefore, informal, continuous observation was necessary. As Huber and Skedsmo (2016) argue, assessment is a daily business in education, corroborating Perryman et al’s (2018) contention that educational settings have moved beyond surveillance to post-

panopticism, whereby practitioners voluntarily intensified practices that include surveillance and the gathering of data according to universalised normative development. Each setting had created strategies that replaced the previous formally recorded observations with informal notes or conversations that were fed into planned activities. Thus, children are under constant surveillance for data that can be utilised for preparing activities with the express purpose of observing and recording progress.

I observed a few examples of where children clearly recognised this process and challenged it. In doing so the children's perspectives emerged from the discourse of observation and accountability (Rasmussen and Haandbaek, 2024). In the toddler room, a child realised he was about to be photographed and walked away from the activity, saying, "no". In the reception class a child questioned Jessica about what she was writing, and quite forcefully claimed that she was able to do the activity. Murray (2022) points out that while young children can forcefully question, their powerless status means that practitioners often overlook their questioning stance, often due to their own performative needs, such as recording progress. These examples, although minimal, do suggest that children are aware of being observed and that it is significant for them. In both examples the children disrupt the adult-human gaze (Murriss, 2023) looking at them through the lens of developmentality and insist on their perspectives being recognised. It is beyond the scope of this study to examine how aware children are of observation and whether their consent should be necessary, or even how it could be sought. Blake (2023) questions the role of assessment in education, using Barad's (2007) model of Agential Realism to show

how children's perspectives are missing from the phenomena of the classroom. Children are also largely missing from neoliberal imaginaries concerning agency; their role is to develop agency, but not to exercise it (I-Fang, 2013). Neaum (2016) problematises the relationship between the notion of measurement and school readiness, policy and practice, which is also identified in this study. The panopticon (Foucault, 1991b) metaphor must be extended to children as well as adults and despite not being formally and actively part of the observation and data-building process they do attempt to add to, change and challenge it.

However, alongside the overt observation of children, covert observation of practitioners by other practitioners was also evident. This was seen in the conversations that went on in classroom across the day. Comments such as, "You should follow that up next week when he is in" (Sarah), "Ivo needs to practice this again. Will you do it with him on Friday 'cos I'm off" (Ashley) and "Isobel is doing that thing with her foot, get a photo quick" (Amanda) are examples of how practitioners governed not only of their own practice, but of that of their colleagues as well, in the name of teamwork (Knights and McCabe, 2003). These examples are all focused on a child's progress, yet subtly show how one practitioner ensured that EYFS approved practice took place by alerting colleagues to the need for observation of their own practice as well as of children's progress. There is little research regarding relationships between practitioners, but a study of collaboration between Swedish teachers, Ronnerman, et. al. (2015) suggests that the same type of communication was observed, whereby casual-appearing comments ensured that practice, observations and beliefs about development were kept within the bounds of

discourse in order to construct and reconstruct the routines and rituals of the “good” practitioner. These conversations could also be seen as performative governmentality. The EYFS and Ofsted require surveillance to ensure measurement and accountability; policy enactment (Ball, Maguire and Ball, 2012) compels practitioners to observe and qualify their observations against the criteria of the EYFS and Ofsted and themselves add this level of “support” for each other by reminding, observing and commenting on children’s activities.

It is also worth considering that my presence in the room heightened the performativity of the practitioners; although they positioned me as a colleague, there was also awareness of my role as a participant-observer and that they wished to be “seen” to be “good” practitioners, thereby potentially influencing their comments. This was visible in subtle but noticeable changes to their normal practice. For instance, practitioners who were not usually scrupulous about using work mats were careful to, something that Shelly remarked upon in a quiet moment. They therefore drew on my inclusion in their category of practitioner, by indicating to me that they recognised my knowledge, not simply as an early years practitioner, but as a Montessori early years practitioner.

The use of Tapestry or My Montessori Child was central to this process of diversion because every observation was logged by the person doing it. They added their initials to an observation, so the parent-viewed aspect of the app allowed parents to identify who logged it. On the setting-view, practitioners logged onto their own account and each observation was recorded in their account, meaning that data

could be extracted to show what percentage of observations a particular practitioner did cover each area of learning, each child or each cohort. This practice allowed/compelled practitioners to “prove” they were fulfilling their performative role in getting children school-ready, both to managers/EYFS leaders and to parents. Hilary confirmed this data was used during supervisions and annual reviews, as a way of discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the practitioners, and to create targets, such as covering all three prime areas of development and learning in planned activities.

The hegemony of school readiness was found to extend its influence right through the EYFS to the very youngest children in early years education in England. In particular, the concept of developmentality (Fendler, 2001), which is a form of governmentality (Foucault, 1975) by which the subjectified practitioner self-governs and governs others was found to reach into all aspects of early years education (Bradbury, 2016). Practitioners, environments, children and planning were identified as viewed through the perspective of development (Fendler, 2001). The discourse of development impelled all participants to understand themselves, each other and their practices through this dominating perspective (Forman and Nuttall, 2024). Policy imposes this perspective through the neoliberal practice of presenting development as common sense and the only possible way to understand children, childhood and education (Sonu, 2022). I argue that the outcome of school readiness is not simply a desired outcome of the EYFS; it is a primary ideology that impels practices, beliefs and behaviour on practitioners, children and parents.

Ofsted is powerful in the production of school readiness. The accountability structure, which enforces school readiness as a primary outcome of early years education is made up of policy and guidance, which has been discussed in this chapter, and Ofsted. Conflict between guidance in Development Matters and Ofsted has been identified in this this chapter. Therefore, the second part of this chapter interrogates the role of Ofsted.

6.4 The impact of Ofsted on settings and practitioners: Ofsted Ready

Previously, hegemonic discourses (Foucault, 1979) of developmentalism with the outcome of school-readiness have been identified as coming from the EYFS (DfE, 2024), Development Matters (DfE, 2023) and Ofsted (Ofsted, 2019) in a symbiotic relationship of policy, curriculum and inspection. In this chapter, the role of Ofsted in early years education is explored to identify and evaluate the issues caused by Ofsted's accountability expectations (Lefstein, 2013). I identified a set of problems resulting from the inspection regulations that impact on practitioners' opinions, attitudes and practices to cause performative constructions of practice that conflict with requirements of the EYFS and guidance of DM. It was apparent from participant-observations and interviews that this conflict caused stress for practitioners and changed practice. Consequently, it is this pressure point of contradictory requirements that this chapter focuses on.

The discourse of personal accountability (Rosenblatt, 2017), especially for EYFS leads and managers, is transmitted through the publication of the Early Years Inspection

Handbook (Ofsted, 2024). The use of passive language such as “ensure they are informed” to indicate the expectation that leaders make themselves familiar with the detail of it is implicit by making the handbook available. This practice ensures practitioners “are informed” (DfE, 2024, paragraph 3), or rather, that practitioners and managers inform and make themselves responsible and then perform that responsibility.

“This handbook is primarily a guide for inspectors on how to carry out inspections of registered early years providers. However, we make it available to providers and other organisations to ensure that they are informed about inspection processes and procedures. It balances the need for consistent inspection with the flexibility needed to respond to each provider’s particular circumstances. It should be regarded as an explanation of normal procedures, as inspections will vary according to the evidence provided. Inspectors will use their professional judgement when they apply the guidance in this handbook.” (Ofsted 2024, paragraph 3).

Consequently, despite appearing to make settings and managers “informed” about inspection processes, it places responsibility for preparation for inspection on their shoulders, rather than the inspectors (Thrupp, 1998). This shift of responsibility from inspectors to settings and practitioners is indicative of the neoliberal application of accountability as informing but also responsabilising those further down the ‘delivery

chain' (Ball et. at., 2012). The contrast between the (lack of) accountability of those who make and write policy and the consequences for those who embody and reproduce it is identified by Colman (2021). The tragedy of Ruth Perry has been argued to be the inevitable outcome of responsibility without the balancing accountability of policy writers (Waters and Palmer, 2023). As this study demonstrates, making the inspection framework available as information has constructive and performative consequences for practitioners and settings.

The cascade downwards of accountability flows from policy writers who have no accountability for how effective or relevant their policy is in practice (Chopra, 2011), to Ofsted, which inspects in a vacuum to managers and EYFS leaders at the “pinch-point” of the delivery chain (Ball, et. al., 2012). It is the managers and leaders who are held accountable for implementing policy with negative consequences where they are deemed to be failing, without recourse to challenging the policy. While settings can challenge a judgement (Ofsted, 2023, paragraph 165), this is constituted as a formal complaint and is within the boundaries of the structure for judgement. In terms of challenging the criteria, there is no mechanism for practitioners or settings to participate in writing policy in England (for example, see the experience of Peter Moss and 7000 professionals who unsuccessfully challenged the introduction of the Reception Baseline Assessment, discussed in the Literature Review). While the DfE and Ofsted conduct consultations, policy reviews and invite contributions from organisations such as Together and Committed to Young Children (TACTYC) as Peter Moss has shown, only the evidence that aligns with government policy intention is

used in writing policy. Therefore, the intentions of Ofsted are imposed onto settings and practitioners who have all the responsibility for delivering “quality” practice without involvement in the writing of policy, nor in approving it, nor in critiquing it (Ehren and Godfrey, 2017).

According to the Ofsted Schools Inspection Framework (which is separate to the Early Years Framework but is also statutory for early years settings) the intention is that,

“Inspection provides independent, external evaluation and identifies what needs to improve in order for provision to be good or better. It is based on gathering a range of evidence that is evaluated against an inspection framework and takes full account of our policies and relevant legislation in areas such as safeguarding, equality and diversity.” (Ofsted, 2023, no page number)

The early years inspection handbook states Ofsted’s remit is to,

“evaluate what it is like to be a child in the provision. In making their judgements about a provider’s overall effectiveness, inspectors will consider whether the standard of education and care is good” (Ofsted, 2024, paragraph 177).

While Ofsted's stated intended remit is to inspect the quality of education and identify what needs to be improved, Wood (2019) contends that Ofsted, not the EYFS defines quality education. Examples of the conflict between the requirements of the EYFS, guidance from DM and the judgements of Ofsted are identifiable in the following three extracts:

Figure 2. Ofsted description of outstanding quality of education

Outstanding (1)

The provider meets all the criteria for a good quality of education securely and consistently. The quality of education at this setting is exceptional. In addition, the following apply:

- The provider's curriculum intent and implementation are embedded securely and consistently across the provision. It is evident from what practitioners do that they have a firm and common understanding of the provider's curriculum intent and what it means for their practice. Across all parts of the provision, practitioners' interactions with children are of a high quality and contribute well to delivering the curriculum intent.
- Children's experiences over time are consistently and coherently arranged to build cumulatively sufficient knowledge and skills for their future learning.
- The impact of the curriculum on what children know, can remember and do is highly effective. Children demonstrate this through being deeply engaged in their work and play and sustaining high levels of concentration. Children, including those children from disadvantaged backgrounds, do well. Children with SEND achieve the best possible outcomes.
- Children consistently use new vocabulary that enables them to communicate effectively. They speak with increasing confidence and fluency, which means that they secure strong foundations for future learning, especially in preparation for them to become fluent readers.

The EYFS states,

“Every child is a unique child, who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident, and self-assured”. (DfE, 2024, p. 7)

While Development Matters states,

“This guidance sets out the pathways of children’s development in broad ages and stages. The actual learning of young children is not so neat and orderly.” (DfE, 2023, p. 4).

All three extracts have in common the neoliberal construction of children as constantly developing along universal, measurable lines that can be recognised, recorded and practitioners held accountable for (Vintimilla, 2014). The Ofsted construction of learning and development in the early years conspicuously avoids the language of schools, with terms such as teacher and lesson avoided. This has the effect of rendering early years practitioners as less professional than later age range educators (Boyd, 2013; Schacheter et. al., 2022; MacMahon, Firth and Younde, 2021), while outcomes remain as high stakes (Wood, 2019). The implication is that high quality practice, which is judged as a technical implementation of the curriculum, will automatically lead to the desired outcomes. When this fails to happen, the practitioners are held accountable, rather than problematising the EYFS or Ofsted (Lefstein, 2013).

Children are also held directly accountable for their conduct during inspection (discussed below) with universal expectations that young children and babies demonstrate the behaviours of deep engagement and high levels of concentration. This is an example of how neoliberalism in early years education is focused on a perspective of children that recognises only cognitive development and ignores context and history. As Roberts-Holmes and Moss say,

“Declarations about the image of the child are not to be found in neoliberalism. In this respect, of course, neoliberalism does not stand alone; policy-makers or researchers in the early childhood field have rarely made such explicit statements. This silence reflects the positivism that inscribes neoliberalism, a paradigm that does not subscribe to the social constructivist perspective with its recognition of images or social constructions and their significance, including how they are productive of pedagogical theory and pedagogical projects. Rather, in positivism, there is only an objectively true child, revealed through the working of science and the application of objective scientists. (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021, p. 96).

Even the reality of what it is like to be a child in an early years setting is founded on a positivist perspective, based on the silencing universal assumptions about environments and practices shaping expectations of behaviour, concentration and engagement. In my experience, these environments can often be chaotic, noisy and distracting as a result of having many young children together. While the EYFS retains the concept of the unique child, even if this conflicts with its own universal

description of learning and characteristics and Development Matters counters this universalised understanding with the guidance that reality does not match the theory, it is thoroughly positivist Ofsted that is impossible to ignore. Ofsted is therefore found to go beyond its description of itself as evaluating the implementation of curriculum and judging quality. In settings, it constructs practice. Ofsted has made itself the curriculum.

The expectation that the “impact of the curriculum on what children know, remember and can do is highly effective” (Ofsted, 2024, paragraph 191) is demonstrated in Jessica’s description of how children in the reception class were expected to reproduce in their free play what they had been taught the day before,

“They have really been enjoying the black sugar paper with crayons trying, sort of, to replicate fireworks and that’s been out for a couple of days, and we’ve just adjusted the plan for this afternoon. They weren’t, sort of, taking care, they were just sort of mark-making, which was absolutely fine. But they are going to have a little lesson on using the crayons so they can make different shapes, so they can replicate shapes and things like that. So we’re hoping then that tomorrow to see them extend what they’ve learnt this afternoon and show in their play a little bit more.”

Jessica’s example of what might be recognised as good reflective practice (Han, Blank and Berson, 2020) can also be seen as a reproduction of Ofsted’s discourse of the constantly developing child who reproduces learning consistently (Naz, 2023). A

routine of observing a problem, devising a lesson and hoping to see the results the next day describe a ritual of performativity where-by the “child-driven” ethos of the school is in fact aligned with the curriculum-driven discourse of Ofsted. Stephanie also described learning as “get[ting] something out of the child”. The unique child whose learning is not so “neat and orderly” is missing from the account and is therefore at risk of pathologisation and interventions to reduce the risk of them failing to become the school ready unit of human capital intended.

The outcome for practitioners is they hold themselves accountable constantly to ensure they provide experiences that not only introduce the curriculum to the children, but that they can create evidence to show children’s constant development. This construction of learning is identified in the previous chapter as being situated in the cognitive load theory (Avgerinou and Tolmie, 202; Sun, Toh and Steinkrauss, 2020; Vaicuniene and Kazlauskein, 2023; Wong and Shada, 2022) which decontextualises children’s learning from their backgrounds, histories and cultures (Robert-Holmes and Moss, 2021). Jessica pointed out that her children came from a disadvantaged area and therefore had “lower starting points” and needed to make “accelerated progress” to reach the standards required to be school-ready. In terms of accountability this had the impact of impelling Jessica to ensure the children did not “fall behind” by creating routines, such as reflexively adjusting lesson plans to teach necessary skills. This is especially important during inspections because children are observed,

“Our inspections focus on children rather than the individuals who work in settings. However, we will look at how individuals in settings are able to work, or work together, to achieve the highest possible quality of education and care for children.” (Ofsted, 2024, paragraph 14)

Thus, children need to be prepared for inspections to show “what they know, can remember and do” and to “demonstrate this by being deeply engaged in their work and play and sustaining high levels of concentration” (Ofsted, 2024, paragraph 191). I observed children being prepared in a way that complies with the behavioural expectations of Ofsted in all three settings. Jessica persuaded, instructed and finally threatened children to sit still and concentrate during carpet time lessons (discussed in Chapter 5). In the baby room I observed how the three children whose imminent second birthdays would propel them into the toddler room the following month were required to show how they could wash their own hands, and perform other rituals that were routine in the next room. In the pre-school, Stephanie handed out notes to the practitioners based on the feedback from the recent Ofsted inspection. Among these were changes in expectations of behaviour because the children had not demonstrated the concentration required to retain information and reproduce it in their play. The pressure that inspection creates is consequently felt daily by both practitioners and children, as children must be prepared for inspection to fulfil the behavioural criteria that Ofsted imposes, on top of the EYFS requirements that Jessica described as “challenging”.

Therefore, I conclude that added to the construction of the “good” practitioner who produces the school-ready child, is the “good” practitioner who produces the Ofsted-ready child. My study adds to Wood’s (2019) finding that Ofsted, not the EYFS, decides on what quality means in early years education; I contend that the Ofsted inspection frameworks are so powerful that they further limit neoliberal constructions of children and therefore, practice. This power is seen in the ways that practitioners change their performative roles, to ensure that they fulfil the accountability requirements of Ofsted, over the requirements of the EYFS or the guidance of Development Matters, where there is a conflict. In addition, children’s behaviour and learning is modified to in essence “train” them to behave in Ofsted approved ways. Ofsted thus becomes the curriculum and where the EYFS and Ofsted are contradictory, the Ofsted requirements are followed. While inspections happen only periodically, children and practitioners are in a constant state of preparation, to ensure they are, in the words of Stephanie, “Ofsted-ready every single day. Every moment of every day”. In so doing, practitioners are compelled to act as inspectors “every single day”, governing others and self-governing to ensure the inspection requirements are met. This conflation of policies that set the curriculum (EYFS and DM) and the inspection requirements are explored in the next section.

6.5 Confusion: Ofsted conflated with the EYFS.

The anxiety to prove Ofsted readiness led to a misconception about the EYFS and Ofsted handbooks. Practitioners treated them as if they were the same policy. The EYFS is designed to be constructive of practice while Ofsted states its intention is to ensure its correct application. However, in common with Scott, (2018) and Wood

(2019) this study found that the Ofsted handbook was interpreted by settings and practitioners as defining quality and as constructive of practice. Practitioners referred to Ofsted together with the EYFS as if they were the same. For instance, Hilary referred to both in one reply, implying they were conflated,

“The number of times the word Ofsted comes out of my mouth is huge, So, yes, that is, it has a huge impact because I have to look at the new EYFS, I have to.”

Practitioners discussed how they referred to the Ofsted inspection handbook alongside the EYFS. Jessica described using her Planning, Preparation and Assessment (PPA) time in the afternoons, “looking at the [EYFS] framework a bit more or looking at the Ofsted handbook”. Hilary too, spent a lot of time trying to absorb the requirements,

“because that’s what they are coming to look to see, if you are delivering that. So you’ve got to deliver it. What I have started to do is to push it down to the practitioners. It’s no good only the manager knowing what Ofsted are coming to look at.”

A particular issue illustrated the confusion between the EYFS and Ofsted. This was the problem of judging quality of education. The Ofsted Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2023) sets out the criteria quality by which all educational settings are judged as

intent, implementation and impact (referred to as the “3 I’s”) and devotes a paragraph to each concept. The Early Years Inspection Framework makes clear that,

“Inspectors will not grade curriculum intent, implementation and impact separately. Instead, inspectors will reach a single graded judgement for the quality of education, drawing on all the evidence they have gathered, using their professional judgement.” (Ofsted, 2024, paragraph 189)

Shelley referred to the “3 I’s” incorrectly as being derived from the EYFS despite there being no mention of them in either the EYFS or DM,

“So we’ve just changed our planning to meet the change in the EYFS. So now we have the intent is what we are planning to do and the implementation is what our resources are and we have a reflection, so we’ve got rid of the session plans”.

As with Jessica and Hilary’s comments above, it is clear when talking about practice, Ofsted inspection criteria and the EYFS are merged in the minds of the practitioners and shaped practices as if they were both curricula.

Hilary’s description of “pushing it down to the practitioners” is an apt portrayal of how accountability works. Ball et. al.’s (2012) concept of the “delivery chain” reaches its culmination with the least qualified practitioner, made responsible for knowing and reproducing the inspection framework intended for inspectors. “Pushing it

down” also included practitioners being required to know their key children’s development well enough to be able to discuss it at any time with an inspector. As Hilary said when she was giving me a guided tour of the Montessori nursery, “Ofsted will tap them on the shoulder and expect them to know”. This is in line with the practice of inspectors following at least 2 children during the inspection and evidence based on, “discussions held with the child’s key person and how they decide what to teach”. (Ofsted, 2024, paragraph 78). Consequently, the merging of the EYFS and Ofsted requirements resulted in changes to practice in the Montessori nursery, from the new planning system to Hilary’s cascading of accountability down to all practitioners regardless of level of training or experience.

The role of Ofsted is confusing; its stated aim is of inspecting settings to ensure curriculum is implemented in early years settings, yet it is instrumental in shaping practitioners’ attitudes and practices because the framework contains more than guidance for inspectors. Practitioners recognise the veiled instructions to themselves to adapt practice and performativity. This is achieved by making available the inspection handbook to settings, making it inevitable that they refer to it and adapt their practice to fulfil what they know will be inspected. This study found that practitioners conflated Ofsted with the EYFS and DM to shape activities and approaches to teaching and learning to ensure settings and children were Ofsted-ready. The impact of preparation for Ofsted is explored in the next section.

“Ofsted-ready every single day”: Ultra preparedness

Ofsted inspections are not predictable. There are no schedules of inspection published; settings receive a phone call the day before an inspection. Therefore, all three settings were concerned about being ready for an inspection at any time.

Jessica told me, in October 2021,

“Ofsted are coming to us soon. We had thought it would already have happened to be honest with you”.

In fact, the school was not inspected until December 2023. In October 2021 (when I was completing my fieldwork) the pre-school had just been inspected and Stephanie was relieved they had received a “Good” judgement. However, she told me,

“[The standards] shouldn’t slip just because you’ve had an Ofsted. That should be every day. It doesn’t matter that Ofsted have been and gone.”

The pressure that practitioners experienced in relation to Ofsted was two-fold.

Stephanie pointed out that Ofsted could come at any time, “because they could walk in the door; they could have had a complaint”. However, the real stressor was that high quality practice, described as a high-quality curriculum that is well delivered might not be enough to gain a good Ofsted judgement. Bousted, (2020) finds that Ofsted has no answers to the problem of inconsistency in advice and have provided no evidence that their changing practices are adequate solutions. As discussed above, Ofsted has different and additional expectations to the EYFS. Jessica, Hilary and Stephanie had invested time in internalising the new EYFS and Ofsted requirements

and making stressful decisions about how to balance them. Ultimately, their conclusions led to tasks that ensured they were prepared for inspection.

There were several ways that the settings attempted to ensure they were always “Ofsted-ready”. These measures included constant (anxious) reference to both the EYFS and Ofsted (sometimes erroneously) to ensure practice was consistent with current guidance and requirements (Burrow, Williams and Thomas, 2020).

Procedures were implemented that were intended to prove accountability to an Ofsted inspector that the setting was successfully providing a good quality of education, according to Ofsted’s handbook criteria (Brady and Wilson, 2021).

Managers and EYFS leaders worked overtime to keep up to date with paperwork and implemented supervisory and Continuous Professional Development to ensure practitioners were up to date with knowledge of their key children and able to discuss them at any time (Burnell, 2017).

However, my data suggests that settings are impacted differently by Ofsted according to their context. Although this was not the focus of my work, and I did not pursue the question with participants, it is an issue that is worth raising here, to continue the debate later. By context, I mean that different types of settings have contrasting levels of financial stability, funding and support. As discussed in the methodology chapter, the settings represent some of the mosaic of EYFS provision. The reception class is a part of a primary school and therefore has infrastructural and financial support and stability. A poor Ofsted inspection for this type of setting is upsetting and would result in heightened intervention and surveillance and might ultimately lead to

it being required to join an academy trust. It would not, however, lead to its closure. For the daycare nursery and the pre-school, however, the situation is different. Both settings were private businesses, reliant on fees and funding. They had no external support or ability to draw on the wider resources of the school. Therefore, they were more reliant on positive Ofsted ratings to attract consumers. The power of Ofsted, although significant in both types of setting, was significantly more in the small, private businesses that it was for the reception class. For the small settings, Ofsted's judgement was existential.

The impact of these measures was not positive. More than 25 years ago Woods and Jeffrey (1998) found that Ofsted caused a deep and damaging clash of values between the inspection framework and practitioners' professional knowledge and values, including feeling deprofessionalised. More recent studies (Swales, 2023; Dufour, 2023; Albin-Clark and Archer, 2023) concur with the findings of Perryman and Bradbury (2023) that Ofsted causes stress in many areas of professional and personal life and that reform is needed urgently. Therefore, these examples of governmentality, where-by the dominant discourses of responsibility and accountability are so deeply engrained that they produce not only the required accountability measures but were also productive of further measures individual to settings, like Hilary routinely asking practitioners about their key children.

Constant reference to the language of performance such as standards, goals, targets and best practice (Cochran-Smith, 2021) were used in every setting at the level of casual conversations, formal supervisions and written texts such as setting's policies,

and activities and practices in classrooms. I found the settings therefore created environments where the reconstruction of the discourses of early years education were inevitably reproduced.

The practice of inspectors using conversations with key people and observations of practice caused particular concern for practitioners. This change in practice was introduced to reduce the amount of paperwork produced. As discussed earlier, this is a very reception-centric perspective taken by the policy writers. Shelley and Sarah from the baby and toddler rooms pointed out that children reach milestones rapidly at this age and therefore the amount of paperwork they were required to do had not reduced. The outcome of this “reform” is therefore that practitioners working with younger children have large amounts of paperwork and face the prospect of inspectors expecting them to discuss their key children’s development, planned experiences and any worries they have without reference to their records.

While observing in the toddler room this inspection focus came up in conversation. The room leader, Sarah, said she was terrified. She had declined being interviewed for this study, despite being a colleague of mine for several years, because she was worried that she would appear unknowledgeable. Drawing on the feminist ethics of care I was careful not to show how disappointed I was that she did not feel able to be interviewed; she would have contributed a different perspective that would have been valuable but her mental health had to take priority. She told me that the idea of an inspector “tapping her on the shoulder” to discuss a key child made her feel ill. Sarah feared that she would freeze and not be able to speak to an inspector and

therefore would let Hilary and the setting down. Hilary attempted to counter this by routinely asking practitioners to explain a key child's progress and expected future learning. This performative ritual of reciting key children's facts was intended to prepare and reassure practitioners, but it appeared to fuel fear of inspection and added pressure during an already stressful day. This finding concurs with Kilderry's (2015) discourse analysis of performativity in early childhood education, that anxiety is one way that practitioners respond to accountability measures in early childhood settings. The other practitioners in the room agreed that they feared an inspection for this reason, but also found the daily threat of being required to performatively "know" their key children an additional pressure (Kay, 2024). From a performative perspective, Ofsted's expectation is that a good practitioner can recall and discuss key children, but this extends to managers' expectations as a means of Ofsted readiness (Clapham, 2015). However, I find that this does not consider the fear that is generated by inspection, nor practitioners' reaction to it. Therefore, while a practitioner might (and in this case clearly did) know their key children well, the performative strain to demonstrate this knowledge in a stressful situation has the potential to lead to misleading impressions being given during inspection, causing anxiety about being Ofsted-ready.

Conclusion

The second part of this chapter examined the impact of Ofsted on settings and practitioners. Ofsted positions itself as inspecting settings to ensure the EYFS (the curriculum) is being implemented. Its intention is to see a typical day and to evaluate what it is like to be a child in that setting. This study found that alongside the

developmental framework, inspecting the delivery of the curriculum also included other practices, not found in the EYFS. These included holding key practitioners to account through performative discussions about key children (Kay, 2024), despite Ofsted stating their remit is to inspect settings, not practitioners or lessons.

Ofsted states that practitioners are not evaluated individually, but the practice of taking a small number (at least 2) children to track through the setting requires practitioners with the role of key person (almost all, including apprentices) to be able to fulfil the Ofsted practice of discussing key children with the inspector. The performative role of the practitioner is one who is knowledgeable, confident and articulate. Practitioners feared they were not capable of fulfilling this expectation (Kilderry, 2015). Additionally, I found they interpreted the discussion as a focused assessment of their practice, rather than an indication of practice in the setting generally. Therefore, the accountability practices of Ofsted are found to cause more anxiety than intended. This anxiety is far reaching, impacting on practice and practitioner well-being daily (Swales, 2023; Dufour, 2023; Albin-Clark and Archer, 2023). Hilary's expectation that practitioners could discuss key children's progress and future learning at any time reinforced this performative role, impelling practitioners to be articulate, confident and knowledgeable at any time during their working day.

Wood (2019) found that Ofsted goes further than the remit of evaluation and is constructive of quantifying quality of practice. This study concludes that far from simply evaluating how well a setting delivers the EYFS, Ofsted instils itself into the

thoughts, opinions, practices and activities of early years settings (Cochran-Smith, 2021). This is brought about primarily by making available the inspection handbook as information for settings and practitioners. In doing so, it impels settings to refer to it, use it and reproduce it in everyday practice.

Practitioners and managers felt it was necessary to be more than simply aware of guidance to HMI's about how to conduct inspections, they were impelled to act as though the handbook was instruction for them. In doing so, this study found that practices were changed to ensure that inspectors would see practices outlined in the handbook, even when these practices conflicted with, or contradicted, the guidance given by the Department for Education in Development Matters (DfE, 2021). By ensuring that settings know how they are to be held accountable, accountability becomes a dominant aspect of early years education (Naz, 2023). I argue that practitioners are required to become inspectors themselves daily, self-governing their own practice, and overseeing that of others. As was contended in Chapter 5 and the School readiness discussion above, dominant discourses of what makes a good practitioner constitute one who self-regulates, enacting practice that produces a school ready child. This chapter adds to that picture, adding the Ofsted-ready practitioner, who prepares the environment through continuous provision, practice and paperwork and prepares the self through ritually knowing key children.

Problematically, the EYFS, DM and Ofsted framework do not always align, which impacts on choices about what and how to teach, construct the environment and know key children. An example of this discord between policies was visible in the

expectation of development and learning. The EYFS positions children as unique. DM regards learning and development occurring unevenly and holistically. Ofsted expects to see consistent and constant learning and development in the seven areas of learning. As Jessica's evidence illustrated, where there was the possibility of either allowing children to experiment and develop (drawing skills) at their own pace or to hurry this development with lessons and expectations of immediate demonstration of new skills, the Ofsted discourse of continuous and immediate development was acted upon. Parallel fears of the impending EYFS Profile assessment and a possible imminent Ofsted inspection compelled Jessica to act in a ritualised manner, despite her misgivings that she might otherwise be more "child-driven". To prove her worth as a teacher, Jessica was obliged to suppress her professional knowledge about children and produce practice that complied with Ofsted's requirements, provoking an "epistemological shudder" (Charteris, 2014). This suggests that the misalignment between the policies produces conflict within practitioners. It is necessary to fulfil all the requirements of the EYFS, supported by DM; where these conflict with Ofsted it appears that practitioners over-ride the EYFS and DM in favour of the Ofsted guidance for inspectors. In addition, Jessica suggested that not all inspectors were aware of the differences between early years and primary practice and therefore, preparation for this occurrence was necessary by ensuring such an inspector would be satisfied by her practice, forcing a performative change in practice to include more formal lessons, and compliance with Ofsted over the EYFS and DM.

Moreover, the pressure that the conflict between policies produced was evident in the confusion that practitioners experienced between the roles of the policies

(Woods and Jeffery, 1998; Swailes, 2023; Dufour, 2023; Albin-Clark and Archer, 2023). It is intended that the EYFS is statutory, DM is guidance, and that Ofsted ensures they are applied correctly. The step that Ofsted takes in constructing a different requirement from the EYFS means that the three policies can be conflated. Clearly, practitioners refer to all three for instruction and guidance in teaching and learning. Where Ofsted differs from the EYFS, practitioners tended to apply this to practice. This was evident in the nursery's application of Intent, Implementation and Impact to their planning. The 3 I's are intended as a tool for inspecting the observation, planning and assessment cycle of early years education as applied to the long- and medium-term plans and the overall environment. It is not intended as a tool for settings to apply to practice themselves. Therefore, going beyond Wood's (2019) finding that Ofsted defined quality and standards differently to the EYFS, I find that settings apply Ofsted's requirements where they are in conflict with the EYFS, thereby changing the type and quality of education they provide. Ofsted, which is intended to inspect and evaluate the implementation of the EYFS is in reality a curriculum itself. This is a key finding of my research, and I contend, a new data that adds to the growing concern about the role Ofsted has in education.

It is hard to come to any conclusion other than Ofsted has a strong influence in the classroom on daily practice. Judging Ofsted against its own remit of evaluating what it is like to be a child in the setting, it falls short. Settings are so concerned to ensure a good judgement they adapt and change practice. Where Ofsted constructs a different practice to that in the EYFS and DM, settings adopt the Ofsted model. This impels practice that is often in conflict with the fundamental requirements of the EYFS.

Therefore, the remit to evaluate what it is like to be a child in a setting is invalid. Settings and practitioners are under so much pressure to provide evidence of good practice they are impelled to act contrary to children's best interests according to the practices laid out in the EYFS. The Ofsted framework appears less interested in the child in the present, and more constructive of producing practice, environments and practitioners who are Ofsted-ready. While this is not the intention of Ofsted, it is the outcome.

Chapter 7. A Critical Discourse Analysis of Accountability in Finnish ECEC and Pre-primary policy.

Introduction

This chapter aims to address the research question, “What are the ideological and educational discourses that construct the accountability discourse in early years education in Finland?”. While this is the focus of this chapter, the questions, “How is the accountability discourse framed and reproduced in Finnish early childhood education and care?” and “What are the consequences of accountability on practice and lived experiences for practitioners and children?” are inevitably touched upon. A critical analysis of policies, interviews and fieldnotes from the three settings identifies the discourses that shape the framework of curricula and the evaluation guidelines. This framework forms the accountability discourse in Finland. Therefore, this chapter interrogates the ideological positions of the key policies to question the political positions and assumptions that shape accountability in ECEC. Evidence to support my claims is drawn from interviews and observations from three settings in Finland. This thesis offers an interpretation of the accountability discourse that combines analytical and qualitative traditions of data analysis. Therefore, the discussions in these chapters arc from policy intentions, through practitioner’s experiences and opinions to outcomes.

The National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (FNAE, 2018) for children aged up to 5 and the National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education (FNAE,2014) for children aged 5-6 are statutory for all settings. Local curricula are

developed to include everything in these curricula, with particular focus on local needs and circumstances, such as language considerations. The Guidelines and Recommendations for Evaluating the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (Vlasov et. al., 2019) provide the framework for evaluation that must be developed at national, local and setting levels. These three policies form the accountability framework through which the accountability discourse that shapes practitioners' beliefs, attitudes and practices, and settings' policies is realised. Therefore, data drawn from observations and interviews in this study are partially indicative of the outcomes of the accountability discourse and the actions of policy.

A Foucauldian theoretical framework is used to explore the ideologies and educational intentions of Finnish policy. The concept of regimes of truth (Foucault, 1966) is used to identify the underlying discourses that shape policy and practitioners' beliefs, attitude and practices. The metaphor of the panopticon (1977) is used to identify the ways that surveillance is used to govern practitioners and children's reproduction of ECEC requirements and evaluation practices.

Governmentality (1991), through which the subjectification of the self is recognised as an imposition of power, rather than an expression of agency, completes the key Foucauldian concepts of this theoretical framework. In conjunction with this analytical framework, Butler's theory of performativity is used to identify how the roles that practitioners inhabit, and the practices they carry out, are created through policies, discourses and the reproduction of attitudes, practices and beliefs. Butler's perspective of routine and ritual as being constructive of gender is drawn on to identify how the construction of practitioners is achieved through "good"

practitioners fulfil their roles to produce normative, “good” children through the daily routine of the setting. The combination of Butler and Foucault allows a critical analysis of policies and practices that provide an understanding of how ideologies and educational intentions work together to produce an accountability discourse that is particular to Finland.

My Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995) identified that the ideological framework of accountability in Finnish ECEC is a combination of Social Democracy and Neoliberalism. This combination is found to conflict with each other, and therefore, the three themes that CDA identified are characterised by this conflict. The three themes are *Future Readiness and Human Capital, Quality and The Evaluation Framework*. While the themes are addressed over two chapters to interrogate the intentions and outcomes of each on accountability in ECEC they are inextricably linked. Like all discourses they are embedded into the policies and practices and conversations of practitioners and are therefore difficult to identify, reflecting the way that regimes of truth are internalised and reproduced as common sense, routine, ritual and attitude.

Neoliberalism and social democracy are explored first because they underpin the ideology shaping the educational policies of Finland. After an exploration of how each ideology is embedded into policy, the conflict between them is explored through an analysis of educational intentions. As Foucault wrote, “This kind of method entails going behind the institution and trying to discover in a wider and more overall perspective what we can broadly call a technology of power” (2007, p. 117). The

same technologies of power that were identified as being embedded in policy and practice in England are also found in Finland, made concrete through the accountability framework of education policy and the evaluation framework and reproduced through the performative routines and rituals of evaluation practices in settings.

Building on the analysis of ideological underpinning and intentions, the educational intentions of the ECEC are interrogated. The three settings are quite representative of Finland, in that one has few children who are not native Finns, one caters for working parents who need irregular and extended hours to cover hospital shifts, and one has many children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Therefore, some sections concentrate on the experiences from a single setting as they provide insights into situations that the other settings did not encounter.

This chapter is in two sections. The first analyses the educational ideologies of early childhood education policy in Finland. Both social democratic and neoliberal ideologies are found to be influential in Finnish policy, resulting in sometimes conflicting and competing discourses and practices in accountability policy and practice. The second section interrogates the key values that underly the policies, attitudes, beliefs and discourses of early childhood education in Finland, identifying the educational intentions. These two sections provide a foundation for the subsequent chapter which analyses the impact of the accountability discourse on settings and practitioners' attitudes and practices in more detail. This policy analysis

chapter establishes the contexts by which the construction of practitioners and construction of children can be understood.

7.1 Ideologies in Finnish early years education policy

The mission statement of the Early Childhood Education and Care (FNAE, 2018) sets out the ideological and educational intentions of early years education in Finland, presenting them as a regime of truth (Foucault, 1972) that shapes beliefs and expectations around practices in the ECEC. ECEC in Finland is described as a “societal service (FNAE, 2018, p. 4) with a number of tasks,

“The mission of ECEC is to promote children’s holistic growth, development and learning in collaboration with their guardians. ECEC promotes equality and equity among children and prevents their social exclusion. Knowledge and skills acquired in ECEC strengthens children’s participation and active agency in the society. In addition, ECEC supports guardians in educating their children as well as makes it possible for them to work or study.” (FNAE, 2018, p. 14).

The mission statement of the ECEC identifies several areas of importance as fundamental to society, families and children. The accountability discourse of this area of policy in Finland centres around ensuring these intentions are fulfilled. The intentions of the ECEC and Pre-primary education to construct a child who is both universally developing as an atomised individual and socially becoming a part of their society of equal and equitable humans presents a dilemma (Sevón, Mustola and Alasuutari, 2024). Analysis of this mission statement identifies that this dilemma lies

at the heart of Finnish early childhood education and care where two constructions of children collide. This conflict is illustrative of the dualism that I contend this study identifies throughout the policy and practice.

The value of early childhood education is central to international and national discourses. As previously highlighted, neoliberal perspectives of early years education are prevalent in international discussions about the value and role of pre-school education. Organisations such as the World Bank, the OECD and United Nations reproduce and enforce this perspective. International discourses position the role of early childhood as instrumental in preventing poverty through several measures (Stevens, Siraj and Kong, 2023). These measures include creating the foundations of learning that lead to literacy and numeracy and there-after employment, and the learning of behaviours and attitudes that create independent, democratic citizens. In addition, preparation for school and the future more generally is regarded as a key role of early years education (Klapperirch, 2022; Steinberg and Kleinert, 2022; Zhou and Lu, 2024). Attributes such as being independent, self-regulation and adhering to societal norms are valued (Strandell 2010). Curricula influenced by these discourses adhere to constructions of children that are universal, developmental and prioritise cognitive development. These discourses are reproduced in Finnish policy in statements such as,

“According to the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care, each child in ECEC has a right to systematic and goal-oriented education, instruction and care.” (FNAE, 2018, p. 10)

And,

“According to the Basic Education Act and the national core curriculum, each child in pre-primary education has a right to instruction and support necessary for favourable development and learning on all working days.” (FNAE, 2014a, p. 10)

These statements are illustrative of neoliberal developmental and universal constructions of education that underpin the educational discourses of ECEC and pre-primary education. Yet these neoliberal discourses are situated with the social democratic discourses of equity and participation in society. The social democratic values are considered central to children’s growing autonomy and independence (Fatigante et. al., 2022; Ragnhild, 2023; Rentzou et. al., 2023). These studies demonstrate that the concept of agency is one that often goes unchallenged, constituting a regime of truth (Foucault, 1972) whereby children are viewed as acting within a perspective of developing freedom and choice. However, Foucault points out that when agency is viewed as occurring with a panoptical surveillance, people assume responsibility for the restraints of power and self-discipline themselves. As children are inherently less powerful than adults, that are subject to adults’ expectations and intentions (Peters and Johansson, 2012; Lansdown, 2010; Lister, 2007; Vanjesevic, 2020). However, practitioners are also subjectified through policy, training and discourses, and their thoughts, beliefs and actions are equally constrained. In the concept of agency both the neoliberal construction of it as

focused on the individual and the social democratic construction which focusses on agency as a means to democratic participation and social cohesion are visible. Therefore, at the heart of the mission statement are apparent the conflicting ideologies of social democracy with its emphasis on the good of the group, and neoliberalism, with its priority of autonomy and responsibility to the self.

Social Democracy; ‘Full membership of community’

Social democratic values and intended outcomes for early years education are strongly represented in the ECEC policies of Finland (Alasuutari, Markström and Vallberg-Roth, 2014). Children are constructed as democratic members of society, with growing agency and involvement; these rights are related in policy to the rights set out in the UNCRC which can be characterised as provision, protection and participation (Hammarberg, 1990). Early years education is viewed as having a role in preventing poverty through equality and equity of access to provision that supports children and families in becoming more integrated into society (OECD, 2006; Kagan, 2020). Social pedagogy shapes activities and environments, focussing on supporting children in learning to be part of the group. Attributes such as cooperation, democratic decision making and working together are encouraged, as is becoming physically independent and competent (Melvin, Landsburg and Kagan, 2020). The curricula shapes activities rather than individual development. The next section begins with an exploration of how and where these competing ideologies of Social Democratic and Neoliberalism can be identified in Finnish early childhood education policies, drawing on interviews and observations to illustrate how they are embodied in practice.

The Constitution of Finland (1999) sets out expectations and requirements for all organisations working with or on behalf of children that position them as having equal value as adults. Children are granted rights by the Constitution of Finland,

“Children shall be treated equally and as individuals and they shall be allowed to influence matters pertaining to themselves to a degree corresponding to their level of development” (Constitution of Finland, 1999, Chapter 2, Section 6).

It is significant that while Finland is Social Democratic, the Constitution draws on a construction of children that is individualistic and based on developmentalism; this is illustrative of the conflicting ideologies that shape Finnish policy. The implications of viewing children from a developmental perspective are discussed in the next chapter.

In the guidelines the key values of ECEC are described as including,

“... promoting social justice, creating preconditions for open democracy and wellbeing, and preventing children’s social exclusion ... These values are based on the child’s rights, and they are realised from the perspective of the principles of full membership in community and inclusion, among other things.” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 41).

The guidelines (Vlasov et. al, 2019) include provisions for participation, membership and democracy as part of the rights of the child. These are historically significant terms in Finland, laid out in the Constitution. A key statement is,

“Democracy entails the right of the individual to participate in and influence the development of society and his or her living conditions” (Constitution of Finland, 1999, Chapter 1 Section 2).

This statement positions democracy as enabling participation and agency. This is reflected in the ECEC and Pre-primary curricula which enshrine the rights of the child to membership and democracy in the sections “Underlying values” (FNAE, 2018, pp. 20-22; FNAE, 2014a, pp. 17-18). The ECEC has the requirements of “equal and equitable treatment and the protection against discrimination” (FNAE, 2018, p. 20). It also “promotes the democratic values of the Finnish society, such as equity, equality and diversity” (FNAE, 2018, p.21). Similarly, the Pre-school curriculum states,

“Active and responsible participation and involvement create a foundation for a democratic and sustainable future. This requires skills and a desire in the individual to participate in the activities of the community and trust in their own possibilities of making a difference.” (FNAE, 2014a, p. 21)

Therefore, in the context of Finnish policy, the accountability discourse has a component of ensuring that participation, equality, equity and diversity are a central part of the practitioner and setting’s responsibilities towards children and families

(Valkonen and Furu, 2022). The ECEC and pre-primary curricula are shaped by social pedagogy which positions children's development within a framework of social learning. Social pedagogy can be understood both as social learning – learning the social and cultural norms and conventions and learning sociably – learning cooperatively.

The discourse of agency is considered central to constructions of children's growing autonomy and independence (Fatigante et. al., 2022; Ragnhild, 2023; Rentzou et. al., 2023) and as these studies illustrate the concept of agency is often a discourse that goes unchallenged (as it is in these papers). Therefore, the concept of agency constitutes a regime of truth (Foucault, 1972) whereby children are viewed as acting with freedom and choice. This construction of the child positions them as a part of the community, with responsibilities for the good feeling of the group that sometimes takes precedence over their own agentic, autonomous desires is also present in this mission statement. Pre-school teacher Ilona referred to social skills as a priority,

“... that they know how to treat other children nicely, that would be like the big hope. It makes it a lot easier for us if they have already that as kind of established in the sense that, I mean, they know not to hurt each other and they know how to also, what's the word? ... take other people's presence into account so they have a little bit already that balance of knowing that they are not the only one.”

Ilona's view of the socialised child can be viewed as a type of governmentality whereby the child's self-regulation is required for the good of other children but also for the teachers, by making it "easier for us". Self-regulation can therefore be seen as a technology whereby children learn particular ways of behaving that make them easier to control, rather than the child learning to identify their emotions and how to act with agency to cope with them. Teachers are required to create conditions for participation and democracy within the group. I observed group meetings where children voted on different ideas put forward during discussion.

In Setting 1, in the pre-school room was a child who did not take part in the group discussion which was taking place on four benches placed in two rows in front of a small white board. Instead they disrupted the group by spitting, making a "ccchhhh" noise at the back of their throat and running around the room until they were taken onto a teacher's lap away from the group where the teacher spoke softly to them, asking their opinion and encouraging them to put their hand up to contribute. At the time I was struck by the gentleness of this interaction. However, considering this scenario reflexively it could be construed as an example of how the accountability discourse requires teachers to create an environment in which children learn to act in a democratic and participatory manner. Using this lens the teacher's action can be seen as reproducing this discourse, and acting to reduce the child's agency by imposing her prioritisation of participation over the child's unwillingness or inability to do so.

The cooperation between teachers to allow the lead teacher to continue the group meeting, viewed through the lens of the panopticon, suggests a high level of surveillance of both children and adults. There were four adults in the room with nine children. These comprised one lead practitioner, with a second beside her at the front; a nursery nurse sitting with the children and the pedagogical lead who had come to observe the disruptive child. Sofia explained they had asked the pedagogical lead to come and observe as their self-evaluation had led them to conclude as a team that they needed more support. This is in line with the guidelines (Vlasov et. al., 2019) which state,

“Being founded on trust between the actors is typical of enhancement-led evaluation. In early childhood education and care, the aim of enhancement-led evaluation is to build an evaluation culture where evaluation is based on open discussion and dialogue rather than control or accountability.” (p. 43).

While the guidelines construct open discussion and dialogue as the opposite to control or accountability, I argue that it simply displaces it. The accountability is not imposed through structures that are encountered as punitive or high-stakes, but through governmentality, whereby practitioners govern themselves. The panoptical structure of everyone acting as though they were being observed is pertinent here. Each practitioner acted to ensure that their colleagues complied with the requirements of the evaluation guidelines, thereby not needing an inspector type figure to ensure they did. Therefore, the control that the discourses of participation and democracy impose is invisible to those embodying it.

This anecdote also reveals a performative construction of the child, indicating the role of an “ideal child” that children are required to step into, to be considered as developing in a way that is considered culturally normative. The children who were able to put the interests of the group before their own desires, reflecting the social democratic ideology of Finland (Sevón, Mustola and Alasuutari, 2024). The intention of participation is to decrease the impact of exclusion through poverty or other challenges, for the wellbeing of the child both in the present and the future. This is constructed as a societal good, which benefits both the individual and the wider society. Therefore, at the heart of the mission statement, is apparent the ideology of social democracy, with its emphasis on the good of the group.

However, the child was taken onto the adult’s lap and their energy directed towards participation. This could be viewed as a loss of agency from the perspective of the child. Heiskanen (2019) identifies that children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities are subject to this loss of agency. Their Individual Educational Plans, which for normatively developing children are a vehicle for their voice to be heard, contributing to their personal targets, are diverted to be tools for addressing developmental and behavioural targets that they have no say in. Aurora explained how in the pre-primary group in Setting 1, they had meetings with the child and their parents,

“We are asking them who you are and what do you like and what do you like to do here and what do you want to learn here and they tell something there.”

Ilona extended this explanation with the comment,

“It is a really big focus in early childhood education that children can affect their own education, their own decisions and are involved in the planning of what they learn here.”

For children who are not presenting the practitioners with reasons to be concerned about their development the process of being involved in planning their own targets is quite free and they were able to exercise agency.

However, at the beginning of the year the practitioners assessed the incoming pre-schoolers to see if they had the skills they were expecting,

“We have that form that they (the municipality) made this year called “I can”. There were pictures of skills that I can use scissors, I can do some numbers, some writing, I can button my own shirt or do the zipper. These basic skills. There are many.”

Ilona identified that these tests were done to identify children who might need support. Those children were not given the same opportunity to exercise their

agentic choice of what targets they might like to aim for, instead those children were given targets by adults. Ilona identified the kinds of targets they had such as “taking food, if that’s a difficult situation for a particular child”. Ilona’s example is of a social situation rather than an academic skill, which is indicative of the social focus of the ECEC. The example of the child in the meeting, and the following discussion shows how the practitioners viewed the problems from the perspective of social pedagogy. From the practitioners’ perspective the child was preventing the group from learning cooperatively, and additionally they were demonstrating that they had not yet acquired the key skills of participation and cooperation that are valued in a social democracy. The accountability discourse in Finland requires practitioners to ensure these attributes are learnt; for the practitioners it was vital that they addressed the situation. Thus, the presence of four practitioners must be seen as a performative ritual, by which different the actors came together to cooperate, evaluate and develop goals and actions to address the problem.

Practitioners’ thoughts, opinions and actions are shaped by the dominant discourses of the guidelines, those of the growing participation and agency of children within the boundaries of the social and cultural norms of Finnish social democracy.

However, against this highly visible ideology of social democracy, I found the less visible ideology of neoliberalism existing alongside. The next section explores how this international, hegemonic ideology is intertwined in both policy and practitioners’ attitudes and actions.

Neoliberalism: Future readiness

The neoliberal discourse of early childhood education and care as an investment in the future is found in international literature such as the *Starting Strong* series,

“High-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) holds tremendous potential for children, families and societies, laying the groundwork for the success of future generations”. (OECD, 2009)

Concepts such as the importance of participation, equality and access are common in publications about early childhood education by organisations such as The World Bank, the OECD and UNESCO, which states,

“It can lay the foundation for good health and nutrition, learning and educational success, social-emotional learning, and economic productivity throughout life.” (UNESCO, 2023).

Similarly, the Finnish evaluation guidelines claim,

“It has been proven that participation in high-quality early childhood education and care is linked to children’s cognitive development and later academic success as well to the development of social skills and skills of self-regulation” (Vlasov, et. al., 2019, p. 43).

Vlasov et. al., (2019) claim that early years education can lead to academic success and social learning. While the Finnish statement does not explicitly claim that quality

early years education leads to economic productivity, social skills and self-regulation are regarded as key skills needed for adults to work successfully (Ernawati, Deliviana and Wigunawati, 2024). Therefore, alongside the ideology of communitarianism and cooperation, there are traces of neoliberal theory of human capital. In particular, the ideology of preparation, whereby the child is in a constant state of preparation for the next stage of education and ultimately employment is discernible. In Finland, ECEC settings are held accountable for ensuring that children learn the appropriate skills that prepare them for school and their future (Heiskanen, 2020). The practitioners in the pre-primary room reproduced these discourses by framing the behaviours and social skills that children needed to learn “to get the children school ready, but school ready in quite a broad sense” (Ilona). The accountability discourse constructed by these statements holds practitioners and settings responsible for producing children able to take advantage of the next phase of education and ultimately employment. The ECEC (FNAE, 2018), pre-primary curriculum (FNAE, 2014a) and basic education curriculum (FNAE, 2014b) is intended to form a cohesive whole. The pre-primary curriculum makes it clear where responsibility lies,

“The goal is that each child’s learning path from early childhood education and care to pre-primary and further on to basic education is a flexible continuum founded on the needs of the child. Systematic leadership promoting competence and cooperation among personnel in pre-primary education units and on the level of the education provider has a significant role in this.” (FNAE, 2014a, p. 16)

While leadership (managers and lead teachers) are responsible for “promoting competence”, it is ultimately every practitioner who is accountable for ensuring that children follow this learning path by being properly prepared by pre-primary education for school. Thus, alongside the cooperation and joint responsibility, lies a second discourse of individualised responsibility. This is not realised through professional performance being judged by children’s individual attainment, but through governmentality. The accountability system relies on every practitioner governing the self to be cooperative, participatory and involved. It is impossible for a practitioner to work alone, evaluating and developing goals and actions in isolation. Every practitioner must act in accordance with the evaluation guidelines (Vlasov et. al., 2019), as a team. To fail to do so is to be responsible for the failure of the whole team to address issues in the mandated manner. In this convoluted manner, individualised responsibility is to performatively act as part of the team; for one person to fail to do so would have consequences for the success of everyone. The metaphor of the panopticon where every practitioner keeps their colleagues under surveillance to ensure they are participating and contributing to the evaluation processes reveals how neoliberalism works alongside the social democratic accountability framework to hold individuals responsible. Ultimately, practitioners are held accountable for producing school (and future) ready children.

In Finland discourses of normative and non-normative participation and inclusion are evident in policy and I observed during my data-gathering. Evaluation and self-evaluation are the means by which practitioners hold themselves accountable and are held accountable by children, parents and state authorities (discussed in more

detail in the next chapter). In this section, the normative construction of the school-ready child is discussed. This may be considered a surprising discourse to find in research conducted in Finland, but here, I propose that, in a manner consistent with Finnish culture, Pre-primary practitioners can be identified as acting to prepare children for school and ECEC practitioners prepare children more generally for the future. This observation concurs with Kangas and Ukkonen-Mikkola (2021) who argue that despite reforms in Finnish pre-school curricula, an underlying schoolification and test-driven perspective is present in teachers' perspectives.

The neoliberal construction of the individualised child as preparing for the future is present in policy.

“The societal impacts of early childhood education and care also include it’s importance in laying the foundation for the knowledge and skills needed on the future school path and in the workplace and the competitiveness of the nation investing in ECEC in a global world” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 65)

This is one of the few places in the three policies where the discourses of investment in ECEC for the preparation for school and the workplace is clearly elucidated. Human capital theory, whereby the skills and knowledge of individuals and communities are recognised and valued through the lens of economics, is visible in this statement.

Similarly, the construction of the child as developmental, within cognitive and social frameworks is reproduced in the following statement,

“Participation in high-quality early childhood education and care can be proven to also have a positive from the viewpoint of children’s cognitive and social development and families’ quality of life.” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 65).

Brandt and Suonpa (2020) find that children are required to begin to take responsibility for their behaviour in the group, and conform in ways which, in Finnish society, are seen to be central to their economic success in the future. Evaluating the impact of ECEC is admitted to be “rather challenging” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 65). At the heart of the guidelines, an increase in human capital is a key impact intended and hoped for as a result of investment in early childhood education and care. However, the discourse of human capital is opaque in the ECEC and pre-primary curricula, but, once the intentions of the evaluation guidelines are recognised, the presence of the human capital discourse is easier to discern.

Human capital in the form of self-regulation appeared to hold a place of particular importance in the settings. Veijalainen et. al. (2019) identify good self-regulation as being linked to persistence, while poor self-regulation is linked to withdrawal, or strategies like giving up or abandoning the situation. Therefore, this Finnish study identifies the cultural discourse of persistence that underpins self-regulation. Self-regulation has many beneficial outcomes, according to the guidelines. Most significant are future success on the study path and in (working) life and inclusion (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p.66). Related to this, the ECEC states,

“Children are helped in expressing and regulating their emotions. Children’s emotional skills improve as they practice perceiving, acknowledging and naming emotions. Children are also guided to respect and protect their own and others’ bodies.” (FNAE, 2018, p. 26)

The Pre-primary curriculum states,

“Good interpersonal relationships and their important to mental well-being are discussed. In daily situations, children practice building friendships and taking others into account, and recognising and regulating their emotions.” (FNAE, 2014a, p. 43)

Thus, although the dominant desired outcome is that of the social discourse of participation and involvement of the child, both in the present and the future, there is a neoliberal individualisation discourse also present. This is particularly visible in the phrase,

“This requires skills and a desire in the individual to participate in the activities of the community and trust in their own possibilities of making a difference” (FNAE, 2018, p. 24).

This phrase is redolent of the Panopticon, with its self-regulating individuals acting as a result of internalised ideology that is reproduced as if it were a self-generated desire and is experienced as such. The task of ECEC and Pre-primary education

therefore is to encourage and instil this desire while children are young. This prepares the ground for the neoliberal individual who self-regulates without questioning the discourses they embody and reproduce. The “ideal” child is therefore one who is participatory and involved in their community. This statement is therefore indicative of both the individualisation of neoliberalism and the participation and communitarianism of social democracy and is an example of the intertwined nature of the two ideologies. I observed that self-regulation and participation were the two skills most addressed in group meetings and group lessons. This is the performative role that children are required to fulfil, both as a member of the ECEC community and as preparation for the school and eventually the work community they are being prepared to step into (Sevón, Mustola and Alasuutari, 2024). I argue that there are conflicting discourses about the role and value of childhood at play. These include the protected nature of early childhood, with no common aims pitted against the role of early years education to prepare children for formal schooling and the future.

Self-regulation is a key area of the children’s development where ECEC and pre-primary practitioners invest their time and resources. Pre-school teacher Ilona told me,

“I think social skills are their biggest first, kind of, important thing in the pre-school. That they know how to treat other children nicely, that would be the big hope. That makes it a lot easier for us if they already have that as a kind of established sense that they know not to hurt each other and [...] take other

people's presence in account. [...] and learning to take their turn, that it's not always an urgent thing so they have that sense of themselves and others".

Aino, the lead teacher in the 3-5 group also focussed on skills that could be described as self-regulation,

"those social skills and playing with friends skills and these "thank you" and "I'm sorry" and "could you please come to me" and this is use of good magic words".

During my data-collection in all three settings and in every group, I observed more lessons that concentrated on teaching recognising and controlling emotions than on any other topic. Each group used their own programmes, with examples of emotional regulation resources including red and green bears, trolls with different expressions and photo cards. I observed during play times that when children had an argument, they were coached in how to recognise and name the emotions they were feeling, how to calm themselves and how to have a conversation with the other child. These performative rituals of the good member of the community were enacted by teachers supporting children in learning them and in children internalising and using the skills, thereby preparing children for both the transition to school and more generally for their future. The individualised skills of self-regulation require the child to view themselves as responsible for their own actions and be held accountable.

One day I observed two children in the 3-5 year olds' room had got into an argument at the start of lunch.

“Observed two children have a fight, brought out of classroom where lunch was happening. Angry with each other and adult who brought them out. Another adult took one child. Focus was on calming down, talking about situation, understanding feelings. Children said sorry to each other and went back to lunch feeling better. No sanctions or blame. Children have opportunity to learn from experience without feeling bad or negative about themselves.”

I argue that these examples are indicative of the type of self-regulation instilled by practitioners, to fulfil their obligation to ensure the “increase in human capital” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p.66). On the surface, learning to regulate emotions and recognise other’s feelings is not consistent with the concept of human capital. However, in the context of Finland, where cooperation and community feeling is part of the work culture, I contend that these skills are central to an individual’s employability, and therefore, is necessary for teachers to instil in children in order to increase future human capital, including being ready for school.

Pre-primary teacher Sofia told me it was pointless focussing on academic work when the children are not able to dress themselves. In the playground, while we supervised children playing (in minus 18 degrees!) another practitioner told me that in her opinion the most important concepts for children to learn were to get on with friends, be part of the group, express emotions, form opinions and have discussions. These goals reflect the intended outcomes of the ECEC and Pre-primary curricula,

“Interaction skills and the ability to express oneself and understand others”
(FNAE, 2014a, p. 21),

and

“In joint discussions, children develop their skills in asking questions about,
making conclusions of and evaluating what they hear” (FNAE, 2014a, p. 38).

Aino explained how she drew on her ECEC (3-5 year olds) children’s interests to support their activities together, and thus their interaction skills and abilities to understand each other. After a planned music session, a group of children asked if they could continue to play with the instruments. She left them to play and went to a different room,

“I came back to the place where they had trained [practiced] these songs ...
they had put [made] the stage there. There was one guitar player, one drum,
one sticks and so on and they said, ‘We have a band!’”

Aino supported this little group by recording their performance and making the instruments available to them for private “mini-sessions”. Her evaluation of this anecdote was that the children built on the knowledge they had from the music lessons to form a band, learn songs and perform them without support from an adult using skills related to cooperation and interaction. Aino can be perceived as having

fulfilled her performative role of ensuring these culturally vital skills were learnt through her support. It is possible that the testing that the pre-primary practitioners did at the beginning of the year creates a downward pressure on the ECEC practitioners to have ensured children reach the end of ECEC at the required levels of development.

These statements suggest a development of skills that construct a child who knows and can performatively fulfil the cultural and social norms of Finnish culture and society. A normative pre-school child is thus constructed as one who is both independent and cooperative, with skills in critical thinking. Therefore, without employing the term school-readiness, the curricula do appear to have a role to play in preparing children for the future.

Practitioners held themselves accountable for this through the process of self-evaluation, as intended by the evaluation guidelines which states,

“One objective of self-evaluation is to help staff examine their own pedagogical activities in keeping with the objectives that steer early childhood education and care.” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 24).

As ECEC teacher Aino told me, this was a process she did all the time, thereby performatively demonstrating her status as an experienced teacher who knows the objectives of the ECEC. This is an example of governmentality, whereby Aino had internalised and reproduced the discourse of reflexive self-evaluation to examine her

pedagogical activities, not just because the policy demands it but because she believed it as if it were her own thoughts. She further extended this through the processes of weekly team meetings and the informal conversations with her colleagues where she, as the room lead encouraged them to extend their self-evaluation. Therefore, the process of self-evaluation can be seen as a Panoptical (Foucault, 1966) exercise with all practitioners self-governing but also watching their fellows to ensure they all fulfilled the requirements. Thus, the example of children who learn to self-regulate can be seen as the production of normative human capital through the hidden power dynamics of the discourse of self-evaluation which imposes and is reproduced in practice through activities with the children.

However, during interviews with pre-school teachers a separate discourse of preparation for school was highly visible. While not apparent in the curriculum, Ilona and Aurora referred to the concept of preparation for school as a part of their task as pre-primary practitioners. Ilona said,

“No, no, there are no requirements. They learn to read and write and school and they learn numbers at school. So it’s just preparing them, giving them that base”

Aurora told me that one of the key aims of the Pre-primary year was for children to “learn to sit, listen and answer questions, ready for school”. The type of behaviour that Aurora describes is that of the docile and obedient body (Foucault, 1979) more associated with neoliberal style education discussed in the English chapters. The

construction of children as obediently sitting, listening and putting their hands up to answer the teacher's questions appears to contradict the construction of participatory, agentic children who are active in their learning. The influence of international discourses about children may have guided Aurora's comment about the type of behaviour she was encouraging, or it may come from another source. Regardless of where this attitude came from, it represents a conflict between the Social Democrat aims of the curriculum and the neoliberal discourses visible and being acted upon in the setting.

Ilona also referred to children being prepared for school,

“Yes, and learn to be able to manage at school, and, I think that's the goal of the pre-school then is to get the children school-ready, but school-ready in quite a broad sense. Not so much in a can they read or write because it's not necessary.”

Ilona described some of the behaviours she was encouraging as part of this school-readiness,

“learning to be together, giving them little skills, like learning to put your hand up when you want a turn those skills of working in a group but being independent as well. So that would be our focus rather than the academic skills.”

Aurora's and Ilona's statements suggest that there is a kind of blindness in Finnish ECEC that has categorised "school-readiness" as specifically academic. Their statements show that there is preparation of behaviours that schools require. The use of the word "just" indicates that, to Ilona, the "little" skills of cooperation and independence are not onerous goals, yet they are skills that she and her colleagues instilled in the children to get them ready for formal schooling. Despite there being no "common aims" (FNAE, 2014a, p. 16) in the curriculum, the practitioners have a common set of skills that they focus on teaching the children and hold each other accountable for, through the accountability framework of evaluation. Therefore, I contend that the ECEC and pre-primary curricula are productive of the discourse of preparation for the future that the pre-primary practitioners specifically call school-readiness, constructing the children as being in preparation and constraining them to behave in culturally appropriate ways that to them appear "natural". The Pre-primary curriculum states,

"A key mission for pre-primary education is to promote the child's prerequisites for growth, development and learning. Activities are planned with the child at the centre of the purpose of strengthening the child's positive self-image and perception of him or herself as a learner." (FNAE, 2014a, p. 14)

Practitioners are subjectified, through policy, training and discourses, and their thoughts, beliefs and actions are equally constrained.

Analysis of the key policies show that both social democratic and neoliberal ideologies can be identified, intertwined in the policies and in practitioners' accounts of practice. The social democratic ideologies shape the participatory, democratic elements of the curricula, and are seen in practice in an emphasis on social learning. Social learning is identified as being both learning what behaviour is culturally acceptable, such as putting the good of the group before oneself, and in styles of learning such as working cooperatively. The activities are shaped through social pedagogy and the priorities are learning to be social, through social actions. While pre-academic skills are a part of the curriculum, they are viewed through the lens of social pedagogy, that is, learning anything is a vehicle for social learning first and pre-academic skills as a consequence of that social learning. Woven into this social democratic stance are neoliberal perspectives. Children are described as learning developmentally. The practitioners drew on universal developmental tests to ascertain their levels of development at the start of the year to identify those who needed more support. Practitioners therefore feel responsible for the normative development of children. In the policies, the construction of children switches between communitarian, group-oriented children and the individualised, developmental child. Children are referred to when describing cooperative play and learning, participation and the group; the child is referred to when describing development, particularly issues with development. In terms of accountability, practitioners are positioned as responsible for ensuring group cooperation, both between children and between themselves as colleagues and positioned as personally responsible for their role in being and ensuring cooperation. Simultaneously practitioners are individually responsible for the normative

development of children. Therefore, governmentality ensures that discourses are reproduced through the performative routines and rituals of weekly planning and daily practice. The metaphor of the panopticon, with each practitioner self-governing and keeping their colleagues under surveillance to ensure each is working cooperatively and for the good of the group is hard to resist. Similarly, the child and the children are subject to surveillance, ensuring that they as a cooperative group and as developmental individuals are behaving, learning and developing according to normative standards. The issues of surveillance, normative development and evaluation as tools of accountability are explored in the next chapter.

Having identified the complex and conflicting ideologies that shape Finnish ECEC policy and practice, the following section considers the place of early childhood in Finnish society. The guidelines express the values that describe ECEC quality evaluation (Vlasov et. al., 2019, pp. 41-42). Four values are expounded: the intrinsic value of childhood; cultural values; equality, equity and diversity; a sustainable way of living. These four values form the foundation by which the evaluation framework is understood. They are therefore indicative of what the educational intentions of Finnish early childhood education is. This section interrogates the definitions, drawing on interviews and observations to explore how they construct the educational intentions of Finnish early childhood policy.

7.2 The Educational Intentions of ECEC Viewed through the Underlying Values

The four underlying values of ECEC in Finland comprise: *the intrinsic value of childhood, cultural values, equality, equity and diversity and a sustainable way of*

living. These values are in line with the Constitution of Finland (1999), the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (2018) and the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2018). Finnish ECEC policy takes account of the international conventions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)(1989) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)(2007). Therefore, the values are positioned within national and international legal foundations that support the foundational values of Finland. They underpin the accountability discourse and evaluation framework by which practitioners and children are held responsible for their inclusion in every activity and developmental action and goal identified.

The concept of values, like quality, can be viewed as neoliberal. Many of the same arguments that were used to critique the concept of quality in the English policies are pertinent in the Finnish use of the term values. The underlying values of ECEC regulate the accountability discourse. The indicators (see Appendix 9 for Process-related factors that describe ECEC quality and the indicators describing them) that form the framework of what practices are held accountable are underpinned by the values, which, I contend, are neoliberal in their construction of the individualised child. In the next section I analyse the values, linking policy to practice and drawing on the arguments above to show that both social democrat and neoliberal ideologies can be seen to influence practitioners' opinions and practices, identifying conflicts where they arise.

Values underpin activities, care, teaching, learning, leadership, behaviour and many more entities that are evaluated through the national, local and setting-based accountability framework. Despite constant use of the term there is no concrete definition of what is meant by the term. The guidelines indicate that practitioners must define what they mean by the term, “it [the term values] should be defined and its links to practical activities should be demonstrated” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 41).

The intrinsic value of childhood

The intrinsic value of the very nature of a thing, in this case childhood, is challenged by taking a Foucauldian perspective. The concept of childhood having an intrinsic value is to ascribe it with universal characteristics. Foucault’s conception of cultural discourses means that the value of childhood in the ECEC can be recognised as the dominant values of Finnish society. Using this theoretical standpoint, the values that are ascribed to childhood, that include “promoting social justice, creating preconditions for open democracy and wellbeing, and preventing children’s social exclusion” (Vlasov, et. al., 2019, p. 41) are cultural discourses that dominate because they have become so embedded as to assume the veneer of naturalness (Foucault, 1979). Practitioners are therefore held accountable for ensuring that their evaluations provide evidence that concepts like democracy and exclusion are considered in activities and development of the environment.

The social democratic ideologies of social justice, open democracy and the prevention of social exclusion embody this discourse. Aino explained that her focus in the 3-5 year old group was “a very happy and healthy child, in a safe context here”

which has echoes of the guidelines requirement that children receive support “for their holistic growth, learning and wellbeing” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 41). The intrinsic value of childhood is realised through “full membership in community and inclusion” (Ibid). Every setting used group meetings to ensure this, and I observed different ways of encouraging community and inclusion depending on the group room. In setting 3 the pre-school children designed a chart to encourage each other to achieve their personal target. In setting 2, I spent a day in the baby room (age 10 -18 months). I observed how the teachers included the children in as many daily life activities as they could. For instance, they had a shared kitchen with the toddler room, equipped with wooden learning towers so that children who could stand were able to safely help prepare snacks for the group at the counter. This activity was remarkable to me, as an experienced baby-room practitioner, to see a child in a working kitchen was notable.

My initial reaction was of surprise, reflecting my experience as an English practitioner where we had to ensure children could not access kitchens or kitchen areas due to Ofsted and EYFS safety regulations. My second reaction was of envy and delight imagining the opportunities for enjoyable activities that this space would afford children and practitioners. My observations on the day were of how this space afforded the whole group opportunities to experience “holistic growth, learning and well-being” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 41). In further reflections I considered how these activities contributed to the realisation of the social discourses that create performative roles of social cooperation and participation that are impelled by the behaviours that are considered culturally normative. My final reflection includes the

observation that this would also provide an area where developmental fine and gross motor skills could be observed, monitored and recorded in children's personal records which feed into the preparation for the future discourse, by viewing development as a linear and universal trajectory towards school and ultimately work readiness. Reflexive consideration revealed initially the differences between England and Finland, but finally allowed me to see how the visible social sharing of a space also contained the neoliberal developmental agenda and therefore the commonalities.

The concept of the intrinsic value of childhood therefore contains two conflicting discourses. The idea of the good childhood here and now suggests an ECEC experience without pressures from the future. The discourse of preparation, seen in the right to quality ECEC, suggests a positivistic construction of childhood, where the task is to instil the correct skills and attitudes to ensure preparation for the future. These skills are both social democratic and neoliberal. Therefore, the neoliberal discourse of the development of human capital is opaque but present. Social democracy presents a more complex picture with both the value of childhood for itself, implying no pressure and also the preparation for the future of the participatory, democratic citizen. Educational intentions are thus both preparatory and immediate. Practitioners are held accountable for children becoming able to participate and the development of human capital through the acquiring of measurable skills and knowledge. The construction of childhood as having intrinsic value is supported by the idea that cultural values should be taught to young children to enable them to participate in their community.

Cultural values

The construction of children as both individualised and participatory supports the aim of ECEC of children being agentic members of their community, both in the present and as they grow older. The guidelines state,

“Early childhood education and care support children’s growth as human beings and this aim is described especially through cultural values, which include striving for truth, goodness, beauty, justice and peace” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 42).

There is therefore an element of preparation in this statement These abstract values are embedded at a deep level in Finnish society. Cultural values are,

“manifested in our attitudes to ourselves, other people, the environment and information, in the ways we act and in our willingness to do what is right.”
(Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 42)

This description of how attitudes are manifested is an example of how discourses work in the individual, being internalised and reproduced as if they were new each time. The values underpin everything in the curriculum and are intended to be included in every activity and every evaluation. Therefore, these characteristics and behaviours that neoliberalism would characterise as personal are in social pedagogy characterised as public, teachable attitudes that are beneficial to society and are

evaluated as part of the accountability framework. Thus, practitioners are made responsible for children acquiring these attributes (Saleem, Kausar and Deeba, 2021).

In Setting 2, the children in the 3-5 group were learning about feelings. A group of 11 children came together for their morning lesson and discussed different scenarios. The aim of the lesson was to think of what children could say or do if they found themselves in challenging situations, including how to support others. This lesson embodied cultural values, encouraging children to think about how their attitudes towards themselves and others had consequences, including positive ones such as justice and peace. This lesson was an example of how the dominant discourses of cultural values were so integrated into practitioners' views of the world that alternative ways of addressing difficult situations were impossible. Performatively, the practitioners were required to give this kind of lesson to ensure they were perceived as "good" teachers. The format of the lesson, with a story, a discussion where every child was encouraged to contribute, practitioners modelling appropriate language and action and children role playing enforced the performative roles that children were required to step in to become "good" members of the community.

Ilona, discussed with me how they deal with difficult behaviour. She said,

"I think that some of the more challenging situations that I can think of are trying to coerce those children who find that [putting the group's needs before your own], that would be the focus for them. Their targets, as it were, would be this kind of more conforming behaviour but it is not done in a

behaviouralist way. They are given the tools. A lot of modelling. A lot of good modelling of tools in order to see then, how is an appropriate way to deal with this situation, and work on feelings and identifying feelings.”

This example from Setting 1 is typical of how all the settings were observed to use similar ways of addressing the common issues that young children have in learning to work in a group. It is compelling that Ilona, who is not a native Finn and therefore has a partial outsider’s view (Zou, 2023), uses the word “coerce” to describe how children are managed. Ilona’s awareness of the discourses of social belonging are visible to her because they do not constitute the discourses that are second nature to her. She now occupied a fluid position (Bruskin, 2019) between the neoliberal discourses of her native education system that she trained and was a young practitioner in, and the Finnish discourses of socialisation that she had worked in for fifteen years.

This example also demonstrates an inequality between children and adults. Whilst the intention is that children have the right to participate, including in setting their own targets, in practice, this right is removed when a child is “challenging”. Ilona used the word “given” when describing how children are taught to deal with difficult situations. Tools are given, demonstrating the power that adults have over children in choosing how and what should be learned. Therefore, cultural values can be seen to be imposed on children through the power that adults hold. Cultural values support the educational intention found in the intrinsic value of childhood, of preparation for the future by imbuing children with the values they are expected to espouse as adults.

The next section takes these arguments further, examining how concepts such as participation are impacted by how well practitioners understand values such as equity, equality and diversity.

Equity, equality and diversity

The intention of the guidelines is not simply equality, whereby the same opportunities are offered to all, as is found in a neoliberal rendering of the issue, but equity as well. Equity requires that responses to children's needs should be differentiated according to their circumstances (Blaise and Taylor, 2012). Equity is positioned as ensuring equality, while participation is seen to be a consequence of equity and equality (Ahonen, 2021).

“In early childhood education and care, all children must be guaranteed equitable opportunities to develop their skills and make choices independently of reasons associated with, for instance, gender, origin, cultural background or other reasons related to the person.” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 42).

Kangas, Lastikka and Outi (2023) argue that despite the use of the terms equity, equality and diversity, and the guideline's contention that the “preconditions for cooperation with families based on trust, respect and openness also include recognising and acknowledging the diversity of families” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 42) there is no mention nor definition of inclusion as a concept in Finnish education

legislation. They contend that this omission causes variations in practice and understanding. Research (Frankenberg et. al., 2019; Millei, 2019) suggests that inclusive practices and pedagogical tools such as hearing, understanding and creating shared meaning are not strong in Finnish ECEC and require practitioners to be supported in adding these to their competencies. The evaluation guidelines are limited to children being guaranteed the equitable opportunities above. Therefore, the discussion that follows focusses on examples of children being given these opportunities with the recognition that inclusion as a concept of value is not yet a part of the Finnish discourse of early years education. This is important because, as Millei (2019) points out, this has an impact on the activities and environments that practitioners evaluate themselves developing.

Setting 1 had 2 children who spoke Finnish as a second language in a group of 18 in the pre-school room. In the 3-5 group in Setting 2, seven languages were spoken in a group of 21. In Setting 3 as a whole, 45% of children spoke Finnish as a second language. In Settings 2 and 3, efforts were made to include the children using their own languages and to include activities that introduced relevant Finnish, where-as Setting 1 was more focussed on English as a lingua franca, partially due to their being a English immersion setting. The following paragraphs give examples of how settings took account of equity, equality and diversity.

In Setting 3 in the Pre-school room, a game was played where the teacher, Pihla, directed one child to sit next to, in front of behind another. This introduced positional language, which Pihla had found many children did not yet know. Therefore, although

it would be expected that 6 year olds would know these terms, Pihla considered it important that she concentrate on the basic vocabulary of Finnish. Also in this classroom, signs and symbols were used to allow the children independence. Part of the group meeting was to make the timetable for the day, using velcroed laminated cards with pictures and Finnish vocabulary. Therefore, the card for rest after lunch had a picture of a bed and the word “säinky” below. This activity was intended to fulfil the intention of the guidelines (Vlasov et. al., 2019) to make it possible for children to make decision independent of their origin or cultural background, suggesting a discourse of participation being based on children learning Finnish values and language. Pihla and Aava had reproduced this intention through the provision of many activities and elements in the environment that supported this learning of Finnish language, customs and culture. They framed these activities as the result of listening to the children, to ascertain what they needed to know and what they wanted to know. The circular nature of the evaluation cycle confirmed their framing of assimilation as equality and equity creating more participation and thus, from an accountability perspective, they felt vindicated.

However, children are not in a position of power and therefore, are more likely to reproduce the dominant discourse, of assimilating to Finnish culture, or for their rejection of this position to be interpreted as non-normative (Millei, 2012). Research shows that listening can be a hidden exercise in power, whereby children are impelled to act in particular ways by adapting to adults’ opinions and decisions (Millei 2012; Moran-Ellis and Sünker 2018; Raby 2014). In fact, listening, and more widely participating, can be seen to impose a type of self-governance upon the children.

Sevón, Mustova and Alasuutari (2024) identify this kind of participation as adult-defined; far from allowing children to voice their opinions and make decisions, these practices shape children's understanding of themselves and their place in the ECEC and wider society. The imposition of normative participation has the impact of disallowing alternative ways of participating, whether resulting from disability, or issues such as lack of Finnish, or coming from other cultural backgrounds that have different styles of participation (Arvola et. al., 2020). Therefore, group meetings, practitioner observations and the planning that follows them form a kind of panopticon by which children's behaviour and thoughts are shaped and governed until they learn how to discipline themselves according to normative standards, or risk being excluded. Thus, the concept of participation runs the risk of being prioritised over equality by failing to ensure equity, reflecting international discourses that emphasise performative participation over practical equity and equality (Kettunen and Prokkola, 2022). This type of practitioner response exemplifies the adult-defined possibilities that children have, or do not have to participate. The findings of this study confirm Piskur et. al.'s (2022) conclusion that participation, inclusion and related issues are not yet well enough defined in policy in Nordic curricula and guidance. The educational intention of equality, equity and diversity can therefore be characterised as assimilation of cultural norms and into Finnish society in preparation for a participatory future.

A Sustainable way of living

A sustainable way of living is described as,

“social, cultural, economic and ecological dimensions are also stressed in early childhood education and care. Early childhood education and care support the child’s growth towards ecosocial knowledge and ability, allowing people to understand ecological sustainability as the precondition for social sustainability and the realisation of human rights” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 42)

While this value is one of four key values proposed by the guidelines, the limited amount of time that I had in Finnish settings did not give me an opportunity to observe this value being implemented. This supports the findings of Valkonen and Furu (2023) who concluded that despite it being a key component of the evaluation values, it is not well supported at a practice level. This would suggest that while the concept of sustainability is well established at a policy level, it has not yet become a discourse at a societal level. The concepts of sustainability and sustainable development are criticised as being too vague to be useful (Ärlemalm-Hagsér and Samuelson, 2017). In addition, the concept of sustainable development is criticised as being aligned to neoliberalism, (Wolff et. al., 2017), whereby individuals are dedicated to developing and investing in themselves and their immediate environment, excluding constructions of the self as part of community and the wider environment. Furu et. al. (2023) suggest that Finnish policies do not explicitly make links in practice between factors such as resilience, which is well embedded in policy and practice, and sustainability which is not yet well applied.

Both the ECEC (FNAE, 2018) and the Pre-primary (FNAE, 2014a) curricula have **Environmental education** as part of the Exploring and interacting with my environment joint objective for instruction. The intention of these objectives is to,

“strengthen children’s relationship with nature and ability to act responsibly in nature as well as to guide them towards a sustainable way of living” (FNAE, 2014a, p. 41)

This is achieved through,

“Making field trips to natural and built environments and exploring the surroundings are an important part of ECEC. Through positive learning experiences, children learn to enjoy nature and the local surroundings, which strengthens their relationship with nature.” (FNAE, 2018, pp. 49-50)

While the three settings had large outdoor areas or gardens, I did not observe children going outside with the intention of fulfilling these criteria. This finding supports Furu et. al.’s (2023) conclusion that more is needed to support practitioners and settings in consistently meeting these requirements. This raises an issue about the effectiveness of the evaluation guidelines. From an accountability perspective, it would be expected for all settings to implement evaluation in all areas of the curriculum. If it is possible for some settings or groups to choose activities from only some areas of the curriculum, this would suggest that self-evaluation is not as robust as tool as the guidelines would hope.

The educational intention of a sustainable way of living can be recognised as having the goal of integrating sustainability into the culture of the ECEC. This is a cultural discourse that is powerful in Finland (Rovanto and Finne, 2023); the inclusion of it in educational discourses is found to be strong in policy yet weak in practice.

Nonetheless it indicates a cultural discourse that is important for preparing children for the future.

The four underlying values (the intrinsic value of childhood, cultural values, equity, equality and diversity and a sustainable way of living) of the evaluation guidelines (Vlasov et. al., 2019) are given much emphasis throughout the policy. They are referred to 35 times, most often as “underlying values” and are described as being “in line with the general underlying values of Finnish society” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 41). Furthermore, that “Values guide all activities and express our idea of a good early childhood education and care, and even a good life and good society” (Ibid). However, despite the weight given to the concept of values, they are given only a short paragraph each, and as discussed above, they suggest their meanings, rather than clearly elucidate them. The values are thus found to contain contradictions and conflicts that have the unintended outcomes of creating tensions in constructions of children, practitioners, activities, environments and evaluation processes. Children are constructed as malleable and developmental, both in terms of the acquisition of skills and knowledge for school and in terms of culturally acceptable behaviours. Thus, policy produces the intentions, practitioners reproduce them and

performatively teach, plan and evaluate to ensure the children absorb and reproduce them in their play, learning and behaviour.

The four values that guide ECEC quality evaluation are constructive of the educational intentions of early years education in Finland. These intentions coalesce around the idea that early childhood education has the intention of preparing children for the future. This preparation is visible in different guises. Social democratic ideology constructs this as preparation for a participatory, cooperative future, while neoliberalism focussed on an individualised preparations through the accumulation of developmental skills and knowledge. Therefore, I argue that the intentions of the Finnish ECEC is to produce children who are both school-ready and future-ready.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to critically explore the ideologies and educational intentions of Finnish early childhood education and care policies and the way these shape the accountability discourse of ECEC. Overall, I conclude that at the heart of Finnish policy is a conflict between two ideologies that is visible in every aspect of policy that I investigated. While the different aspects of ideologies, educational intentions and values have been addressed separately in this chapter, they are intertwined and act together. Even where conflicts between attitudes, practices and intentions were identified, they were often found to act in concert. The nature of discourses is they are experienced as internalised truths and reproduced without awareness, thus explaining how practitioners were able to make statements with contradictory ideas without recognising them as such and act without perceiving the dualism.

A sense of societal belonging and participation is highly valued as culturally Finnish. These attributes are reflected in the policies, with cooperation, evaluation of activities and environments and value ascribed to childhood in the here and now evident as priorities in curricula and the guidelines. However, alongside social democratic discourses, neoliberal discourses were also evident, both in policies and in practitioners' attitudes and practices. These discourses made their way into policy via the adoption of the UNCRC. The influence of international organisations such as the OECD and the World Bank were found to be pervasive in influencing Finnish policy in educational intentions, such as positioning ECEC as an important investment in the future as a producer of human capital and reduction on state reliance. While this explanation of the importance of ECEC is somewhat given a Finnish veneer of educating children to become members of society in a cooperative, participatory way, this does not replace, or hide the intention for children to become human capital.

Therefore, two ideological perspectives are identifiable in policy, with two educational intentions that are interwoven throughout the curricula and guidelines. However, while the social democratic intentions are highly visible, the neoliberal intentions are less so. The social democratic intentions are two-fold. The first is to give children a happy childhood in the here and now. Children are valued as they are and their growing participation in the daily running of their environment is supported and encouraged. Peer relationships and interactions with adults are supported in a systematic way, for the child to learn to self-regulate and become part of society. The

second intention is to prepare children for a democratic, participatory future, where they are prepared for employment, by developing transversal competences that will make learning new skills and knowledge possible in the future. These intentions constitute a regime of truth about the role of early years education in the child's life and as of value to society. Conflicting with this commutarian educational intention are the neoliberal human capital intentions. Founded in a framework of universal developmentalism and individualised academic attainment, education is positioned as an investment in the future to create greater human capital. This human capital is intended to find its expression in higher levels of study, qualification and employment. These intentions equally form a regime of truth about the role of early years education as constructive of the nation's future prosperity.

The values that underpin these ideological and educational intentions are conflicting. The evaluation guidelines set out the four values that underpin the evaluation framework (the intrinsic value of childhood, cultural values, equality, equity and diversity and a sustainable way of living). However, I contend that while values are referred to throughout the document, their discussion and explanation is very brief and there is little guidance given as to how to embed them into practice. My discourse analysis of the values revealed that they have the educational intention of producing children who are future ready. This readiness is comprised of a neoliberal school-readiness construction, which is found in normative developmental models of growing and learning and a social democratic intention to produce children who have absorbed and reproduced cultural values of cooperation and self-regulation ready to be participatory adults as full members of communities.

Accountability is found to rest in two contrasting and conflicting areas. Practitioners are variously constructed as individually accountable for delivering the curriculum and performatively responsible for children's progress, or as responsible for acting as a trusted, cooperative and participatory professional. Where practitioners experience the greatest tension is at the point at which the curricula and guidelines fail to deliver advice and support. This study concludes that this weak point is where-ever a non-normative construction of development, learning, participation or outcome is identified. Consequently, the curricula and guidelines are only able to support normative experiences of children, groups and environments. Where non-normative development, participation and cooperation exist, practitioners turn to neoliberal practices. These are manifest as turning from group evaluations to individual assessment of children; assessing against academic and developmental norms as a tool to ensure normative development; pathologising non-normative development as located within the child, rather than as a societal issue. A consequence of the frailty of the accountability framework is that children are subject to a high level of constant surveillance. Far from the educational intention that children are free to experiment and learn according to their interests, children are permitted this freedom only so long as they conform to developmental and educational norms. To ensure they are not stepping outside of these boundaries, practitioners are compelled to observe constantly.

The construction of practitioners and children is addressed in more depth in the next chapter; nonetheless, this chapter can offer broad outlines of the competing

constructions as a result of the dual ideological and educational intentions and outcomes critically explored in this chapter. Practitioners are performatively required to be gentle, calm, sensitive, professional, trustworthy and cooperative and simultaneously performatively individually accountable for delivering a universal, developmental curriculum. Children are found to be both valued for themselves in the here and now, learning cooperatively and as a part of a community, while also being constructed as incomplete adults who are nonetheless (and somewhat contradictorily) required to take responsibility for their own learning by acting with agency and independence.

In this chapter, conflict between the ideologies of neoliberalism and social democracy filter down to constructions of practitioners and children and are constructive of practice. This causes tension for practitioners who are impelled to swing between different performative versions of themselves to fulfil the various accountability requirements. This tension is spilled down to children who are constructed in conflicting ways depending on how normative their development is judged to be. Ultimately, the tension between competing ideologies, educational intentions and values is found to be where non-normative development is assessed. Whether the issues are with environments, children or practitioners, the intention of the accountability discourse to address these problems through evaluation of activities and environments is found to be problematic. In the next chapter, the impact of the ideological conflict, educational intentions and intended outcomes are explored through the experiences of the practitioners.

Chapter 8. The Effects of the Accountability Discourse on Educational Practices

Introduction

This chapter addresses the research questions, “How is the discourse of accountability reproduced in policy and practice in early childhood education in Finland?” and “What is the impact of the accountability discourse on the educational practices in early years education in Finland?” The accountability framework of Finnish ECEC is that of evaluation with the intended outcome,

“to improve the quality of early childhood education and care, support continuous improvement and development of the activities, and promote the fulfilment of the tasks and achievement of the objectives set for early childhood education and care.” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 13).

As the tasks and objectives of Finnish ECEC were addressed in detail in the previous chapter they are summarised here, briefly. ECEC is a mandatory, goal-oriented curriculum which is a part of the Finnish education system and an important stage on the child’s path of growing and learning. It promotes lifelong learning and equity in education as a systematic whole consisting of education, instruction and care with a particular emphasis on pedagogy. The primary focus should be the best interests of the child. These aims are supported by the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (Finlex, (2018), 540/2018).

The previous chapter explored the ideological foundations of the ECEC and found there was a complex and conflicting intertwining of social democracy and neoliberalism. The four values that guide ECEC quality evaluation are *the intrinsic value of childhood, cultural values, equity, equality and diversity and a sustainable way of living*. These were interrogated in the last chapter as the guidelines position them as underpinning the intentions of education in the ECEC. I identified the educational intentions of the ECEC as being preparation for the future. Social democratic discourses constructed this preparation as being for participation as a democratic member of society while neoliberalism was productive of a discourse of school readiness. Both ideologies espoused the discourse of the ECEC as being productive of human capital. These ideologies and educational intentions are supported by the concept of quality which is a contested term used throughout the evaluation guidelines. It is used to justify holding settings, practitioners and children accountable in Finnish ECEC policy (Pihlainen et. al., 2022).

This chapter addresses the issues identified through my Critical Discourse Analysis CDA (Fairclough, 1995). The key themes are *Future Readiness and Human Capital, Quality and The Evaluation Framework*. They are characterised by the conflicts identified in the previous chapter between the ideologies of social democracy and neoliberalism. The theme of future readiness and human capital was addressed to some extent in the previous chapter. In this chapter the interrogation continues by situating it alongside the themes of quality and the evaluation framework. Therefore, the concept of quality, as it is constructed and reproduced in Finnish ECEC is interrogated next.

8.1 Nebulous and unstructured constructions of “quality”

This section explores the concept of quality in Finnish ECEC in order to understand how it is applied to indicators, evaluation and pedagogical documentation, the tools by which quality is determined. The term quality is used 369 times in the Guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education and care (Vlasov et. al., 2019) to describe those practices of pedagogy, activities, documentation and evaluation that are valued and permitted. Quality is underpinned by the concept of “values”, which were discussed in the previous chapter. Values are positioned as “Finnish” and social democratic, but I identified them as being ill-defined and applied, leaving practitioners to turn to neoliberal constructions of school readiness. Indicators (Vlasov et. al., 2019, pp. 71-77) are the means by which quality is determined to have been achieved. Discursively, quality is the way in which practitioners, leaders, parents and children absorb discourses about education and care and reproduce them in practice and policy (Foucault, 1972). However, I find no definition of the term “quality” in any policy documents, leaving practitioners delivering to a concept that they are held accountable for yet is never defined. The implications of this issue are a key focus of this chapter.

Roberts-Holmes and Moss (2021) identify the term “quality” as a key neoliberal concept which allows the state to both impose its will from a distance onto settings, practitioners and children, and demands that they accept responsibility for outcomes by internalising and reproducing discourses of accountability. Therefore, this chapter explores the construction and reproduction of the accountability discourse and its

possible effects on the educational practices through the lens that the contradictory ideologies and intentions impose on practitioners, particularly the problem of quality. Moss contends that the “gravitational pull” (2016, p. 8) of the term “quality” is that it is perceived as an objective term. Neoliberal ideology suggests that “quality” is a concrete characteristic that can be defined and captured with data. This belies the subjective nature of quality, which is that it is cultural and temporal, and as Cornelius (2023) points out, is rooted in global discourses that cause inequalities.

While the difficulty of defining “quality” is acknowledged in the Finnish guidelines, it is also simultaneously negated.

“A value may be nebulous and unstructured as a concept, which is why it should be defined and its links to practical activities should be demonstrated. ECEC values are translated into visible and concrete goals that guide the activities as ECEC quality indicators, through which the operationalisation of values as activities can be ensured.” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 41)

As Dahlberg Moss and Pence, (2013) suggest, it is impossible to make the term encompass subjectivity or multiple perspectives. Attempting to do so, as Vlasov et. al. (2019) do is “a wild goose chase” (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2013, p. 111). The guidelines acknowledge that quality is a difficult concept to define,

“Quality is a relative concept, as it is always connected to not only time but also the society and culture around us and the meanings produced by them”.
(Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 16).

Historical constructions of quality in Finnish ECEC were found to be insufficiently rigorous, leaving too much room for interpretation in a modern, universal curriculum (Alila, 2013). Therefore, the definition of quality is claimed to have been constructed through inclusionary approaches (Pence and Moss, 1994) that Vlasov et. al. (2019) intend to be comprehensively understood because they have been written cooperatively with practitioners. The evaluation guidelines state,

“In this document, the definition of quality is regarded as being formulated in a shared democratic negotiation influenced by the prevailing values of society and the multiple meanings brought to bear on the definition by different parties” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 16)

This constructivist approach draws on the results of reviews of Finnish policy such as Hujala, Fonsén and Elo (2012) and work by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007). Therefore, the guidelines are presented as constructivist and democratic. At its core, the guidelines are intended to facilitate evaluation of the quality of early childhood education and care. However, because the concept of quality is never satisfactorily defined in the guidelines, Dahlberg et. al.’s (2013) contention that the term comes from the positivistic tradition and cannot be made to fit complex, subjective, multiple perspectives is confirmed. The closest the guidelines get to defining quality is,

“In general, quality refers to compliance with requirements” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 16)

This reference to “compliance” is the language of neoliberal governance. As education has been neoliberally reimagined as a process by which children are converted from potential participants in the economy to adults with qualifications and employment, the processes and outcomes of education have come to be judged by indicators that are designated to indicate compliance with “quality” (Moss, 2016). The word compliance has implications for practitioners. There is no direct explanation as to who or what it is to be compliant with the requirements. The opaque nature of terms such as value and quality combined with the vagueness of this, the only statement that addresses the question, leaves practitioners and children subject to discourses of power. Lindh and Mansikka (2023) find that pedagogical documentation, which is the means by which compliance with requirements is proven in Finland, does not have a strictly defined meaning and is therefore interpreted according to context and how the practitioner implements it. Pedagogical documents are consequently representative of the individualisation of both the child and the practitioner. Both are constructed as accountable for the documentation. The practitioner for producing it to reproduce the discourses needed to comply with requirements and the child to fit the normative constructions inherent in “compliance”.

International discourses of accountability in early years education centre on the judgement that quality provision prepares children for school and later life. Finnish ECEC preparation for future life includes “Increase of human capital” by, in particular, making possible “success on study path and in (working) life” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 66). Despite the guidelines and curricula consistently describing holistic growth and societal inclusion as the intended outcomes for ECEC, table 5 (Vlasov et. al, 2019, p. 66) presents the intended impacts of ECEC.

Figure 3. Reproduction of "Table 5 illustrates the different dimension of ECEC impacts (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 66)

	Present	Future
Individual	Children’s quality of life Peer relations Learning new things and skills	Increase of human capital Success on study path and in (working) life Inclusion, citizenship
Society	Men and women have opportunities for maintaining reasonable living conditions and participate in civic life Children’s equal opportunities in education	Increase of human capital Cumulative benefits of investments An equal society in which social inclusion results in civil peace.

Notably, this table is the only place where the term human capital is used in the entire policy. In the individual/future category we see “increase in human capital” is accompanied by “success on study path and in (working) life” and “inclusion, citizenship”. The future impact of early childhood education is reduced to an economic investment hoping for returns through successful future employment, less reliance on the state and democratic inclusion. Democratic inclusion is presented by international organisations such as the World Bank and the OECD as a means by which populations are educated to behave as neoliberal citizens, making choices, taking responsibility for themselves and their families, acting in individualised ways to ensure their own prosperity (Ozga and Jones, 2006). Concepts such as freedom to decide, freedom to act and freedom to participate democratically are performative actions of democratic members of society that are promoted without acknowledging the restrictions that these freedoms incur (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). These restrictions include the limits of personal freedoms related to how they impact on the personal freedoms of others and the systems of democracy that restrict when and how the population participates in the exercise of democracy. Therefore, regardless of the social democratic rhetoric of the curricula and the guidelines, the fundamental discourses of the ECEC are economic. In drawing on Human Capital Theory, the guidelines are revealing of the reach that neoliberal ideology has into policy in Finland.

As a concept, Human Capital Theory does not appear to fit comfortably with social democratic discourses in Finnish ECEC and society. Yet, as the previous chapter identified, both the evaluation guidelines and the ECEC and pre-primary educate

children in such a way they reproduce the discourses of democratic citizens who are economically productive. In particular, the curricula prepare children for the future, “ECEC lays the foundation for lifelong learning.” (FNAE, 2018, p. 19). Paananen, Lipponen and Kumpulainen (2015) found that Finnish policy was a hybrid of social democratic ideology and neoliberal ideology, an argument that this study has produced further evidence to support.

Quality, itself a neoliberal concept connected with human capital, is ubiquitous throughout the evaluation guidelines. This points to a conflict between and within the societal intentions of the ECEC (FNAE, 2018) and pre-primary (FNAE, 2014a) curricula and the Guidelines and recommendations for evaluating the quality of early childhood education and care (Vlasov et. al., 2019).

In Finland, the reliance on the term “quality” as a descriptor of the value of education indicates a shift from social democratic imageries of education as socially constructed, to imageries of education as economic processes. The guidelines represent a moment in this shift, whereby the rhetoric of the policy is social democratic, but the underlying ideology is neoliberal. An example of this moment is seen in the pre-primary curriculum, in a description of the importance of transversal competences.

“Transversal competence refers to an entity consisting of knowledge, skills, values, attributes and will. ... It is strengthened gradually over the course of the learning path through studies connected to different fields of knowledge

and skills and in everyday activities and interaction. ... Competences that cross boundaries and link different fields of knowledge and skills are a precondition for personal growth, studying, working and civic activity now and in the future.” (FNAE, 2014a, p. 19)

Transversal competences are a collection of attributes that are individualised and rooted in neoliberal characteristics linked with neoliberal entrepreneurship and human capital. The second sentence reflects a social constructivist perspective of learning, framing it as being achieved through interaction. The third sentence repositions itself back in the neoliberal individualised space of personal growth with a social democratic reference to civic activity and finishes by drawing on the educational intention of future readiness. Transversal competences underpin the ECEC and pre-primary curricula joint objective for instruction and learning modules and are therefore central to the evaluation of the quality of education. The concept of the transversal competences are therefore an illustration of the intertwining of neoliberal and social democratic ideologies and practices.

“Quality” implies a construction of the world that is positivistic, generalisable and stable. The world is socially constructed, subjectively encountered and in a state of constant reconstruction. Therefore, the concept of “quality”,

“cannot be conceptualized to accommodate complexity, values, diversity, subjectivity, multiple perspectives, and other features of a world understood to be both uncertain and diverse. The ‘problem with quality’ cannot be

addressed by struggling to reconstruct the concept in ways it was never intended to go.” (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p. 105)

The use of the term “quality” as an indicator of good practice, environments and children who are developing appropriately is therefore problematic. There are very few studies that address the issue of “quality” in Finnish ECEC (Hujala, Fonsén and Elo, 2014; Salminen, 2017). The failure to address the issue of the definition of quality is problematic because accepting a term and a discourse without challenging them allows the concept takes on a discursive power that is hard to challenge. This thesis therefore aims to add to the debate about “quality” in Finnish ECEC by identifying the vacuum at the heart of the concept and the consequent outcomes of applying such an imprecise term to the accountability framework of evaluation.

8.2 Discourses of Evaluation; Evaluation or Monitoring?

The guidelines position evaluation in early childhood education and care within the accountability structure of the education system as a whole, but with features that are particular to early years education,

“The evaluation of early childhood education and care differs somewhat from the evaluation of other sectors of education. The unique features of educational activities with young children should be taken into account in the evaluation, as rather than specifying the goals for the *child’s* learning or competence, the acts and documents informing early childhood focus on steering the delivery of early childhood education and care in a manner that

supports children's learning, development and wellbeing. The evaluation thus focusses on the activities of the ECEC staff and stresses a reflective work approach and critical examination of their own activities by the staff. In other words, we can say that the evaluation of ECEC is a tool for the overall development and steering of pedagogy." (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 27)

Evaluation is intended to be a tool used to ensure the quality of education and care,

"The purpose of this document is to support ECEC organisers and private service providers in carrying out systematic and goal-oriented self-evaluation associated with quality management and to provide tools for evaluating the structure and content of early childhood education and care" Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 3).

There was little opportunity to see evidence of evaluation at provider level in the short time I was in each setting. However, I observed two examples. In setting 1 the practitioners filled in a form created by the manager regarding their self-evaluation of how well they were fulfilling the setting's specialism of sports and arts. The answers the pre-school team gave included the introduction of pedometers to count how many steps the children took each day, a measure the children had decided on in a group meeting. In setting 3, setting-wide concerns that the children were not getting enough physical movement, especially in the winter, had resulted in a decision that children were allowed to run in the (wide and long) corridors. I saw the children playing in the corridors, running and using gym equipment such as balls, hoops and

beanbags. These examples show two different forms setting-wide evaluation can take. In the first example the impetus came from the manager as an evaluation of a process, while in the second a problem was identified by practitioners and the solution came from staff body. Both are examples of how powerful accountability discourses act to shape the practices, thoughts and attitudes of the practitioners who reproduce them through self-governance.

This self-governance is evident in the statement from the guidelines, “Self-monitoring stresses the responsibility for the quality and goal-oriented nature of the activities” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 21). This statement is ambiguous about who is held responsible. I discussed this statement with Iiris, the researcher who acted as a translator, who confirmed that the statement in Finnish is as neutral sounding and ambiguous as to who is held responsible as it is in the English. The context in which this statement is made is in the introduction to the section discussing evaluation at national, regional and local levels. Therefore, this statement refers to all actors in the evaluation framework, from policy writers and the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre down to individual practitioners. The subtle difference in language between the commonly used “self-evaluation” and the unusual “self-monitoring” is significant and points to the true intention of evaluation, which is to impel practitioners to monitor, or govern themselves and hold themselves accountable. This is supported by the statement,

“At the level of pedagogical activities, evaluation mainly takes the form of self-evaluation. One objective of self-evaluation is to help the staff examine

their own pedagogical activities in keeping with the objectives that steer early childhood education and care.” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 24)

Governmentality can be seen to underpin the evaluation guidelines. Despite the ideology of social democracy emphasising cooperation through teams of teachers and nursery nurses working together to evaluate activities and environments, the underlying discourse is of monitoring. Using this lens, the metaphor of the panopticon is compelling, whereby every practitioner self-governs and ensures their colleagues are equally self-governing themselves to produce the discourses of participation, cooperation and the evaluation of the activity not the child (Pitkänen, 2022). Therefore, the accountability discourse that underpins evaluation is disciplinary, internalised and reproduced, impelling practitioners to maintain the control of governance to uphold the practices of self-evaluation, whether individual or within a team. From a performative perspective, for practitioners to be perceived as fulfilling the requirements, they must perform the role of the active, participatory, cooperative colleague who is conversant with different modes and methods of self-evaluating and suggesting and demonstrating solutions.

Governmentality is visible in the two interpretations of the intentions of evaluation in the practitioner’s interviews. Pre-primary teacher Ilona explained what she understood by self-evaluation,

“You are not evaluating the child. You are evaluating your pedagogical tools for helping that child achieve”.

Aino gave her definition of evaluation,

“You are talking about professional support. That is available. It is not about evaluating the work but it’s more of a way of receiving help if there is something you need help with, in your self-evaluation and working on your work. It can include documentation for example, if someone can record your teaching with children and then you can watch it together and then you can perhaps have feedback or discuss it. But it’s not about evaluation it’s for support for teachers and staff.”

These examples of how practitioners perceive evaluation are indicative of how they reproduce the discourses of there being “no common aims” (FNAE, 2014a, p. 16) for the children’s achievement levels but that “evaluation focusses on pedagogical activities and learning environments” (Vlasov et. al. 2019, p. 26) and the discourse of professional development whereby “ECEC quality is improved and developed based on the development areas emerging in the evaluation” (Vlasov et. al. 2019, p. 26). These discourses demand a high level of self-governance. Practitioners need to have internalised the discourses to the extent that reproduction is continuous within the accountability framework, both chronologically and vertically, through the systems of evaluation from manager down to children. Aino’s comment reproduces the ECEC’s direction about practitioner’s self-evaluation,

“The personnel’s goal-oriented and systematic self-assessment is essential for maintaining and developing the quality of ECEC. The targets of assessment may include interaction between the personnel and children, atmosphere in the group, pedagogical working approaches, contents of activities or learning environments.” (FNAE, 2018, p. 65).

The consistency between Aino’s explanation and the ECEC’s direction suggests that the discourse about evaluation being for developing specific aspects of the ECEC, based on self-assessment is absorbed and reproduced as common sense. Aino positions herself as an experienced and skilful practitioner by recognising where help might be needed and performatively asking for support in a cooperative ritual of “working on your work”. Pre-school teacher in Setting 1, Ilona described this kind of self-assessment as “within our work culture”, therefore also revealing how roles of practitioners as supportive and participatory are performative already in place before the individual practitioner steps into it. Studies (Luokkamäki et. al., 2016; Kulju et. al., 2020; Manninen et. al., 2021) show that self-assessment is a common form of accountability in Finland across professions. Therefore, practitioners are fitting a performative role that is familiar not only in education, but more generally nationally. In this sense, self-evaluation is a normative factor in being a working adult in Finland and is therefore perceived to be neutral, or apolitical.

Evaluation is built on discourses that draw on both social democratic constructions of people as participatory and cooperative as well as neoliberal construction of people as independent and self-reliant. However, drawing on the imagery of the panopticon,

these attributes are revealed to be regimes of truth that cannot be ignored (Hult and Edström, 2016). Practitioners self-govern themselves to ensure they comply, as Aino said,

“My own work’s reflection I do somehow my own way [...] all the time I think, what could I do better?”

They also govern each other, through self-evaluation as a group or team, as Ilona explained,

“We look at the needs within the group. What is going on within the group, what the children are doing, behaviours, strategies, we talk about it as a team. What do we do? Where do we go with this and that is reflecting as well on our practice.”

Thus, evaluation is revealed to be a strong disciplinary force that is productive of performative “quality” routines and rituals of “good, trustworthy, agentic, cooperative, supportive, reflexive” practitioners who need little outside discipline because they impose it upon themselves. In turn, they discursively construct children who become “agentic, independent, cooperative, positive learners”. In so doing, future human capital is assumed to have been assured, through the production of happy, secure learners who become successful, inclusive citizens.

Finally, evaluation happens within a hierarchical framework. The framework alludes to this hierarchy, “self-evaluation refers to goal-oriented, methodical and continuous evaluation carried out by the staff and superiors” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 26). The relationships between “staff and superiors” were not very apparent during my time in the three settings; differences between teachers and nursery nurses were not clear in the group rooms, nursery nurses led group activities and meetings and teachers changed nappies for instance. I recorded three examples. As mentioned above, the manager had sent a form to all the groups in setting 1 requiring them to evaluate their practice on a specific matter. Regarding staff supervisions, I recorded in my field notebook, “Evaluation with manager 1ce a year. Prepare/think about questions and go for a walk with the manager – what went well, dreams for the future”. The lead teachers for each group were responsible for recording the weekly planning and children’s documentation. Therefore, although it was not immediately visible in practice, in terms of who took on what role in the group room, there is a hierarchy of accountability that cascades down from policy to manager, to room leader, to supporting practitioners and finally, to children. Extending the metaphor of the panopticon used above, in which practitioners self-governed and governed others, the hierarchical framework adds positions of power within this surveillance, so that some actors can be recognised as more powerful than others. Accountability therefore cascades down, resting finally on the shoulders of the lead teachers, whose responsibility it is to assemble the evaluation processes at work in their groups and represent and defend them to those in superior positions to themselves. Performativity reveals how little agency practitioners have in fulfilling these roles. Their professional status as good or successful teachers or nursery nurses rests on

their ability to provide evidence that they have stepped into the roles directed by policy. The routines and rituals of evaluation must be reproduced in the recognised manner.

The next section explores the ways in which evaluation is (re)produced, according to the evaluation guidelines. In particular, the indicators are used to illustrate how practitioners' reproduce the requirements of the evaluation guidelines.

Indicators

Vlasov et. al. (2019) use the term "indicator" (see Appendix 9) to describe how quality is judged:

"An indicator is a concrete and verifiable description of the essential and desirable properties of high-quality early childhood education and care" (p. 12)

Aino's description of her practice to recognise her children's interests and support them in developing their ideas and participatory skills can be viewed as her disciplining herself to fit the prescribed targets of evaluation. She illustrates a political construction of self that is agentic, independent, trustworthy and sensitive. Although Aino did not refer to the guidelines and therefore was not drawing on them directly, her comment above is significantly like indicator 7,

“The staff observe and document the children’s daily lives in early childhood education and care regularly and systematically in order to understand the child’s world of experience. Information produced together with the children and using diverse methods is used in the planning implementation, evaluation and development of the activities.” (Indicator 7, Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 76)

The steps that Aino described both above, in producing information about pedagogical practices that could be improved and below in using children’s interests to develop activities, reproduce the discourse of the practitioner as both systematic and sensitive. This ritualised process of “being” a teacher in a particular way, points to the performative role that she inhabits.

In the following extract, Aino explained to me via a translator how she planned activities with the children,

“She explained amazingly how she uses the children’s initiatives. Basically, children are interested in something and then her duty is to bring them to a shared inspection in a way that these ideas and initiatives are used and that they are done together. She described how they had a Christmas party and had different kind of, for example, song. And the children were very interested in them and she thought that this something that we just can’t quit, we have to continue and now they have a children’s band and parent’s orchestra and staff orchestra and everything. So, it’s just building up from something that has come from the children.”

Aino showed how through discussion and a “shared inspection”, by which she meant evaluation with the children, they developed the initial idea. Aino’s example illustrates how Finnish ECEC teachers are required to enact the rituals of encouraging democratic discussion and scaffolding children’s thinking to collectively choose activities and make decisions. The metaphor of the panopticon suggests that this kind of observation and scaffolding of learning, which extended over several days requires the practitioner to keep the children under surveillance throughout the day to identify the moments suitable for development. Her skill in turning the conversations and ideas towards outcomes that she desired is indicative of how children are not entirely free to explore, but through the discourse of social learning are directed towards the particular kinds of learning that are valued through the education system and beyond into work. Therefore, this anecdote is revealing of the increase in human capital that is the educational intention of early years education. According to the process-related indicators,

“Interaction is positive, caring, encouraging and gentle. The staff are committed to each child and the child group.” (Indicator 1. Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 76)

And,

“The pedagogical learning environment planned and built together by the staff and the children encourages the children to play, be physically active,

explore, create and express. The learning environment is assessed and modified regularly as indicated by the children's needs and interest, ensuring that it challenges and inspires the children to learn." (Indicator 13, Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 76)

These indicators are directly used to shape evaluation of practice. Aino's examples of evaluation, both individually in reflecting on her own practice, and as the lead teacher with her 3–5-year-old group are illustrative of the performative roles that discourses shape through regimes of truth about teachers. These discourses create a kind of panopticon that positions the practitioner in such a way that they appear to be creating the learning environment with and for the children. However, as I reflected on the environments I encountered, despite the variety of age groups, buildings and make-up of the groups, I realised they were remarkably similar. This suggests that Aino's personal feeling that she responded to the group of children she was working with is not the entire story. Rather, a powerful discourse of the ideal early childhood environment shapes her knowledge, opinions, attitudes and practices, in the same manner that they shape those of all early years practitioners. The environment and activities that have the appearance of naturally developing in a particular group are in fact the reproduction of discourses that all practitioners have internalised, resulting in similar looking environments and activities across the settings. These environments make the educational intentions of future and school ready children and the increase of human capital possible, by making the regimes of truth that support these intentions appear natural, neutral and inevitable.

Studies on the teaching of characteristics regarded as prosocial and positive (Pardon, Kuusisto and Uusitalo, 2023) and productive of Finnish cultural values found that modelling and co-production of understanding between practitioners and children were regarded as the strongest methods of instilling desired attitudes and behaviours. These behaviours include agency, independence, participation, cooperation, sensitivity and having a caring attitude. Practitioners are directly held accountable to both display these attributes and encourage their development in the children. Ilona explained,

“I think it goes further than independence, in the sense that, in Finnish we have this *osallistua* – participation, that’s also, so it’s like children’s agency and participation is a really big focus in early childhood education that children can affect their own education, their own decisions and are involved in the planning of what they learn here and that kind of goes hand in hand with gaining those independent skills.”

Ilona’s comment aligns with indicator 3, from the staff-child interaction category,

“The staff work sensitively, taking notice of the children’s initiatives and responding to them in a manner that supports the children’s agency and participation.” (Indicator 3, Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 76)

The focus on development of children in both Ilona and the guideline’s statements obscures the wider discourse of human capital that is present alongside the social

constructivism. Agency and participation are key attributes in Finland, as Ilona points out, and therefore necessary for the child's future success in the education system and beyond, in employment. Therefore, a performatively good practitioner practice rooted in social pedagogy is also, at a deeper level contiguously a neoliberal, economic discourse.

It is significant that when I showed the participants my copy of the guidelines, they were not familiar with them. The constant reproduction of language and discourses from the guidelines suggests that they were encountering them, possibly as a result of dissemination via leadership, suggesting that indicator 15, referring to leadership, was being adhered to,

“The head of the ECEC unit is responsible for the goal-oriented and methodological leadership, evaluation and development of their unit's pedagogy and the staff's opportunities for learning in their work. Pedagogical leadership is implemented with the support of ECEC teachers and ensuring the participation of the entire staff.” (Indicator 15, Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 77)

This suggests that leaders in their settings were, as Ahtainen, Fonsen and Kiuru (2021) claim, taking on the role of formulating the evaluation tools and cascading these down the accountability hierarchical structure to lead teachers and supporting staff use these, rather than requiring practitioners to be familiar with the guidelines themselves. The regime of truth embodied in the indicators was diffused through the settings through the accountability structure in ways that made concepts such as

evaluation and development to have the appearance of common sense. Therefore, the performative roles of the practitioners embodied ensured evaluation and self-evaluation were perceived as a marker of high quality practice that ensured high-quality teaching, learning and environments that could be held accountable by evaluating practice against the indicators.

The indicators have no criteria for children's individual attainment. Evaluation is built on the concept of "no common aims" for children's attainment. The next section investigates how the use of pedagogical documentation unwittingly undermines the claim that the individual attainment of children is not linked to accountability.

8.3 Pedagogical Documentation; "we don't do reports"

Ahtiainen, Fonsén & Kiuru (2021) found that reforms between 2013-2018 in ECEC and Pre-primary curricula, qualifications and evaluation moved Finnish ECEC closer to the emphasis on the child's individual education and learning found internationally. In particular, the use of pedagogical documentation, which is intended to reflect the pedagogical tools used to support children's growth and learning, is identified as turning the practitioner's focus towards developmentally framed learning. In this, Finland was influenced by the same discourses as other Nordic countries such as Norway (Kaskac and Annete, 2023; Korsvold and Nygård, 2022) and Denmark (Anette and Hanne Hede, 2023) where national debates about funding and curriculum led to these countries adopting measures that are more focussed on individual attainment than the development of the environment and evaluation of pedagogical activities. These debates are partly fuelled by tensions between international discourses of

school or future-readiness and cost-effectiveness and are countered by Nordic discourses of child-centred, holistic education (Kaskac and Annete, 2023; Anette and Hanne Hede, 2023). Norway and Denmark moved to using children's attainment as a signifier of quality. Thus, the claim that children's attainment is separated from measurement of quality is a distinctive characteristic of the Finnish accountability discourse.

Factors such as children's attainment are not included as indicators of quality. Therefore, learning environments are assessed and modified, as discussed above. In parallel to this process, pedagogical activities are evaluated,

The staff are responsible for the planning, documentation, evaluation and development of activities in line with the curriculum in a manner that supports the children's learning and development. (Indicator 6 Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 76)

And,

The staff observe and document the children's daily lives in early childhood education and care regularly and systematically in order to understand the child's world of experience. Information produced together with the children and using diverse methods is used in the planning, implementation, evaluation and development of the activities. (Indicator 7, Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 76)

These statements suggest that daily or regular evaluation is done at the level of the group, rather than at the level of the individual child. There is a duality however, with the emphasis moving between “children” and “the child”. This duality is also present in the ECEC and Pre-primary curricula,

“Assessment is an integral part of pre-primary education. In pre-primary education, assessment has two tasks; it is used to plan and develop education and to support the well-being, growth and learning of each child.” (FNAE, 2018, p. 33)

I concur with Ahtiainen, Fonsén & Kiuru (2021), that practitioners do use individual children’s pedagogical documentation to chart attainment and record progress rather than to evaluate environments and activities, as intended. This duality was evident in Aino’s interview where she described,

“Other forms of pedagogical documentation like the ones that are concentrated more on learning processes and recording how children are learning [...] we give all those works and the things they train for (*sic*)”.

To clarify, the “works and things they train for” refer to activities planned for individual children. For instance, one child might be learning to write their name, while another might be doing fine and gross motor activities to prepare for writing.

For Aino, there appeared to be two separate strands of observation and assessment. The weekly, team evaluations happened during the planning meetings to reflect on the previous week and plan for the next. The focus in these meetings were the atmosphere in the group to decide what support was needed in social and emotional skills, or the adaptations needed for the learning environment, reflecting on where more independence could be encouraged, and what the interests of the group were. The second strand, which Aino refers to as “other forms of pedagogical documentation” are the IEP’s and individual documentation of each child’s progress. The child/children duality visible in policy is reproduced in practice, with both discourses being powerfully embodied in the performativity of the practitioner moving between neoliberal constructions of the individualised child and developmental psychology and social democratic constructions of group dynamics and social pedagogy.

Ilona gave an example of how discourses strongly shape a particular construction of children, permitting certain forms of language and prohibiting others,

“We’ve had training on pedagogical writing, so when (laughs), when we write their reports, as it were, we don’t do reports, but we have these – I can show you these. So this is an example of an early childhood preschool learning plan ... So, when we write in this you have to write in such a way that it says what pedagogical strategies you are using with the child, rather than evaluating the child. So, you can’t say, oh this child is sensitive and you can’t put a label on the child. In that way, when you are writing, you can only say that, for

example, that to help whatever-her-name-is with difficult situation. For instance, taking food, if that's a difficult situation for a particular child, ... you are evaluating your pedagogical tools for helping that child achieve."

Ilona identified a few ways that Finnish policy uses language to construct both practitioners and children in particular ways. For instance, "reports" are reframed as "learning plans" that are produced and shared with the parents; yet clearly from Ilona's perspective (as an English practitioner who has worked in both England and Finland), they are similar enough that she regards them as reports in the English sense. This suggests that while the language is carefully constructed in the learning plan to shift the focus of evaluation from the child's attainment to the practitioner's tools and actions, the essence of them, which is to let parents know what their child has learnt and what their challenges are, remains the same. While this construction of practitioners is of trustworthy and knowledgeable professionals, the underlying construction of children as "in progress" means that both practitioners and children are shifted from a social democratic perspective to a more neoliberal construction.

Transversal competences

Transversal competences underscore the whole curriculum, as the ECEC curriculum (FNAE, 2018, p. 24) makes clear,

"The purpose of the learning areas described in Chapter 4.5 is to promote children's transversal competences."

While the pre-primary curriculum states,

“The joint objectives [of pre-primary education] are based on the goals emerging from the different fields of knowledge and skills which are significant for pre-primary education, as well as on the goals set for transversal competences.” (FNAE, 2014a, p. 34).

The learning areas (also referred to as learning modules in the pre-primary curriculum) are *Diverse forms of expression, Rich world of the language, Me and our community, Exploring and interacting with my environment* and *I grow and develop*. Transversal competences, otherwise known as soft, core or basic skills (Bunaiasu, 2014) are “an entity consisting of knowledge, skills, values, attitude and will. Competence also means an ability to apply knowledge and skills and act in a given situation.” (FNAE, 2018, p. 24). The skills are described as “Five interconnected transversal competence areas” of *thinking and learning; cultural competence, interaction and self-expression; taking care of oneself and managing daily life; multiliteracy and competence in information and communication technology; participation and involvement*. (FNAE, 2018, p. 24). The Pre-primary curriculum claims,

“The need for transversal competence is emphasised as the world around us changes. Competences that cross boundaries and link different fields of knowledge and skills are a precondition for personal growth, studying, working and civic activity now and in the future.” (FNAE, 2014a, p. 19)

Therefore, transversal competences are located within an ideology that constructs the child as unfinished with a value that is situated in their economic future. The implication of this orientation to future economic prosperity is that transversal competences are related to the increase of human capital. Human capital can only be understood when related to knowledge-based economies (Ho, Campbell-Barr and Leeson, 2010), accrued by the acquisition of skills, knowledge and qualifications that are regarded as an investment for future work, prosperity and economic contribution to society in individualistic terms. In its broadest terms, early years education is viewed as an investment in the future by creating human capital (Campbell-Barr, 2012). Because being successful and productive in a job requires more than simply knowledge and qualifications, additional qualities such as adaptability (Schultz, 1971) and the ability to follow orders and work within organisations (Bowles and Gintis, 1976) and characteristics such as sociability, cooperation and creativity (which are often termed multiple-intelligences theory) (Becker, 1993) are valued as sources of human capital. In addition, circumstances such as good physical and mental health, healthy environments and stable personal relationships are regarded as important at every stage of life, as a foundation for human capital. Transversal competences underpin how the areas of learning are taught, and the reason for their inclusion in the curriculum.

Examples of how learning modules are supported by the concept of human capital and transversal competence can be seen in *diverse forms of expression*. This is characterised as,

“Artistic experiences and expression promote children’s learning potential, social skills and positive self-image as well as their capacity to understand and structure the surrounding world.” (FNAE, 2018, p. 45).

The transversal competence “Cultural competence, interaction and self-expression” includes the statement,

“Interaction skills and the ability to express oneself and understand others have a major significance to the individual’s identity, functional capacity and well-being.” (FNAE, 2018, p. 25)

Artistic experience and expression is viewed as an opportunity to increase and enhance a child’s human capital. In this construction of the child, all learning, including artistic expression is reduced to social skills, self-image and functional capacity. The construction of the child is individualistic and entrepreneurial. The framing of artistic expression in such neoliberal terms challenges the construction of children as agentic and free to choose how they play and learn; rather this comprises a narrow set of skills and knowledge that they are required to achieve. Similarly, the construction practitioners as trusted, professional and agentic is challenged, as they are required to ensure the children achieve these skills. Such narrow limits to learning and teaching invoke a vision of the panopticon where-in the children are kept under close surveillance by the anxious practitioners who scrutinise every activity, freely chosen or adult-led, to ascertain whether they can check off a skill from a list.

Aino gave an example of how a creative project gave children the opportunities to practice functional and interactional skills. Within her explanation are clues that she is aware of, and promotes, transversal competences at the same time. *Aino spoke this part herself, rather than being translated, so the English is not fluent. I have chosen to keep her words as she spoke them, rather than summarise, as I believe they convey her meaning more faithfully,*

“Then we have this Valentines Day on Friday. So I saw in one museum’s window – big, big hearts, pink and red hearts hanging in the window. So I thought, yes, we will do a little bit of cutting with scissors and we train this and make those heart this morning beside work. And I just ask, do you want to come here and cut with scissors? And yes, yes, yes and there are two or three children around me who were training. And they were training after that with pencils, their own names. One very shy boy says, I can’t write my name, and I said, Can I help you? So I write down examples that you can train and yes, yes, write it down, he told me. And then I write it down, his name, on the paper and I said, yes, you can train and check how it goes. And I say some words to guide him, like S is a snake and just kind of playing. And then he trained very long time there doing his own letters.”

While this extract appears quite mundane, there are a few aspects that are worth pointing out. The first is that the word “train” is used multiple times. This is a Finnish to English translation that might be better construed as “practice”. When this

pertains to personal identity, the transversal competence of being persistent, and recognising that skills are not always learnt immediately are key skills that are encouraged. Using the lens of human capital, these are skills needed for an adult to be successful in work. Therefore, Aino's actions are recognisable as governmentality. She governs herself by calling to mind the skills she knows the child needs to learn and directs his learning to fulfil the requirements of the curriculum. Despite being labelled as shy (which Ilona previously identified as unacceptable in ECEC), he responded positively to Aino, and interacted with her to express his needs, a key competence which Aino makes visible by mentioning in her telling of the story. Finally, Aino was less interested that he wanted to write his name, and more interested by the way he was absorbed by his task, which is also a key competence. Aino's description could have been a simple comment that the boy wanted to learn to write his name. Her extended account reveals the aspects of this encounter that were significant to her. By relating what she found remarkable to the transversal competences, it is possible to identify the discourses that she reproduced. Aino's satisfaction with this child's progress is evidence of the universal developmental progress she was unconsciously measuring him against, and performatively encouraged as her role as ECEC teacher dictates. Transversal competences are therefore constructive of a developmental model of learning situated within the individual child.

This study contends that far from basing evaluation on the activities and environments of the setting, or the pedagogical tools of the practitioner, evaluation is used to make judgements on children's normative development. The normative

targets are not set out specifically, thus are invisibly visible, but are found throughout the ECEC and Pre-primary curricula and the evaluation guidelines in the form of normative statements about children. They create an illusion of evaluation being focussed on the approaches used in working with the children, but ultimately, individual, normative development is the foundation of evaluation.

8.4 Normative development: “learning to conform”

The discourse of normative development is most noticeable in the tension between the holistic, child-centred intention of policy, and practitioners’ worry that a child might be developmentally or academically behind. It was most clearly visible in the interviews and observations with Pre-school groups. In particular, the discourse of attainment was referred to in interviews. The practitioners were so unaware of the developmental discourses they reproduced that they were able to combine it in sentences that purported to refute developmentalism. Ilona described how her setting used testing to evaluate a child’s progress,

“The children do do (sic) tests here, like papers where you can – standardised tests, I suppose. But they’re not, not obligatory and they’re not like SATs, you know. The results don’t go anywhere except for us.”

Similarly, Aino showed me a book called “The Daily life of Four Year Olds” (There is no link to this. It is produced by the Municipality of Jyväskylä and is not available to the public). This was an ages and stages guide to physical, cognitive and emotional/social development expected of children, comprised of areas of development and lists of

skills or knowledge a child was expected to have by the end of that age band. A version was available for each age. This is problematic as the Core Curricula are designed to be the frameworks of social pedagogy that local curricula are based on. The local curricula of Jyväskylä did not appear to reproduce any material from the core curricula, but instead were Piagetian (1952) universal normative developmental frameworks. This meant that practitioners in this municipality were working with two, conflicting curricula. This should be a concern to policy writers, who are obliged to relinquish control to municipalities and other local organisations

I observed an example of how the tension between practitioners' discourses of normative development and policy intention produced unintended assessment and practices. In Setting 1 I spent two days in the 3–5-year-old room. A child was causing the practitioners concern because she chose to play alone. They included me in the conversation by conducting it in English and drew me into the discussion by asking how we might address their concern in England. The practitioners had observed the child choosing to play alone and refusing to join the play of other children and this went against their normative understanding of children's play and social cooperation,

“While peer relationships are valuable for children's positive and holistic development in themselves, they are also important in terms of the planning an implementation of pedagogical activities in early childhood education and care. In particular, interaction in the group and the principles of children's togetherness and communal learning guide early childhood education and care at the level of pedagogical activities.” Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 60)

The practitioners took out the Municipality's local curriculum "The daily life of four year olds" to confirm that children of this age and stage should be playing with other children. In this way they turned from being constructed as trusted teachers, drawing on their experience and pedagogical expertise, to taking the position of technicians, turning to the manual to work out how to fix the problem. The ECEC national curriculum states,

"The personnel has the duty to secure the preconditions for playing, supervise the play in a suitable way, and ensure that each child has the opportunity to participate in playing together according to their skills and capabilities."

(FNAE, 2018, p. 41)

The two policy documents combined to confirm their feeling that, at the age of four the child should be participating in cooperative play, and that therefore, the solitary play was an issue. They therefore took immediate action to try to include the child in group activities. Each time, the child complied briefly and then went back to the dolls-house. Similarly in the swimming session the child chose to swim alone and moved away from other children. Efforts to have them join ball games were equally unsuccessful. Notes were made and the team told me they would include cooperative games in the following week's plan. The practitioners used tactics of governance such as suggesting policies and practices that strengthened their belief in the discourses of participatory and cooperative play, drawing each other in to

observe the child. They also governed each other through the conversation, ensuring they agreed on the meaning of the child's play and their interpretation of it.

Significantly, the evaluation guidelines point out,

“In the context of ECEC, there is a natural asymmetry in the adult-child interaction, among other things in relation to knowledge, power and conceptions of growth and learning. While the child's status has become stronger and children are today seen more strongly as active agents with initiative and as participants in their own learning and every-day activities, methods of education and daily practices are slower to change.” (Vlasov et. al., 2019, pp 60-61)

The local curriculum clearly shaped the practitioners' views of the child's behaviour as non-normative. Additionally, children are required to play together because this confirms practitioners' creation of an environment for learning according to social pedagogy; solitary play for any reason is delimited. There is no space for a child to choose to play alone. The adults owned the knowledge that children should play cooperatively at this age and constructed this child as non-normative because solitary play was chosen. The child failed to step into the performative role of the sociable member of the group and was pathologised. Surveillance was increased and corrective measures were planned. The panopticon of surveillance and control for the non-normative child is clear from this anecdote.

The child who is unable or unwilling, for whatever reason, to participate causes real problems for the practitioner because individual activities are not pedagogically appropriate. Ilona referred to this when talking about the main aims of ECEC,

“As an individual there’s also a big focus on, maybe it is learning to conform as well [...] for the comfort of the group and your surroundings. That individuality is, is really allowed, everyone’s allowed to be themselves but at the same time, you are encouraged to be yourself in a way that is not disruptive to others.”

The situation where the child chose to play alone could be construed as too individualistic, and disruptive of practitioners’ ability to provide quality communal learning. Conversely, the practitioners’ reaction to the problem was to turn to the neoliberal, individualistic perspective to find a solution.

The duality of the neoliberal and social democratic ideologies represents a breach between the principles of social pedagogy of the guidelines and curricula, and the neoliberal developmental comparison that practitioners are compelled to performatively carry out when they are concerned. A concern that this study identifies is the fragility of the new guidelines. Their strength is visible in the normative, but it is not able to support where non-normative development is identified. Practitioners must be on constant alert for children who are not developing according to normative measures. This means that every child must be, albeit informally, assessed on a daily basis. Thus, accountability is placed on the

shoulders of children to meet the criteria set out in the curricula, for practitioners to prove that their activities are of high quality which can be proven using the accountability framework of evaluation. This is achieved by adhering to the guideline's statement that "quality refers to compliance with the requirements" (Vlasov et. al., 2019, p. 16); the requirements being implementing the curricula and evaluating that implementation is achieved according to the indicators.

The staff asked me for my perspective, as a practitioner. I had spent some days in the pre-school room previously and had reflected on how I might introduce myself differently and emphasise the participant aspect of my method of observation more effectively. This was because I became aware through conversation with Sofia when she was more comfortable with me, that they had been unsure of what I was doing or how. I felt from the perspective of the feminist ethics of care that I had not been sufficiently aware of how busy they were, nor of potentially how little information had been passed on, or when. It transpired that they had known for several weeks that I would be coming but had forgotten the details. Therefore, in this second field, I was careful to take a little time to introduce myself and asked to be made useful immediately. There were two advantages to this. The first was the practitioners recognised quickly our shared category of professional educator, which led to my involvement in the discussion about child playing alone. The second was the children were more likely to approach me and be comfortable with me sitting with them which allowed me to experience their play alongside and with them and allowed me to chat with the practitioners while we worked. I even learned a new Finnish word,

“myrkky” (Sounds like murku) = poisonous, which I discovered was the flavour of playdough I was being made cookies from!

In response to their question about my perspective as an English practitioner, I answered that firstly I would like to know if there was something significant going on in the child’s life, like a new sibling, house move or divorce, that might explain this behaviour at this time separate from a developmental perspective such as suspecting autism for instance. And secondly, I told them that from an English perspective, I would be positively observing the child’s concentration, storytelling, language development and fine motor skills in dressing and undressing the dolls. From a reciprocal point of view, the significance of the child’s wider life had not occurred to the practitioners, and they told me they intended to ask some gentle questions of the parents. I never found out what the outcome was.

Reflexively, I believe my presence as a researcher and fellow practitioner changed the actions of the practitioners. This group of practitioners were supportive of my research and went out of their way to include me in conversations so I could have a greater understanding of how their observation and evaluation process worked. In this setting, my insider status was confirmed by the practitioners including me in their category, confirming their construction of me as “one of them”. This was beneficial to be in being included in conversations as if I was a team member. It afforded me insights into their practice that merely asking questions in an interview could not. When I answered I drew on the ethics of care to be careful not to sound as though I was critical of their perspectives or practices. I was particularly concerned

that when I suggested there might be a change or disruption in the child's life circumstances, they had not considered it but had gone straight to the developmental framework and that they were critical of themselves for not considering other reasons. The answer I offered was couched in terms of my experience and perspective as an English practitioner, with the unspoken assumptions carried with that positionality, in particular the technical application of "causes for concern" that was the framework for my practice at home. I hope this was transmitted.

Development is therefore constructed in Finnish policy as being understood within a culturally normative developmental framework. The municipality's local curriculum was a Piagetian (1952) ages and stages framework. Where children failed to meet the criteria for normative development either social, emotional or academic, this normative framework was turned to. However, I also contend that the national policies rely on normative discourses or social and emotional development, and in Ilona's words, demand that children "conformed" to the norms or risked being manifested as pathologised. Evaluation was the tool used to determine development and is therefore the focus of the next section.

8.5 "It's not a judgement passed by a teacher about a child"; differentiating between evaluation and assessment.

Practitioners in this study did not differentiate between evaluation and assessment of children; evaluation included technologies such as standardised tests and developmental models. These technologies were used as a confirmation of

observations of environment and pedagogical activities which are part of the evaluation cycle. As Ilona said,

“They help us identify the children who are not managing [...] It’s not a judgement passed by a teacher about a child”

The question of how accountability to different stakeholders is performed is difficult to unpick. Aino emphasised partnership with parents,

“In autumn, about two months after we have started [term], then we invited parents here and we talked about do we have the same kind of thoughts with children about the children and children’s training needs [...] and we have very good conversations and mainly are in the same path with these things and they trust us somehow.”

This idea that the practitioners and parents are on the same side is an important concept in Finnish ECEC. Ilona also explained how the children’s progress was not simply reported to parents. In clarifying how standardised tests are used to check progress where there is concern, she said,

“So the assessment is between you and the parents. It’s an agreed text that you write together or as a result of your conversation. It’s not a judgement passed by a teacher about a child. Even in the case that there are big issues, it’s always, how do WE? The cooperation is really important.”

This also explains how normative assessment comes to be integrated into practice. It is a means of explaining to parents what the practitioner's concerns are, which are themselves a result of evaluation.

Aurora explained that at the beginning of the year they test the Pre-school children using a standardised test. This setting used the LukiMat test (lukimat.fi, 2024), an assessment tool available online. It includes a reference sample for teachers to use to compare their group and individuals within it to. Sofia explained,

“So, like a basic maths test, [...] numbers, or mark the one on the middle or on the right [...] or which one is bigger, or higher or lower. And we test some number skills and then we check if they know their alphabets”

Aurora, Sofia and Ilona's explanations suggest that despite there being no common aims and the intention of evaluation to be focussed on practice, an alternative discourse of individualisation, developmental learning based on ages and stages also exists. To the practitioners the difference between the two discourses appeared to be invisible. Therefore, the neoliberal discourse of school preparation which in the previous chapter was found to focus on behaviour, is in this chapter found to also have gained traction in the question of attainment. Despite children not being required to be able to read or do maths, practitioners use acquisition of these skills as indicative of normative or non-normative development. This expectation suggests that the research (Anette and Hanne Hede, 2023; Kaskac and Anette, 2023; Korsvold

and Nygård, 2022) identifying the shift from social democratic ideology to neoliberalism observed in Denmark and Norway might also be observable in Finland. In particular, the claim of Finnish policy makers, that attainment is not linked to quality is not as strong as they would like to suggest.

The perspective of performativity offers an insight into why practitioners might introduce testing into a system that does not appear to require it. Hennessy and Patricia (2013) find that in neoliberal education systems with developmental accountability frameworks, testing and standardisation pose a threat to practitioner autonomy and pedagogy that gives practitioners the choice between conforming or resisting. Each stance is performative, with the practitioner taking on a role to support their stance of supporting the accountability framework of testing as beneficial or resisting it as detrimental. In the case of the Finnish practitioners that I interviewed and observed, their roles had changed recently (Ahtiainen, Fonsén & Kiuru, 2021) and many practitioners had been in their posts since before the reforms, meaning they had experienced a recent period of professional upheaval. The new guidelines were not yet established and at least one practitioner told me they were still working out how to implement the guidelines. Therefore, the inclusion of tests and developmental models may be indicative of the dysregulation felt by practitioners in early 2020 (when this data was collected). In a converse action to that found by Hennessy and Patricia (2013) the practitioners attempted to import a measure of stability through turning to standardised models of learning and behaviour. From a performative standpoint, it could be argued that in the absence of

guidance, practitioners sought it, based on their own experience and available materials that allowed them to both conform and resist.

The practitioners conformed to a developmental understanding of children's learning and growth by referring to standardised models which gave them reassurance that they were acting as "good" practitioners should. Equally they could be understood as resisting the instability in the culturally and socially normative core curricula by introducing an alternative ideology which, within the discourse of trust and freedom in practitioners also reassured them that they were fulfilling the "good" practitioner role. The fact that this was a common practice across the three settings indicates that the discourse of assessment providing stability is a possible explanation.

Downes and Brossuek (2022) found that Australian ECEC and primary teachers were sophisticated in their use of available materials in difficult circumstances during the Pandemic, suggesting that a neoliberal construction of practitioners as resourceful and adaptable can also be applied to Finnish ECEC practitioners. Governmentality, whereby self-governance and the subtle governance of others ensures that only a few discourses are viewed as the truth and all others discarded may explain how, across a municipality, where practitioners regularly meet for professional support and development, a practice such as using standardised tests might become imposed. The fact that Sofia, Aurora, Aino and Ilona referred to standardised testing and observation as a part of their practice indicates that they themselves did not recognise the contradiction between neoliberal universal standards of development and social democratic social pedagogy. Equally, Butler's perspective of performativity

suggests that the routines and rituals (Derochers, 2007) of being a practitioner include introducing measures where a vacuum is experienced. Therefore, the discourse of assessment alongside a performative construction of practitioners as resourceful and agentic could be an explanation of how developmental assessments are a key measure in the Finnish practitioner's arsenal of accountability tools.

In the mission statement (FNAE, 2018, p. 14), ECEC is presented as a "societal service" with the tasks of promoting children's holistic growth, development and learning, collaborating with guardians, promoting equality and equity, preventing social exclusion, strengthening children's participation and active agency in society and supporting guardians in educating their children and making it possible for them to work or study. From this, stakeholders can be deduced to be children, guardians, setting managers, municipalities, FINEEC, the government and society. It is a task with both contemporary and future consequences. Practitioners are therefore accountable to various stakeholders who have potentially conflicting requirements of practitioners.

The multi-voiced process of defining ECEC quality is influenced by a number of parties and viewpoints simultaneously: children, guardians, ECEC staff, researchers, policy-makers responsible for legislation and national steering, and entire society with its prevailing values (Vlasov et. al., 2019)

The different needs and perspectives of the various stakeholders suggests that practitioners utilise different discourses and performativities to fulfil the expectations

and requirements of each. Therefore, the perspective of governmentality suggests that practitioners subjectify themselves in various, conflicting, contradictory ways using different tools and methods of accountability.

Evaluation can therefore be seen to be an ambiguous term as far as practitioners are concerned. They used the language of evaluation and reproduced the messages of the policies, such as no common aims for children's attainment. However, this language masked alternative discourses such as developmentality, and preparation for school where they used the language of assessment. I argue that teachers have to navigate between sets of ideologies and educational intentions; one that reproduces the discourse of social pedagogy as preparation for a participatory future as a full member of the community, and a second that reproduces neoliberal discourses of school-readiness, normative development and the production of human capital.

Conclusion

The concepts of quality, evaluation and assessment were found to form the foundation by which accountability framework is constructed. The concepts of quality and assessment are typically neoliberal, and apply to a positivistic construction of education, whereby universal concepts and outcomes are quantified and measured. Evaluation is typically social democratic and espouses constructions of people and practice as participatory and cooperative and based on the outcome of observation and deliberation about circumstance particular to that setting and group.

Quality was found to be a troubling concept which, despite being acknowledged as nebulous and imprecise in the guidelines was nonetheless applied to evaluation about practice and environments. It was also applied to practices such as the assessment of individual children's attainment. The concept of quality constructs a neoliberal regime of truth that shapes all aspects of ECEC practice and attitudes. Quality, as a concept applied to accountability in Finnish ECEC was therefore found to be troubling.

The indicators are expressive of a regime of truth, permitting and arbitrating a limited number of behaviours, attitudes, practices and outcomes through a process of making judgements. Evaluation was found to be fragile as a tool; it was able to cope with situations that were within the boundaries of normative constructions of development and behaviour but could not stand up to problematic situations. Where evaluation broke down, a neoliberal developmental discourse was turned to in the place of evaluation until such time as normative conditions were restored.

Pedagogical documentation was the means by which the whole cycle was both recorded and justified. This dual construction between neoliberal and social of practice and attitudes was found to have significant impacts on the construction of practitioners and children.

Constructions of practitioners and children draw on both neoliberal and social democratic ideologies. These conflicting constructions that exist simultaneously can do so because the space that practitioners inhabit is constructed by policy as both infused with trust for professional teachers and pervaded with the anxiety that

normative discourses arouse. Through self-evaluation practitioners were subject to a panoptical level of surveillance, that acts to ensure they reproduce both identities seamlessly, despite their contradictory nature. Through surveillance and scrutinisation, practitioners both self-governed and governed their colleagues, to reproduce the discourses of ECEC. In doing so they were impelled to act, think and believe in particular ways, embodying the “conduct of conduct” (Foucault, 1981) and performatively re-enacting the routines and rituals of a “quality” practitioner. At times while I was gathering data, this performativity was turned towards me, (both as a co-practitioner and as a researcher), as practitioners explained, described and performed themselves as experienced, trusted and agentic practitioners.

Children are constructed by policy and practitioners as at once agentic, independent and participatory but also powerless, developmentally fragile and underdeveloped, both constructions productive of human capital. The dual construction of practitioners as both professional and technical supports the divided construction of children. The agentic, independent and participatory construction of children is supported by the professional practitioner, while the powerless, fragile and underdeveloped child is supported by the technical practitioner. Both practitioners and children are caught in performative and discursive requirements that insist on both constructions being reproduced concurrently.

While the curricula claim there are no common aims of attainment, this study found that children were under constant surveillance to ensure they were meeting developmental targets based on age and stage. While these targets were not overtly

academic, they were normative. There were examples of academic milestones being used as a method of judging a child's normative development. In particular, behaviours and attitudes were seen as crucial aspects of development that children were required to acquire. Thus, agentic children act within narrow boundaries. These boundaries consist of curriculum requirements which, beneath the veneer of experimentation and expression, a neoliberal ideology reimagines education as a vehicle for accruing human capital in the form of characteristics, styles of learning and accountability. The transversal competences that underly the areas of learning were identified as being neoliberal attributes that centre on the individualised, atomised child, whose main responsibility in ECEC and pre-primary is to accrue as much human capital as possible in order to become successful (entrepreneurial) workers in the future. This conflict between ideals of education that are projected as "Finnish", consisting of the intrinsic value of childhood and of the child as inherently valued in the here and now, and the international norms of early years education as an economic investment in the future and childcare to support parents in accruing human capital in the present collide in ECEC settings. The best interests of the child, which is an important facet of Finnish ECEC is found to be undermined by the overlaying of neoliberal ideology that prioritises the needs of economically active adults over incomplete and not yet economically active children.

The accountability discourse was found to have two conflicting perspectives consisting of self-evaluation and developmental norms; these were the means by which accountability was reproduced. Self-evaluation, whether individual or as a team was found to be shaped by social norms and democratic ideals of cooperation

and democratic participation in the form of curriculum and evaluation guidelines. Where children were perceived as developing according to normative criteria, they were allowed a measure of agency within the boundaries described above. However, where individuals or groups were judged to fall outside of normative criteria, there were pathologised and measures were put in place to encourage development in the correct direction. Until return to normative development was achieved both individual and groups were subject to higher levels of surveillance, restricted activity and documentation. Examples of the child who played alone, and of groups who were required to learn emotional intelligence were observed, with group activities being planned as the method by which these children were corrected.

Therefore, where problems were encountered, evaluation was found to be inadequate in practice. This finding adds to the limited evidence already available, that the new evaluation guidelines have, at their heart, a contradiction that results in conflicting practices. Children's development is made the focus of practitioners' evaluation, a practice that is emphatically proscribed yet made inevitable. I argue that the Finnish ECEC and pre-primary accountability discourse is contradictory in content and impact. Practitioners, children and the practices they embody are conflicting and productive of practices, some of which appear to be prohibited, yet, in order to fulfil the accountability requirements, are facilitated by policy.

Chapter 9. Conclusion

Introduction

In Chapter 1, I explained that this thesis explores the ways in which policy concerning accountability in early years education shapes practice in England and Finland. In recent years this has become an important part of the sociology of early years education, but my intention has been to view the acknowledged issues of hegemonic discourses remaining uncontested at policy writing and practice levels through the perspective of policy being an active partner alongside practitioners in their settings. This perspective opens a vista of complication and complexity, of many discourses and practices operating in the setting and between practitioners, controlling what practitioners think, believe and do. This discursive perspective, while not unknown in research concerning early years education, has not been used specifically for accountability regarding pre-school children, toddlers and babies; the focus tends to be towards the older end of early years education. In this conclusion, I summarise my arguments in relation to the underlying ideologies and educational intentions of policies, and the consequences and impacts of these policies on day-to-day life in early years settings. The limitations of this project and the potential for future research are also discussed.

This thesis is not simply a comparative analysis of English and Finnish policy followed by an exploration of how policy creates a framework for practice. Rather, it examines how policy, and practitioners and managers are viewed as unequal partners in the constructions of attitudes, beliefs and practices. Policy is often regarded as an

abstract framework within which routines, rituals, practices and outcomes are achieved (Campbell, 2002). I knew from being in practice that policy is included in conversations, shapes practice, attitudes and beliefs and is occasionally challenged and resisted. Therefore, I aimed to position policy as an active agent in settings; not simply as guidance and information about statutory requirements, but an integral part of managers' and practitioner's processes in holding themselves accountable for implementing curricula. Rather than a comparison of contrasting policies and practices in two countries with different political and educational intentions I aimed to identify these international discourses and explore how far they are active in contrasting policies and practices.

This thesis has contributed to the field a critical discourse analysis of accountability policies and practices in two contrasting countries. I have shown that policy is an active agent in the lives of managers and practitioners, and far from being a remote framework within which they have agency, policy is invoked and referred to, ensuring they subjectify themselves to reproduce it. In particular, the issue of accountability, which produces discomfort in England, and is accepted as part of good practice in Finland, is shown to be underpinned by some of the same, international discourses of education (Noam, 2020). Constructions of practitioners are performatively shaped by the accountability discourse to reproduce opinions, beliefs, attitudes and practices constituted to form regimes of truth as if they were common-sense and natural. Discourses such as the importance of early childhood education in the production of the "right" kind of human capital (Hursh, 2005), the necessity to prepare children for the future of education and work, the correct way of knowing children through

universal, developmental models and the necessity of accounting for “good practice” and normative measurements of children’s learning and developing are identified as being powerful regimes of truth in both countries. The concept of quality, which permeates both countries’ policies, was found to be an undefined yet powerful discourse that was applied to all aspects of accountability (Ranta, 2023; Wood, 2019).

This chapter presents the significance of these findings about the impact of the accountability discourse in England and Finland in terms of policy and practice and their implications. The key findings and contributions of this study include the identification in literature of the lack of research regarding how policy impacts on babies and younger children, and the practitioners who work with them. My methodology contributes to the existing studies that draw on Foucault and Butler by using them across the data in this study, both policy and fieldwork, resulting in analysis that identified how policy is embodied in practice, not as a remote framework, but as a close partner constructing the daily practice, opinions, attitudes and outcomes. Furthermore, I identified how neoliberal discourses are finding their way into the attitudes and practices of Finnish practitioners, without their conscious recognition that they draw on ideological and educational discourses and intentions that conflict with their stated aims. In England, I identified that Ofsted inspection frameworks are so powerful that they are used as a curriculum, replacing the requirements and advice of the EYFS and DM where they are contradictory. Finally, I found that in both England and Finland, the educational intentions of early years education are to produce school-ready human capital.

I argue that the significance of this study is in two areas: policy analysis and a deeper understanding of the impact of the accountability discourse on early years education. My critical analysis of the accountability discourse in early years education has in both theoretical and practical implications. I begin with theoretical implications, as these may be useful for researchers in the future, regardless of which social policy area they are interested in. I follow this with findings focussed specifically on England or Finland. I finish with findings that relate to accountability in early years education.

9.1 Foucault and Butler; theoretical implications

Policy tends to be thought of as a framework that sets out the statutory requirements of legislation but that once understood and implemented leaves people free to act as they wish within that framework. My theoretical framework draws on some of the theoretical concepts of Foucault and Butler, which I applied to both policy and fieldwork disproves these thoughts. In this thesis I offer an example of a pathway through the data-collection and analysis process that continually applies both discourse analysis and the theory of performativity (Butler, 1990) to the issue. I show that policy is not a background to practice, but that it is an equal partner.

Through discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) of policies, interviews and observations, I show that regimes of truth (1979) become internalised and reproduced as if they were original thoughts, feelings, attitudes and practices. Practitioners spoke of discourses as if they were common-sense, performatively reproducing discourses such as developmentalism, normative values and working conditions as “the way things are”. Through discourse analysis of policies combined with observations and interviews the direct line between political ideologies and

educational intentions into the thoughts and beliefs of practitioners is visible.

Performativity complements this theoretical approach by showing how, rather than choosing to act and believe as policy dictates, practitioners had no choice. The practices, identities and attitudes of being an early childhood practitioner existed before the individual who had no choice but to step into the role. Performativity allowed me to question how far a person has a choice in how they act when fulfilling policy.

The use of this theoretical framework therefore challenges concepts such as agency, free choice, responsibility and fault. Accountability policy is framed by governments as ways of holding practitioners accountable, whether through evaluation or inspection, for implementing curriculum. I contend that rather than governing, policy is in fact productive of governance (Högberg and Lindgren, 2020). Practitioners must performatively self-govern. This is an example of how governmentality and performativity are used to interrogate the same issue from different perspectives to give a more insightful view. In the case of accountability policy, practitioners are held responsible for the outcome of policy and therefore self-govern, and in the manner of the panopticon (Foucault, 1991b) govern their colleagues, children and their families to ensure that, as far as possible, the outcomes are met.

Furthermore, in neoliberal England especially, but also less so in Finland, discussion about policy content is sidestepped by the accountability debate. The argument is that policy has been written by experts and the role of the practitioner is to implement it (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). This forestalls discussion, critique or

analysis of the content or intention of policy, turning it into a technical manual that is referred to by practitioners. Accountability therefore becomes about how well they do this. The question of whether the policy is worth implementing in the first place is not one that is open for debate. This is especially true of neoliberalist derived policies in England, where there is little possibility of holding those who impose the policy to account, as has been seen in the aftermath of Ruth Perry's suicide, an issue which has been disposed of through silence on the side of government.

I argue that all research concerning social policy therefore must begin with questioning what policy intends, what its ideological underpinning is and what its intentions are. Without beginning with this analysis of policy, researchers accept the discourses of the policy and reproduce them. I contend that this renders their research not simply biased, but reproductive of the dominant discourses. I therefore offer this theoretical framework as one that can be used in the future to interrogate how policy impacts on practice in any area of social policy. To bowdlerise Socrates, the unexamined policy is not worth researching.

9.2 The impact of the accountability discourse on early years education

England

The accountability discourse in England begins and ends with Ofsted. While I included the EYFS and Development Matters as key policies in the discourse, they were secondary to Ofsted. The EYFS and DM lay out what is to be inspected. The stated intention of Ofsted is to ensure that the EYFS is being implemented. However, I found that there were many aspects of the Ofsted inspection framework that reached

beyond the remit of evaluating implementation. The two aspects that I concentrate on here are the finding that Ofsted itself constituted a curriculum, that it inspected to ensure it was being implemented, and the finding that fear of Ofsted imposed a further discourse of Ofsted-readiness.

Ofsted as curriculum

The inspection frameworks are not intended to be used by settings, but only as information about what to expect during an inspection. I find this to be an unsubstantiated claim, working to provoke settings to comply with the inspection framework. All three settings referred to the Ofsted inspection frameworks as often as they did the EYFS and DM. Through many examples I highlighted that practitioners either conflated the four documents, or confused them, showing that the power of Ofsted has become hegemonic, extending far beyond its intention of ensuring the curriculum is implemented. Far from simply being present in the minds and worries of practitioners, I also found examples of practices being changed to ensure that they performatively fulfilled the requirements of Ofsted. In particular, I found that Ofsted's construction of children opposed DM's of children whose development is not consistent or logical, or the EYFS which characterises children as "unique". Ofsted imposes an alternative construction of children who develop consistently and continuously. Learning is expected to be shown immediately after a lesson or demonstration. Practitioners are held accountable for children learning in the "Ofsted-approved" manner. This has the impact of holding them accountable for children's learning that is constructed in conflicting ways according to which document they are looking at. Therefore, I find that Ofsted has added itself to the

EYFS as a part of the curriculum, a barely credible feat for an organisation that claims it makes the inspection frameworks public as information.

Ofsted-readiness

I also found that the fear of Ofsted inspection compelled practitioners to train children to behave as if there was an inspector present, even when the likelihood of an inspection for several years was improbable. Therefore, alongside the school-ready child at the end of reception, there was also the Ofsted-ready child, toddler or baby. The necessity of this training was clear through close reading and analysis of the Ofsted framework for early years settings, where expectations of children as quiet, concentrating, being happy while they learn and compliant to adult demands were found throughout the document. I provided evidence of practitioners changing lesson plans to suit this construction of children's learning, including trying to make sure this learning could be captured in learning stories as proof that the activity fulfilled the intent, implementation and impact criteria of Ofsted inspection.

Finland

Accountability in Finland is realised within a framework of evaluation. Evaluation is a key working practice in all areas of the Finnish work culture, and it can be seen as both a tool of accountability and as part of children's socialisation into Finnish culture. However, I identified that evaluation is not without consequences. The two aspects I concentrate on here are the pathologisation of non-normative development and the issue of school-readiness.

The Pathologisation of Non-normative Development

Research (Heiskanen, 2019) has already shown that children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) have a different experience of contributing to their pedagogical documentation to children without special needs, with the documentation being used to pathologise disability and return their agency to the teacher in deciding which targets they are working towards. While observing I found evidence that children who were not diagnosed with an SEN, but whose behaviour did not fit with the normative social and cooperative expectations of play were also likely to experience pathologisation. I conclude that this is a result of a weakness in the evaluation guidelines, which assume a normative child. Combined with the local curriculum used in this day care centre which used a developmental ages and stages model, teachers were drawn away from social pedagogy, whereby they were constructed as agentic and trusted into being technicians, following a manual. Additionally, children were either viewed as socially constructed where their play was normative, or developmentally constructed where their play caused concern. I argue that international discourse of developmentalism (Formen and Nuttall, 2014), which promotes a normative developmental model is drawn on by practitioners in instances where the evaluation guidelines and core curricula fail to offer adequate support. In this case, they tried to encourage the child to play with others, but this support was rejected. Rather than continue with an approach shaped by social pedagogy, and view the problem as in the environment, they situated the problem within the child, made it her issue and worked on her to find a solution.

The influence of international discourses of developmentalism was also evident in the pre-primary teachers' use of standardised tests for mathematics, language and literacy. These draw on normative developmental models and were used to identify children who needed support. However, this contradicts the Pre-primary curriculum's claim that there are no common aims for children's attainment. The question I am left with is, why do teachers who are trained in social pedagogy fall so easily into developmentalism? It is possible that my because small number of participants inadvertently included only experienced practitioners with over twenty years of experience, they drew on their training and ingrained practice which included more emphasis on developmental models. Further research including participants who have trained more recently might offer different insights.

My contribution to the literature in this area is first to act as a warning. Although research has identified children with SEN as being at risk of being pathologised, my research suggests that any child who fails to behave or develop normatively risks this pathologisation. I also offer a challenge to Finnish policy makers, to consider how developmental discourses are creeping into the educational discourse of Finland, and how they might be countered, through strengthening the social pedagogy of the curricula and evaluation guidelines to embrace children who are without the normative constructions of children.

School-and -future-readiness

School readiness is often understood in terms of pre-academic skills such as early numeracy, literacy and language skills. As discussed above, pre-primary teachers

were concerned to identify which children might be showing signs of struggling in these areas so they could provide them with extra support before starting school. However, alongside these pre-academic skills, I observed that teachers with all age groups were concerned that children learnt various attributes that might be called behavioural soft skills. Practitioners identified behaviours such as sitting and listening, putting hands up to answer questions and working cooperatively as necessary for children to succeed in school. Parallel to these soft skills were character traits such as participation, putting the group before one's own needs and learning how to disagree and compromise without resorting to violence or harsh words. These skills are valued throughout Finnish culture, which include concepts such as 'sisu' – the ability to keep going when you want to give up, and "talkoo" – reciprocity. These characteristics and skills are regarded as necessary for children to learn in order to be school-ready. These skills represent a form of human capital that is meaningful only in the context of Finland but nonetheless are needed for Finns to be employable. They therefore constitute a form of human capital. I therefore argue that far from recognising the intrinsic value of childhood, a child's time in ECEC is in fact a time of preparation for school.

9.3 Quality as relative and nebulous

The story of quality is an old one. It has been separately addressed in the English (Rudnoe, 2020) and Finnish (Hujala, Fonsén and Elo, 2013) contexts before. However, it is rare to find research that critiques it in both a neoliberal and social democratic context and finds that the same story is being told in both. Quality as a concept is not defined in either Finnish or English policies. In English policy there is no attempt to

address this as a concept nor as something that needs addressing. In this, English policy reproduced the neoliberal belief that experts decide on policy content, and it is therefore beyond critique. Policy acts as a manual for technicians in the form of instruction for practitioners to implement. In Finnish policy the concept of quality is addressed. This reflects the social democratic ideology of participation and the construction of practitioners as trusted professionals. However, neither policy in fact offer a definition. Both offer a similar construction of what quality is, which is: *quality is implementing the curriculum correctly.*

There are many implications for researchers and practitioners that result from this (lack of) definition of quality. These form the final section of this consideration of my conclusions. I offer two discussions that are a consequence of this finding; the first discussion concerns systematic disadvantage, the second relates to the accountability discourse.

Quality and Systematic Disadvantage

I argue that the construction of quality as implementing the curriculum correctly leaves practitioners and researchers with problems. For both, leaving the concept of quality undefined and unchallenged means it is applied by inspectors, evaluators, the media and parents to mean anything and nothing. It is used as a disciplinary tool to enforce practices and it is used to ascribe positive characteristics to inspection and evaluation frameworks and curricula without justification.

For researchers, the implications of using the term without contest is to accept the accountability framework and curricula without interrogation. Investigating the quality of an aspect of a curriculum without first questioning the ideological and educational intentions and the developmental or social constructions of learning that underpin it, is to reproduce those intentions and constructions unconsciously. When considering curricula, this is imperative. Research (Bradbury, 2013) has demonstrated that systematic disadvantage is built into the assessment of young children. This research adds to this body of evidence, showing that where curricula are developmental, children who by an accident of birth have parents with the cultural capital to support their learning and growth in sanctioned ways are advantaged over those who do not. Therefore, research that leaves the construction of curricula unchallenged inadvertently adds to and accelerates the story of advantage for some and disadvantage for others.

For practitioners in England, the implications of the use of the term “quality” are substantial. The reception class children found the Early Learning Goals a challenge, compared with children in more advantaged areas. Yet the quality of her teaching and the children’s learning was not considered in this context. The Profile at the end of reception and the looming Ofsted inspection were the two contexts in which quality was applied. The concept of quality increased anxiety in all the settings, shown in practitioners’ introducing practices in unintended ways, such as the nursery applying intent, implementation and impact into the planning framework. Constructions of both practitioners and children by practitioners were impacted by the anxiety to prove quality to Ofsted.

In Finland, the issue of quality can explain why teachers drew on developmental models when the social pedagogy model failed to provide support. Quality was defined as implementing the curriculum which entailed ensuring that children were learning and developing in normative, expected ways. However, because the policy stated there were no common aims for children's attainment, the teachers had to find alternative ways of assessing this. The discourse of normative development creates a division between children who conform and those who do not, setting up systematic disadvantage for children who do not demonstrate normative development. As the teachers' evidence shows, they used standardised testing in the absence of guidance from national accountability policies. The tests created a binary expected/not expected level of development and the consequence for the child was to either be allowed to take the agentic, participatory route, or alternatively be put onto the route of imposed intervention, with less agency and participation. Children who were found to be developing non-normatively experienced a second wave of disadvantage as they had less opportunity to practice the culturally necessary skills of target settings and self-evaluating progress.

In Jyväskylä, where I conducted my research, developmentalism was the theoretical construction of children in the local curriculum. As not all local curricula draw on ages and stages models of development and learning, this is not a nationwide situation. However, I argue that it is indicative of the unsure foundation that ECEC curricula and evaluation guidelines are built on. The fact that it is possible for local policy writers to

draw on developmentalism rather than social pedagogy suggests that further work needs to be done to support teachers, policy writers and managers.

Quality and the Accountability Discourse

The lack of definition of quality has a fundamental impact on accountability discourses. I argue that the examples of England and Finland both show that where quality is left undefined the outcomes are problematic. Quality is claimed as a positive attribute that can be observed, assessed and judged, yet without a definition the judgements must be questionable. Quality as part of the Ofsted process is used as a powerful tool; it impels teachers into performatively collecting data and changing activities, yet it can never conclusively be shown to have produced better education. In Finland, the discourse of quality compels teachers to turn to developmentalism rather than using evaluation as a tool to reflexively consider alternative. The concept of quality, and its attendant lack of definition, is constructive of different problems in each context. Consequently, I reason that the term itself is problematic.

9.4 Implications

The conclusions that I come to at the end of this study might appear to be somewhat critical and negative. I have established that the accountability discourse is powerful, emanating from international organisations that are not held accountable by any independent body. I have shown that the neoliberal ideology that drives accountability resists being named, which makes it harder to identify and expose. Yet, my research identifies and exposes not only the ideology, but its intentions and practices. While English politics continues to deny the existence of neoliberalism, it is

embedded across all political parties. The logic of the economy is seen in all political literature whatever the party. In Finland, the same processes are in play, with neoliberal concepts taking on cloaked in Finnish cultural discourses, seen in the collective concept of *sisu* being reimagined as individualised resilience.

The implications for research are to challenge researchers to recognise that whatever their issue, they and their research topic commence from a position that has been constructed through their location in a particular culture and at a particular time. Therefore, their research pursuits do not come simply from interests and specialisations; they have been formed through exposure to normative discourses about their topic and the wider world. I contend (not an original contention) that this is as true of mathematical and scientific research as it is of social and humanities research. For researchers in education this is particularly true. Therefore, I argue all research should begin by recognising and identifying the dominant discourses that pervade the policies and practices they are interrogating.

I argue that the greatest benefit of doing my research in two countries was not that I could compare them, although that has been rewarding. I would say that when I was at my most uncomfortable, I learned the most. When I was in Finland, I thought this was that time. It was discomfiting to be in an early years environment that looked similar to home, but with subtle differences. Older children, larger rooms, indoor climbing apparatus, naps after lunch, children in the kitchen. Disconcertingly for an English practitioner, I walked into Setting 1, opening the garden gate, going through the front doors and into the cloakroom area without having to ring any bells or be let

in past locked doors. Observing in my first room, I offered my phone to the lead teacher. She looked at it, and me in confusion, thinking I wanted her personal number. I explained it was for her to put away while I was in the setting. A long explanation, a lot of laughter and some severe cultural dissonance on both sides later, we established I could keep my phone, I could even take photos if I wished, so long as no faces were shown. I did not take photos. It was a step too far for my safeguarding lead self to cope with. However, the real shock was observing in England. I had become used to house keepers, five hours a week of PPA per teacher, large purpose-built premises and a style of education that looked child led with endless afternoons of free play. To return to small, cramped settings, where the practitioners cooked breakfast and tea, and washed up, leaving colleagues to cope in crowded classrooms set out with areas of learning giving pre-academic lessons to babies was shocking. It was a salutary experience.

I questioned everything I had observed in both countries. It was at this point that I began to question the accountability discourse in both countries, realising I was not going to be concluding that one country could learn from the other. Rather I realised the importance of studies such as this, which encounter the uncomfortable and attempt to sit with the discomfort (Thomson, 2013). I hope that by using critical discourse analysis and performativity as I have, to create the uncomfortable realisation that everything is not as it seemed, I can offer a theoretical framework that has been used to disrupt what is known.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. I acknowledge that I was able to observe in a limited number of settings in each country and therefore they are not indicative of typical early years settings. My difficulties in recruiting settings to participate in England suggest that they are not representative of practitioners as they were the only ones prepared to participate. Indeed, as my experiences with my colleagues showed, they were not interviewed because they were worried about being considered uneducated. The settings that participated in Finland were part of the University of Jyväskylä's teacher training scheme and were therefore used to being observed and interviewed. They also cannot be considered typical of Finland.

A further limitation was my failure to interview managers and pedagogical leaders in Finland. This was due to the sudden the lockdown that occurred at the beginning of the Pandemic. Included in this lacuna are the voices of children. I decided not to involve children in the study for ethical and practical reasons, but I realise that this plays into the construction of children as unfinished and "in development". This construction assumes that children are unknowing and have no reasonable responses to serious questions. This research has led me to question that conclusion.

I am also conscious that I left out a large proportion of the data that I gathered. Had I chosen different theoretical perspectives or themes to discuss I would have used a different selection of what I saw, heard and gathered. From a feminist ethics of care perspective, I am aware that I have chosen extracts from interviews and fieldnotes that sustain the arguments I am making. Therefore, although I have been careful of the responsibility, I have to my participants to allow their voices to be heard as they

intended, I could only include a small fraction of what they shared with me.

Therefore, the risk is I have distorted or misrepresented their contribution. I have attempted, through remaining reflexive throughout the process of fieldwork and analysis to present their words in the manner I believe they intended.

Further research

As I have mentioned there are many questions this thesis provokes regarding further research. I have concluded that the term “accountability discourse” is a profitable way to understand how accountability is constructed through policy and encountered in practice. Therefore, this provides the possibility of interrogating the accountability discourse of any early years education policy. In both England and Finland, the question of how the accountability discourse impacts practice would merit from further, more in-depth research. In particular, the data regarding the issue of Ofsted-readiness in England suggests that this would benefit from further research. The Finnish problem of developmentalism creeping into practice through such means as local curricula and teachers’ actions to fulfil the requirement to show that curricula are being taught suggests an area of further research. The question of quality has been critiqued many times already. However, this study has shown that the issue is spreading beyond the Anglo-American world of developmental psychology into areas that should have more defence against is an issue that deserves further research.

Concluding comments

This study aimed to explore the impact of the accountability discourse on early years settings in England and Finland. My intention was to use a theoretical framework of

Foucault and Butler to interrogate this issue both “top down” by using critical discourse analysis and “bottom up” by using the theory of Performativity. However, I found that I was able to apply both theories to both analysis of policies and analysis of data gathered through field work. What I found was that policy is far more powerful than is often assumed. Far from being a remote framework, it instilled itself into the minds and actions of practitioners and shaped not only their practice, but their thoughts, attitudes and beliefs. Therefore, policy was constructive of how practitioners constructed their own sense of self and how they constructed children. Accountability is productive and reproductive. In England this was seen in the way Ofsted inspection frameworks came to be used as curricula, while in Finland a lack of support from the evaluation framework and curricula led teachers to fall back on developmental models of learning to allow them to hold themselves accountable through self-evaluation. In both systems accountability was found to be responsible for imposing systematic disadvantage. The accountability discourse needs to be challenged at policy and practice levels.

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Appendix 1. Interview schedule

Loose structure/format of interview

Introductory explanation

General planning questions

Influences on planning

Interview Schedule

Planning for individual children (not IEP in England)

Planning for individual children (IEP in Finland)

Planning for a group

Pedagogical documents/learning journeys

Self-evaluation

Personnel/Practitioners/Managers

What are the impacts of policy on practice? Exploring the experiences of personnel in ECEC.

ECEC personnel (Not pre-primary)/ EYFS practitioners 1. How do you plan? –

1. alone, or as a team, division of work between the team members?
 2. Can you talk about how you do your planning – what notes or thoughts you bring
to a planning session;
 3. how often;
 4. where;
 5. how do you record planning;
 6. do you have planning sessions with different agendas, for instance, sometimes planning for individual children but other times planning for the group.
2. What are you drawing on when you plan? – Whatever is mentioned – follow up with “Can you tell me more about your experience of working with ...?”
1. National curriculum
 2. Local curriculum/Development Matters/other curricula, philosophy etc
 3. Professional development information
 4. Own experience
 5. Pedagogical knowledge
 6. Guidelines or developmental guides; municipal guides.
3. Can you tell me about planning for individual children?
1. Is there a difference between IEP/individual child planning and planning in between IEP/learning journey’s? Can you tell me more about....?
 2. IEP’s – how do you prepare for an IEP Finland/England individual children?
 3. How do you follow up?
 4. What guides do you use to support you in planning (if any at all?)
 5. What are your priorities in planning? What is beneficial for the child/ what do you need to know before you can plan?
4. Group planning
1. Are there age specific tasks /skills that you consider when planning for a group activity?
 2. What are your priorities when planning for a group? Are they different dependent on age?

3. Millaisille ajanjaksoille ryhmän toiminnan suunnittelua tehdään? Which time periods do you do group planning for (fall/spring/whole year, month, week)?
5. What type of pedagogical documentation do you do? What kind of individual documentation do you do?
 1. How do you record children's pedagogical documents/learning journeys?
 2. How do you decide what to include?
 3. How often do you add to them? Are there guidelines about this?
 4. What is considered "good practice" regarding pedagogical documentation/ learning journeys? Can you talk about what support, training, information you get

about how to produce them?

e. How do you assess and follow children's learning and development?

6. Self-reflection.
 1. This is an important part of being an early years educator. Can you talk about what impact self-reflection has on your practice?
 2. How formal is it? Do you use a form or other guideline, or is it something that you have developed for yourself? If you are comfortable, can you describe a time when you reflected on an activity and this resulted in you doing it differently next time?
7. What are the main challenges in planning and evaluating/reflecting on practice ECEC/ EYFS for you in your work?

Pre-primary personnel - Finland only

1. What skills would you ideally like a child to have when they begin pre-primary?
What is the priority of the ECEC in your opinion?

Pedagogical leader - Finland only 1. Planning

1. Considering planning ECEC, what is it that you do in your work?
2. How would you define your vision of planning the ECEC?
3. What do you see as your role being, in regards to planning in your setting? Can you tell more about how you realise your role? (supporting personnel, giving advice, providing guidance about how planning is done, recorded, reflected on)
4. How do you share you vision for planning (staff meetings, information emails, not at all – it is personal to each ECEC teacher, etc)
5. Where do you receive support from? (Municipality? Other?)
2. What
3. IEP's

type of evaluation of the pedagogical work do you use in your setting?


- Finland only

1. How would you expect teachers to prepare for an IEP meeting?
2. How do teachers evaluate a child's progress so that they know what to plan in the new IEP?

4. Pedagogical documents/learning journeys

1. Does your setting have a special way of presenting the pedagogical documents/learning journeys? Is it different to other settings?
2. What is included? How is that decided on?
3. How do you ensure they are of a good quality?

Appendix 2. Example of poster displayed in English settings to recruit participants



Post-graduate research study
Planning and recording in the EYFS study

- Are you an EYFS practitioner?
- Do you have key children?
- Do you plan for your key children and record their progress?
- Are you prepared to take part in a *confidential interview and discuss your experiences and beliefs about working with children?

You will be interviewed in your setting at a time we arrange to suit you

You will be fully informed about the nature of the study before any interview takes place.

All responses will be thoroughly anonymised (you may use an alias if you prefer)

This research is closely supervised and conducted in strict accordance with the University of Suffolk's Ethical Procedures and Policies.

*Participants will be fully informed about the limits of confidentiality before any interview takes place

PLEASE CALL ANNA MAX ON 07930442665 IF YOU WISH TO KNOW MORE
(Interview will typically last no more than 1 hour.)

Appendix 4. Information for participants



University
of Suffolk

Participant Information Sheet

Study title: A comparative exploration and analysis of the accountability discourse in early years education in England and Finland

Main Investigator: Anna Max

Academic Supervisor (for Student research): Dr Sarah Richards, Dr Pere Ayling

You are invited to take part in a study exploring your experiences as a practitioner in supporting children's growth and development within the framework of the EYFS in England and the ECEC in Finland.

This Participant Information Sheet will help you decide if you would like to take part. It sets out why we are doing the study, what your participation would involve, what the benefits and risks to you might be, and what would happen after the study ends. We will go through this information with you and answer any questions you may have. You do not have to decide today whether or not you will participate in this study. If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign the Informed Consent Form. You will be given a copy of both the Participant Information Sheet and the Informed Consent Form to keep. Please make sure you have read and understood all the pages of the Participant Information Form.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this PhD study is to

- explore the experiences of practitioners in their work of supporting children's growth and development in early years settings
- explore the influence that the EYFS in England or the ECEC in Finland has on the kind of activities you plan
- explore how you assess or evaluate progress or practice.

2. What will my participation in the study involve?

Your participation will be voluntary and the researcher is very grateful to you for deciding to take part. You have been asked because to participate because you have valuable experience in working in an early-years setting and your opinions and experiences will add to the worth of the study. Practitioners are not often asked for their experiences about how policy impacts on their practice and the researcher believes it is important that their views are heard.

If you would like to take part,

Participant Information Sheet-Template –version 3 dated 28 February 2018

Appendix 5. Consent form



Informed Consent Form

The University of Suffolk expects all research to be carried out in accordance with the following principles:

- The emotional well-being, physical well-being, rights, dignity and personal values of research participants should be secured.
- Research participants and contributors should be fully informed regarding the purpose, methods and end use of the research. They should be clear on what their participation involves and any risks that are associated with the process. These risks should be clearly articulated and if possible quantified.
- Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from coercion. Participants have the right to withdraw at any time.

This research has been approved by the University of Suffolk Ethics Panel. Should you have any concerns about the Ethics of this research, please feel free to contact the Chair of the Ethics Panel, Professor Emma Bond e.bond@uos.ac.uk (01473 338564) or the Research Development Manager, Andreea Tocca a.tocca@uos.ac.uk (01473 338656).

Study Title: A comparative exploration and analysis of the accountability discourse in early years education in England and Finland
Main Investigator: Anna Max
Academic Supervisor (for Student Research): Dr Sarah Richards, Dr Pere Ayling
Please initial box:

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet/letter (delete as applicable) dated *[insert date]* explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences.

I understand that my responses will be anonymised and any personal or identifying information removed from published materials

I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.

I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be

Template Participant Informed Consent-Version 5 dated 28th February 2018

<p>identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.</p>																	
<p>I understand that the data I provide will be used solely for the purposes of the research study outlined and will not be used for any other purpose. I also understand how long my data will be stored for.</p>		<input type="checkbox"/>															
<p>I agree to take part in the above research project.</p>		<input type="checkbox"/>															
<table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 40%; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;">Name of Participant <i>(or legal representative)</i></td> <td style="width: 20%; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;">Date</td> <td style="width: 40%; border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;">Signature</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;">Name of person taking consent* <i>(if different from lead researcher)</i></td> <td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;">Date</td> <td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;">Signature</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3" style="padding: 5px 0 0 0;"><i>To be signed and dated in presence of the participant</i></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;">Researcher*</td> <td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;">Date</td> <td style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;">Signature</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="3" style="padding: 5px 0 0 0;"><i>To be signed and dated in presence of the participant</i></td> </tr> </table> <p><i>*Delete as appropriate</i></p> <p>Copies: <i>Once this form has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants.</i></p> <p><i>A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record, which must be kept in a secure location.</i></p>			Name of Participant <i>(or legal representative)</i>	Date	Signature	Name of person taking consent* <i>(if different from lead researcher)</i>	Date	Signature	<i>To be signed and dated in presence of the participant</i>			Researcher*	Date	Signature	<i>To be signed and dated in presence of the participant</i>		
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<i>To be signed and dated in presence of the participant</i>																	
Researcher*	Date	Signature															
<i>To be signed and dated in presence of the participant</i>																	

Appendix 6. List of codes

Organised alphabetically)

Field note codes:

- Behaviour (observed)
- Behaviour management
- Child-led
- Environment
- Expectations
- Inspection talk
- Intentions
- Professionalisation/deprofessionalisation
- Self-evaluation
- Self-regulation
- Teaching style

Policy Analysis Codes:

- Agency
- Assessment
- Cooperation
- Development
- Ideology
- Inspection/evaluation
- Intention
- Learning
- Needs/rights of child
- Normative/non-normative
- Pedagogy
- Qualifications
- Self-evaluation

- Who's responsibility?

Interview codes:

- Constructions of children
 - "Children should be children"
 - "concerning" development
 - "good" development
 - Acceptable behaviour
 - Preparing
- Constructions of practitioners
 - "Good"
 - "Unacceptable"
 - Cooperation
 - Teamwork
- Curriculum
- Development
- Funding
- Learning
- Normative/non-normative statements
- Parents
- Planning
- Pressures/stress/anxiety/worry
 - Inspection
 - Pressures to observe/record observations every day
 - Interactions with parents
 - Supervision
 - Finance
- Proving progress
 - Pedagogical documentation
 - Learning journey
 - Matrix

- Purpose/intent
- Surveillance
 - Of children
 - Of parents
 - Of practitioners
- Qualifications
 - Trust
 - Not worth it
 - Low/high level
- Recruitment
- Teaching

Appendix 7. Narrative description of participating settings in Finland and England

Finland

Setting 1

Setting 1 was a päiväkoti (daycare centre) with one group per age range. It was an English immersion daycare centre, meaning that certain routines were conducted in English to introduce children to spoken English and start to feel confident in hearing and speaking it. Ilona (a pseudonym) was an English primary school teacher and spoke mostly English in the classroom. It was also a sports and arts specialist centre. Setting 1 had children from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and had a small number of children from immigrant backgrounds and who did not speak Finnish as a first language. It was in temporary accommodation while a larger, purpose-built centre was being built. I spent time in the pre-school room (children aged 5-6) and the 3-5 year olds room, and was at this setting for five days. Each group had a suite of rooms with different purposes. In the pre-school suite they had two rooms with concertina doors between that were opened and closed during the according to use. The back wall was covered in floor to ceiling cupboards, which contained pull down bunkbeds. On a side wall was a climbing frame which could be pulled out on ceiling rails; ropes, rope ladders and swings were suspended from the ceiling and could be tied out of the way when not in use. An adult height table with adult chairs and child chairs that bring children to the height of the table were also in this room. There was a small, portable whiteboard and benches that were put out in a horseshoe for morning meetings. In the other room were open shelves with plastic, lidded storage boxes with toys and games in. There was a cupboard with art materials and a low

shelving unit with a drawer for each child. There were more tables and chairs and this room was where the children ate lunch. Outside this room was a cloakroom area with benches that was used throughout the day as an additional area to play and read in. Boxes of books were stored out here. This area was shared with the 3-5 group and children enjoyed meeting and playing or reading in mixed ages. This combination of beds, physical activities, tables and chairs, and accessible but packed away toys was typical for this setting. The overall atmosphere was light, spacious and uncluttered. The garden was large with a climbing frame, a man-made hill that the children sledged and slid down and bushes that the children played in. There was a cross-country ski area next door that the children used daily, a frozen pond within two minutes' walk that they skated on every week and a school nearby with a swimming pool they visited weekly. I accompanied groups to all these activities during my week with the centre. While I was there groups also visited the local library and the pre-school children joined the grade 1 children at the school for the afternoon. All these activities were timetabled to happen weekly.

Setting 2

Setting 2 was a larger, purpose-built daycare centre. It was aesthetically very beautiful in the Finnish/Nordic style of blond wood and lots of large windows. It had a 24h facility to accommodate the children of shift workers at the hospital next door. The socio-economic backgrounds of the children were not as wide as in the previous setting. There were many more children with Finnish as a second language. There were two groups of each age range, each with purpose-built facilities that they did not share with other groups. I spent time in a baby room, toddler room and 3–5-year-

olds room. There was also a large garden with new play equipment. I also arrived at 6.30am one morning to spend time in the overnight room as the children woke up and had breakfast before going to their group rooms. Children who arrived before the session time of 8.30 also came to this room and many had breakfast. I spent three days at this setting.

As with the previous setting, each group had a suite of rooms. In this setting the rooms were relatively small, but they also had a large sports hall that they used when the weather was poor, or for timetabled PE lessons. As well as kitchens where meals and snacks were prepared, a family style kitchen was shared between two groups. The baby and toddler groups that I observed had a kitchen in between their rooms. The practitioners used this as an additional room, and siblings enjoyed meeting and playing together in here. There were a couple of ovens, a microwave and a large table with children's chairs. Children had access whenever the door was open, and an adult was present. The baby suite consisted of a room with two round tables, eight children's chairs and three adult chairs which all fitted the table. There was a small toybox, a rug on a laminated floor and a few bean bags. The adjoining room had a bookshelf, a couple of cots and bunk bed cupboards. The 3-5 suite of rooms also had a kitchen that was shared with the pre-school group. Children used the kitchen table as a place to choose to work or play, especially messy craft activities. Smaller rooms had single activities, like a dressing up box, or a sofa and box of books. A larger room had a carpet and was used for group lessons. The children used all the rooms, without an adult necessarily in sight, although always within hearing. The atmosphere was homely, due to the suites of smaller rooms including kitchens.

Setting 3 was a large daycare on the edge of the town. It shared a building with another daycare. Reflecting the Finnish practice of going to the local daycare, the catchment areas for these two daycare centres spread in opposite directions. The children all went on to the same elementary school, housed on the same campus which included a unit for profoundly disabled students and a comprehensive school. There were over 1000 children aged 1-16 on site. Also on the campus were support staff such as Occupational Therapists, Educational Psychologists and specialists in all types of educational support. These specialists were available to the teachers when needed and went out to visit other centres in their care. I spent two days in this setting, where 45% of the children were of immigrant background. I spent most of the time in the pre-school room, but also in the 3-5 room. I was not able to record the interview because one practitioner asked that I took notes instead. I interviewed the teacher and nursery nurse of the pre-school room and had planned to return to interview the 3-5 team together but was unable to due to Covid-19 state imposed restrictions.

England

The Pre-school

The pre-school was a rural, single room setting accommodating 2–4-year-olds. The building was of a portacabin style. It had a mixed cohort of children, with some from private housing and some from social housing. They had several children with language issues, due either to English being an additional language or developmental

delays. They were a popular setting in the area and places were sought after. They offered care from 8am-6pm, throughout the year. I interviewed the manager of this setting who was also a practitioner. There were 25 children in this setting on the two days I visited. The children had access to a small but well-resourced garden including a climbing frame and a mud kitchen and sometimes the children visited the playground adjacent to the pre-school. Children could have a packed lunch or a cooked lunch, which was prepared by the practitioners in a kitchen that had half-walls to prevent entry by children but was a part of the room. The room was set up with many small areas aligned with the areas of learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Bookshelves and furniture were used to create these areas. There was a carpet in one corner with books in baskets around it that could seat most of the children. It was well resourced, but because it had so many activities and areas set out, it quickly became disorganised and tidying up at the end of the session was an issue the staff were working to find solutions to. Younger children transported materials from one area to another and then left them when they moved onto the next activity. Being only one room, it felt noisy and quite chaotic. Although there were designated quiet areas, the single room did not afford much escape from the noise. Throughout the two days I was in the setting I chatted informally with the other practitioners and although they did not want to be interviewed, they were happy for me to record their thoughts in my notebook.

The Nursery

The nursery was a Private Daycare Provider on the outskirts of a large town, which followed the Montessori philosophy. It had three rooms, accommodating babies from

3 months to 2 years, toddlers from 2-3 years and pre-schoolers from 3-4 years. They were a popular and well-regarded setting and their clients were middle-class and worked. I spent time in all three rooms and interviewed the leader of the baby room and the manager. The baby room had a maximum of 8 babies, the toddler a maximum of 9 toddlers and the pre-school room a maximum of 16 children. All three classrooms had access to a large garden with many areas reflecting the Montessori areas of learning, a sandpit, a climbing area and a tree with a swing and ropes. This setting had two practitioners who were based in the garden every morning. Each room was laid out in areas that corresponded to the Montessori curriculum. The children were taught to put activities and materials away after using them, and the classrooms were relatively quiet and ordered, although the pre-school room was noticeably noisier and more chaotic, due to children playing games that involved racing and shouting. Although there were a lot of activities on the shelves, I noticed that only a few were accessed. I interviewed the lead practitioner of the baby room and the manager. As with the previous setting, I was able to record conversations in my notebook, but practitioners were not comfortable in being recorded.

The reception class

The reception class was one of two reception classes in an urban primary school. The school was in a very deprived area and all the children lived close by. Most lived in social housing. It had a nursery attached and, in many ways, integrated, for instance, sharing Forest School sessions. I spent a day in the reception class and interviewed the class teacher. The reception class and the parallel reception class shared access to a joint snack and kitchen area, toilets and art materials. They had a sheltered,

covered area outside that housed the free-flow area. The shelter was not permanent and during the October morning, it was quite chilly and the children needed coats. This area was set up each morning according to the children's interests and needs. The lead teacher confided that they were under-resourced and that she could easily spend several thousand pounds on new equipment and toys. Some areas such as sand and water were permanent with resources changing daily. As the class was part of a primary school they had access to a sports hall, meals cooked on site and the forest school area. I interviewed the EYFS lead teacher and the head teacher showed me around the school. There were two teaching assistants, but they were very busy because they should have had a third colleague who was absent. Therefore, I did not have a chance to chat with them as they were constantly working with children and recording observations. I was careful not to make their work any harder.

Appendix 8. Early Learning Goals, EYFS

Communication and Language

ELG: Listening, Attention and Understanding

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Listen attentively and respond to what they hear with relevant questions, comments and actions when being read to and during whole class discussions and small group interactions.
- Make comments about what they have heard and ask questions to clarify their understanding.
- Hold conversation when engaged in back-and-forth exchanges with their teacher and peers.

ELG: Speaking

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Participate in small group, class and one-to-one discussions, offering their own ideas, using recently introduced vocabulary.
- Offer explanations for why things might happen, making use of recently introduced vocabulary from stories, non-fiction, rhymes and poems when appropriate.
- Express their ideas and feelings about their experiences using full sentences, including use of past, present and future tenses and making use of conjunctions, with modelling and support from their teacher.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

ELG: Self-Regulation

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Show an understanding of their own feelings and those of others, and begin to regulate their behaviour accordingly.
- Set and work towards simple goals, being able to wait for what they want and control their immediate impulses when appropriate.
- Give focused attention to what the teacher says, responding appropriately even when engaged in activity, and show an ability to follow instructions involving several ideas or actions.

ELG: Managing Self

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Be confident to try new activities and show independence, resilience and perseverance in the face of challenge.
- Explain the reasons for rules, know right from wrong and try to behave accordingly.
- Manage their own basic hygiene and personal needs, including dressing, going to the toilet and understanding the importance of healthy food choices.

ELG: Building Relationships

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Work and play cooperatively and take turns with others.
- Form positive attachments to adults and friendships with peers.
- Show sensitivity to their own and to others' needs.

Physical Development

ELG: Gross Motor Skills

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Negotiate space and obstacles safely, with consideration for themselves and others.
- Demonstrate strength, balance and coordination when playing.
- Move energetically, such as running, jumping, dancing, hopping, skipping and climbing.

ELG: Fine Motor Skills

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Hold a pencil effectively in preparation for fluent writing – using the tripod grip in almost all cases.
- Use a range of small tools, including scissors, paint brushes and cutlery.
- Begin to show accuracy and care when drawing.

Literacy

ELG: Comprehension

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Demonstrate understanding of what has been read to them by retelling stories and narratives using their own words and recently introduced vocabulary.
- Anticipate – where appropriate – key events in stories.
- Use and understand recently introduced vocabulary during discussions about stories, non-fiction, rhymes and poems and during role-play.

ELG: Word Reading

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Say a sound for each letter in the alphabet and at least 10 digraphs.
- Read words consistent with their phonic knowledge by sound-blending.
- Read aloud simple sentences and books that are consistent with their phonic knowledge, including some common exception words.

ELG: Writing

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Write recognisable letters, most of which are correctly formed.
- Spell words by identifying sounds in them and representing the sounds with a letter or letters.
- Write simple phrases and sentences that can be read by others.

Mathematics

ELG: Number

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Have a deep understanding of numbers to 10, including the composition of each number.
- Subitise (recognise quantities without counting) up to 5.
- Automatically recall (without reference to rhymes, counting or other aids) number bonds up to 5 (including subtraction facts) and some number bonds to 10, including double facts.

ELG: Numerical Patterns

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Verbally count beyond 20, recognising the pattern of the counting system.
- Compare quantities up to 10 in different contexts, recognising when one quantity is greater than, less than or the same as the other quantity.
- Explore and represent patterns within numbers up to 10, including evens and odds, double facts and how quantities can be distributed equally.

Understanding the World

ELG: Past and Present

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Talk about the lives of the people around them and their roles in society.
- Know some similarities and differences between things in the past and now, drawing on their experiences and what has been read in class.
- Understand the past through settings, characters and events encountered in books read in class and storytelling.

ELG: People, Culture and Communities

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Describe their immediate environment using knowledge from observation, discussion, stories, non-fiction texts and maps.
- Know some similarities and differences between different religious and cultural communities in this country, drawing on their experiences and what has been read

in class.

- Explain some similarities and differences between life in this country and life in other countries, drawing on knowledge from stories, non-fiction texts and – when appropriate – maps.

ELG: The Natural World

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Explore the natural world around them, making observations and drawing pictures of animals and plants.
- Know some similarities and differences between the natural world around them and contrasting environments, drawing on their experiences and what has been read in class.
- Understand some important processes and changes in the natural world around them, including the seasons and changing states of matter.

Expressive Arts and Design

ELG: Creating with Materials

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Safely use and explore a variety of materials, tools and techniques, experimenting with colour, design, texture, form and function.
- Share their creations, explaining the process they have used.
- Make use of props and materials when role playing characters in narratives and stories.

ELG: Being Imaginative and Expressive

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Invent, adapt and recount narratives and stories with peers and their teacher.
- Sing a range of well-known nursery rhymes and songs.
- Perform songs, rhymes, poems and stories with others, and – when appropriate – try to move in time with music.

Appendix 9. Indicators (Vlasov et. al., 2019, pp. 76-77)

4.2 Process-related factors of ECEC quality and the indicators describing them

Staff-child interaction

1. Interaction is positive, caring, encouraging and gentle. The staff are committed to each child and the child group.
2. The staff interact reciprocally with the children in a manner compatible with the children's development, interests and learning capabilities.
3. The staff work sensitively, taking notice of the children's initiatives and responding to them in a manner that supports the children's participation and agency.
4. The staff's language use is as rich and diverse as possible taking the children's age and level of development into account. The staff adapt their language use to the child's world of experience, verbalise the activities, and encourage children to participate in daily linguistic interaction as permitted by the child's capabilities and skills.
5. The staff take all children in the group into consideration and understand the different ways in which the children express themselves.

Pedagogical planning, documentation, evaluation and development

6. The staff are responsible for the planning, documentation, evaluation and development of activities in line with the curriculum in a manner that supports the children's learning and development.
7. The staff observe and document the children's daily lives in early childhood education and care regularly and systematically in order to understand the child's

world of experience. Information produced together with the children and using diverse methods is used in the planning, implementation, evaluation and development of the activities.

Pedagogical activities and learning environments

8. ECEC activities are meaningful and inspiring for the children and challenge them to learn.

9. The staff and the children carry out together versatile pedagogical activities based on play, physical activity, arts and cultural heritage that offer positive learning experiences for the children. The activities promote the achievement of objectives set for different areas of learning and transversal competence.

10. Children's individuality is accounted for, helping each child identify and find their strengths and interests.

11. Meals, rest periods, transitions, dressing and other basic activities are carried out with pedagogical goals in mind.

12. A child's individual needs for support are recognised. The staff assess the need for support together with the guardians, and if necessary, appropriate support is organised for a child in multidisciplinary cooperation.

13. The pedagogical learning environment planned and built together by the staff and the children encourages the children to play, be physically active, explore, create and express. The learning environment is assessed and modified regularly as indicated by the children's needs and interests, ensuring that it challenges and inspires the children to learn.

14. The staff organise the daily transitions to be flexible and consistent, ensuring that the daily routine as a whole supports the child's wellbeing and learning.

Leadership at the level of pedagogical activities

15. The head of the ECEC unit is responsible for the goal-oriented and methodical leadership, evaluation and development of their units' pedagogy and the staff's opportunities for learning in their work. Pedagogical leadership is implemented with the support of ECEC teachers and ensuring the participation of the entire staff.

16. The ECEC teacher is responsible for planning the activities for the child group, achieving the objectives set for the activities, and the evaluation and development of the activities. The entire staff work together to plan, implement, evaluate and develop the pedagogical activities.

Peer interaction and group atmosphere

17. The staff construct a positive learning environment for the children. The atmosphere of the group is safe, warm and caring, and it inspires learning.

18. The staff and the children form a community of learners together in which every child's meaningful participation in the activities is realised. The staff support the children's group activities through their guidance and example.

19. The staff build and guide the group's operating culture systematically, ensuring that it promotes, maintains and develops togetherness. The staff ensure that each child can feel they are members of the group and belong to the group. The staff support the children in establishing and maintaining versatile friendships.

20. The staff ensure that each child thrives in early childhood education and care. The children feel they are heard and valued just as they are.

21. The staff build and maintain in the group an atmosphere based on appreciating the children's individual differences and different cultures, religions and world views. The staff support children's plurilingualism in the group.

Interaction among staff and multidisciplinary cooperation

22. The staff work towards professional interaction based on trust, appreciation and respect as part of the ECEC operating culture.

23. The ECEC staff recognise the different professional groups' professional duties, competence and responsibilities as part of the entity of ECEC work. The staff draw on different skills in ECEC work and its development.

24. The staff recognise their professional responsibilities and competence and those of the parties they work together with, and draw on them in multidisciplinary cooperation.

Interaction between staff and guardians

25. Educational cooperation starts from appreciation for the children and their guardians as well as an open, equal and trusting relationship. The interaction reflects respect for the guardians' knowledge of their children and for the staff's professional knowledge and competence.

26. Guardians' participation in planning, carrying out and evaluating early childhood education and care activities is enabled. Different forms and practices of educational cooperation are planned together with the guardians.

