EARLY CHILDHOOD PRACTITIONERS' EXPERIENCES OF REGULATORY PROCESSES AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF HOW THEY AFFECT THEIR WELLBEING IN DAY NURSERIES: A SMALL-SCALE EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

This small-scale empirical study explores the professional wellbeing of nine early childhood practitioners (ECPs) working across nine different settings within a single social enterprise in England. This research employs an interpretivist and qualitative research design, using semi-structured interviews and weekly journals to collect data. The thesis privileges the voices of ECPs and provides insights into their experiences of professional wellbeing within the context of regulation. The study applies post-structural theory as a critical lens to examine the power/knowledge discourse within ECPs' experiences of regulation. Additionally, feminist theory is applied as a complementary lens, as it illuminates the perspectives of women participants and how they position themselves across regulatory frameworks. Nine participants were recruited for this study, all of which held over two years' experience in their roles, in addition to having experienced a nursery inspection. Each participant was invited to keep a short, weekly reflective journal over a period of four months and subsequently participate in a semi-structured interview. The findings reveal that ECPs understand professional wellbeing as a multifaceted phenomenon in their lives and identify a strong connection between professional and personal wellbeing. Findings also show that ECPs have difficulty in sustaining their own professional wellbeing; and those in leadership positions feel a sense of responsibility and take steps to ensure the wellbeing of their teams. ECPs reveal that encounters with regulation have had an adverse impact on their professional wellbeing and they convey concerns about regulatory processes in England, particularly with regard to the criteria for maintaining staff-to-child ratios and qualifications. Additionally, ECPs emphasise that the act of preparing for inspections, and the anticipation of them, have a substantial impact upon their personal and professional wellbeing. Practitioners perceive that the regulator, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), does not appreciate their value and fails to consider their wellbeing during inspections. Lastly, ECPs maintain the perception that the regulator exercises subjective and inconsistent judgements with regard to the quality of settings. As a result, ECPs adopt targeted strategies to mitigate the impact of regulation on their wellbeing. They emphasise the need

for reform of the regulatory environment in order that it acknowledges their professional wellbeing.

Practitioners.

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Acknowledgements

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Glossary

DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DfE	Department for Education
ECE	Early Childhood Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECP	Early Childhood Practitioner
EYA	Early Years Alliance
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
HMI	His Majesty's Inspectorate
KS	Key stage
NDNA	National Day Nurseries Association
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
OMEP	World Organisation for Early Childhood Education
PSLA	Pre-School Learning Alliance
SEF	Self-Evaluation Form
UNCRC	The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Chapter 1: Introduction to the study

1.1 Introduction

This research explores professional wellbeing in the early years workforce and how it is influenced by Government regulatory procedures. This small-scale study examines the professional wellbeing of nine early childhood practitioners (ECPs) through an interpretivist paradigm, using qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews and weekly journals, to explore the experience of working in a day nursery in England.

Investigation surrounding the existing literature identified a gap in the body of empirical studies focused on the ways in which regulation affects the professional wellbeing of ECPs across early childhood education (ECE) in England (Early Years Alliance (EYA), 2023a). However, studies do exist on the impact of workload, stress and psychological pressures on teachers in primary schools (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998; Case, Case and Catling, 2000; Drake, 2014). Such studies specifically focus on the role of regulation in England and its impact on the professional wellbeing of teachers. This research, however, though continuing to look at the role of regulation, instead, explores its impact on the professional wellbeing of ECPs. The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), as a Government agency, plays the role of regulator in England, responsible for inspecting and judging the quality of early years settings and nurseries (Ofsted, 2022). Ofsted has established its authority as the arbiter of high-quality practice across ECE (Davis, 2017) through the production of guidelines and statutory requirements, significantly impacting and influencing the way ECPs and providers conduct their practice (Wood, 2019). Therefore, this thesis refers to Ofsted as 'the regulator' throughout.

Curiosity about the complex ways in which ECPs' professional lives are governed by powerful structures of regulation prompted the adoption of a post-structural, critical theoretical lens throughout this research. Foucault's (1977) post-structural theory of disciplinary power provides insights into the power dynamics within regulatory practices and how they affect the professional

wellbeing of ECPs (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998) and feminist theory provides a second critical lens with which to understand the experiences of this predominantly female workforce (Osgood, 2010; 2012). Together, they form the main theoretical framework of this study.

ECPs' professional lives have not escaped the scrutiny of empirical research on other fronts, and there has been extensive focus on a) leadership of practice (Moyles and Yates, 2004; Waniganayake and Semann, 2011; McDowall *et al.*, 2012; Siraj and Hallet, 2014), b) pedagogy (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004; Robson, 2019; Bradbury, 2020; Edwards, 2021), c) professionalism (Grieshaber and Cannella, 2001; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Osgood, 2006a; 2006b; 2006c; 2009; 2010a; 2012; Urban, 2010; Fairchild, 2017) and d) professional knowledge (Ritblatt *et al.*, 2013; Hordern, 2016; Campbell-Barr, 2019)**.** This study extends this valuable body of knowledge through its focus on ECPs' professional wellbeing at work.

ECPs play a significant role in the support of young children's wellbeing by fostering their enthusiasm for life and learning through nurturing development of their social, emotional and cognitive abilities (Malti *et al.*, 2016). However, until recently, few studies (Hall-Kenyon *et al.*, 2014; Whitebook *et al.*, 2016; Schaack and Le, 2017; Schaack *et al.*, 2020; Cumming and Wong, 2020) have focused on the professional wellbeing of ECPs. Since 1997, over the past twenty-five years, ECE in England has faced a problematic history arising from government policy initiatives. Under the New Labour Government (1997 to 2010), there was an ongoing focus on the expansion of ECEC services across England, resulting in an ever-changing policy landscape (Lloyd, 2010). The government's perpetual shifts in policy have constructed ECPs professional lives, influencing their work, consequently creating a state of ambiguity concerning professional practice (Mikuska, 2023). Furthermore, policies and strategies aimed at professionalising the workforce through graduate led programmes, such as the introduction of the Early Years Professional Status, negatively impacted upon the professional identity of ECPs. Such initiatives can be understood as a wasted opportunity for professionalisation, exacerbating the existing institutional and conceptual divisions between teachers and ECPs due to employment restrictions which fail to offer ECPs the same parity in pay and conditions as teachers (Lloyd, 2010).

This introductory chapter, therefore, begins with an analysis of the context in which ECPs work in England. First, the context of the ECE sector in England in relation to ECPs' lived experiences is outlined. Next is a concise analysis of the concerns surrounding ECPs' professional wellbeing. Following that, the researcher's personal motivations for this study and positionality are outlined in the first person. An explanation of the terminology applied throughout the thesis is included and an introduction to the research questions and aims, along with a statement on this study's potential contributions to the field. Finally, each chapter is summarised, outlining the structure of the thesis.

1.2 The early childhood education sector in England – a problematic context for early childhood practitioners

ECPs' professional lives must be considered within the context of the ECE sector in England. Whilst a detailed analysis of the ECE policy framework in England is beyond the scope of this thesis and has been studied elsewhere (Lloyd, 2010; 2015), it is important to understand the complex ways in which ECPs are positioned across the ECE sector. This positioning is problematic for five reasons. First, the early years workforce in England remains significantly behind other professions in primary and secondary education in relation to recompense and acknowledgement from Government and policymakers, despite its crucial contribution (Douglas-Osborn, 2017). Second, there was a lower level of value and support for early education during the Covid-19 pandemic compared with colleagues across the wider education sector (Lloyd, 2022). Third, recruitment and retention present several challenges for ECPs across the sector (EYA, 2021). Amanda Spielman, the former Chief Inspector of Ofsted, emphasises the difficulties that the early years sector is currently experiencing in their Annual Report (Ofsted, 2023a). According to Ofsted's research, the proportion of unqualified staff increased from one in seven in 2018 to one in five in 2023 (Ofsted, 2023a). Furthermore, the percentage of staff with Level 3 qualifications decreased from 65% in 2021 to 61% in 2023 (Ofsted, 2023a). The sector has significant difficulty in attracting and maintaining skilled and experienced personnel to provide the necessary education and care required for young children. Providers are often compelled to either hire agency staff or reduce their services due to inadequate staffing levels (National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA), 2023). This leads to inconsistency of staffing,

which has a detrimental impact on the early years providers and practitioners that could lead to lower Ofsted gradings. This could also affect parents who are unable to source ECE as more providers reduce their operations or, in the worst case, are compelled to close their settings (NDNA, 2023). Local authorities further emphasise that nursery closures are attributed to challenges in finding and maintaining skilled personnel, in addition to increasing expenses (Local Government Association (LGA), 2023). Fourth, the policy context in relation to professionalism for English Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has a problematic history that has implications for those working in the sector (Lloyd, 2015). Lloyd (2010) argues that the introduction of the Early Years Professional Status qualification heightened the longstanding divide between ECPs and other professionals involved in the care and education of young children. The Government's commitment to a ten-year plan for childcare and education demonstrates their position on enhancing the professionalism of ECPs across England. Lloyd (2010) emphasises that the aim of ECPs' professionalisation was to attain the 'Early Years Professional Status' qualification, accessible to practitioners who held a graduate-level qualification. However, rather than prompting a rise in the status of ECPs, this qualification served to exacerbate existing divisions between ECPs and other professionals who specialise in the care and education of young children (Lloyd, 2010). These divisions arose largely due to the recruitment limits placed on individuals who obtained Early Years Professional Status, rendering them ineligible for positions in state-funded nurseries within the maintained sector. Additionally, these divisions are a consequence of the Government's failure to examine the implications of the historical origins of the different approaches to working with young children (Scheiwe and Willekens, 2009). It is, therefore, evident that the division between early childhood 'care' and 'education' has been further strengthened in relation to its historical, practical and philosophical context (Lloyd, 2010). Fifth, both the media and ECE industry organisations have reported widely regarding the increasing number of nursery closures post-pandemic as a result of insufficient funding (LGA, 2023). There is decreasing trust in local authorities to provide sufficient funded childcare and education and cater to the requirements of working families (LGA, 2023) as stated in the Coram Foundation's childcare survey (Jarvie *et al.*, 2023).

The progress made in the expansion of publicly funded provision needs to be acknowledged, but changes in the funding framework for ECE, and in policy, have implications for ECPs. Public funding of ECE has been gradually increasing since 2000. In 2004, part-time entitlement in England was extended by the Labour Government to include children aged three, to cover term-time attendance (Lloyd, 2010). This funding was later increased (by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government) to fifteen hours per week, extending to 40% of the most disadvantaged two-year-old children (West and Noden, 2019). The Childcare Act 2006 and Education Act amendments of 2011 provided the legislative foundation for these adjustments (Department for Education (DfE), 2018a). Subsequently, the Childcare Act 2016 established a responsibility for the Secretary of State to provide thirty hours of free childcare for three- and four-year-old children of working parents (Gambaro *et al.,* 2014). In September 2017, the Conservative Government consequently implemented an extended allowance of fifteen hours a week of free childcare, totalling thirty hours of ECE and care for three- and four-year-old children with parents in employment (DfE, 2018a). At present, working parents of three- and four-year-old children in England can receive up to thirty hours of free, term-time childcare per week, with the eligibility period expiring when children reach the age of compulsory education (the September term following their fourth birthday) (DfE, 2018b). The current national funding model for the early years sector means that public funding is available for all registered (with Ofsted), eligible providers (DfE, 2018b; West and Noden, 2019). However, since its implementation, there remain concerns surrounding the funding rate granted to early years providers regarding their financial sustainability (LGA, 2023).

The British Government's latest objective for the early years sector is to significantly enhance the accessibility of childcare, and address concerns about the cost to parents (DfE, 2023a). Commencing in September 2025, children between the ages of nine months and five years, whose parents are employed, will be entitled to thirty weekly hours of free childcare each. The programme will, initially, be available to all two-year-olds from spring 2024 (DfE, 2023b). This expansion is, however, within the context of increasing reports of financial pressure across the early years sector and concerns surrounding the current level of capacity (LGA, 2023). As a consequence of the pandemic, there has

been an increase in expenses and a decrease in adjusted funding rates required for inflation (Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), 2022). This, combined with increasing demands on the workforce, has caused nursery prices to rise and jeopardised the availability of services across England (EYA, 2023c). As a consequence of these economic pressures, the early years workforce is experiencing a state of emergency (LGA, 2023). The funding expansion implemented in 2023 (DfE, 2023b) if successful, holds the power to significantly increase the demand for nursery spaces among parents, thereby benefiting a large number of families (LGA, 2023). Nevertheless, the achievement of this outcome will be contingent on the acquisition of a sufficient number of high-quality spaces (LGA, 2023). The Government has pledged an increase in the funding rates (DfE, 2023c) but its adequacy remains uncertain at the time of writing (EYA, 2023d; EYA, 2023e). If the level of funding inadequately reflects the expenses of service, the expansion might result in even greater pressures for ECPs and nursery closures (EYA, 2023c; NDNA, 2023).

Organisations advocating policy reform in England are raising significant concerns about the sustainability of the ECE sector. Purnima Tanuku, Chief Executive of the National Day Nurseries Association[1] (NDNA, 2023), emphasises the concerns raised in Ofsted's annual report about the decline in ECPs' qualifications (NDNA, 2023; Ofsted, 2023a), highlighting that in order to recruit and sustain practitioners in publicly funded provision, the Government must resolve the continued funding shortage, as the recruitment and retention crisis in the profession remains a hindrance to achieving the expected future expansion. Furthermore, Neil Leitch, the chief executive of the EYA[2] (EYA, 2023c), cautioned that nurseries will face difficulties without the necessary additional funding, specifically considering the upcoming implementation of the

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[1] The National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) originated as a collective of nurseries that united to exchange methods and concepts. Currently, the organisation is experiencing significant growth and has gained recognition as an award-winning national charity. It boasts a dedicated and flourishing membership in England, Scotland, Wales.

[2] The Early Years Alliance (EYA) is an educational charity and the largest, most representative early years membership organisation in England (previously known as the Preschool Learning Alliance).

extended funding entitlement (DfE, 2023b). The EYA (2023c) has also expressed concern that no further funding for the early years sector has been announced, despite the substantial rise in the national living wage that was set to take place in the spring of 2024 (His Majesty's (HM) Treasury, 2023). The regulator's data reports the closure of 3,000 providers that were unable to sustain themselves financially between 2022 and 2023 (Ofsted, 2023a). Although it is important to ensure that ECPs are adequately compensated for their work, implementing an increase and extension of the living wage without providing additional funds for the sector is a questionable decision (EYA, 2023c) and will further exacerbate the existing challenges faced by practitioners (Ofsted, 2023a), particularly during a critical period of expansion of publicly funded provision (DfE, 2023b).

1.2.1 Policy surrounding the early years regulatory framework

Various policies pertaining to the field of ECE have engendered a state of uncertainty in relation to the principles that lie behind both care and education. This has posed a challenge to ECE policy formulation by central Government in England (Lloyd, 2015). With regard to regulation and compliance, Ofsted hold a key role in overseeing and enforcing regulations across early years settings in England. Since its establishment in 1992, Ofsted has been responsible for conducting inspections in both state-owned and private nurseries; previously overseen by different regulatory organisations. Revised procedures were subsequently implemented, drawing upon the legal framework established by the Inspection Act 2006 (DCSF, 2007). In 2008, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCSF, 2007) was implemented, which provided an avenue to improving the consistency of ECE assessment across all establishments. The statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), also implemented in May 2008, outlined the regulators' criteria for children from birth to five years, and has undergone several adjustments since. Significant revisions were made in 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021, and most recently, in 2023. This study refers to the 2021 version of the EYFS, as it was the relevant statutory framework governing ECP's work during the fieldwork phase of this doctoral study. Furthermore, the regulator has experienced substantial transformations itself since its inception in 1992. The integrated inspection framework, established in September 2008, was additionally introduced with the

intention of standardising early years inspections. The purpose of this framework was to provide consistent evaluations of ECE facilities through the process of inspection (DfE, 2008). The current inspection handbook incorporates the criteria for regulatory inspectors, which includes specific standards for evaluating early years institutions. These evaluations, ultimately, have resulted in publicly published, one-word judgements, for example, 'Good' and 'Outstanding' (Ofsted, 2022).

1.2.2 Concerns surrounding the professional wellbeing of ECPs

In the early childhood sector in England, there has been an increased focus by Government on the psychological health and wellbeing of children, with better strategies for promoting the health of children through various means including prevention of harm (Douglas-Osborn, 2017). However, Cumming (2017) highlights that the professional wellbeing of practitioners has received little attention in the academic discipline of early childhood. Cumming and Wong (2020) argue that the concept of professional wellbeing is fluid, subject to change and shaped by the ECE system as a whole. It might, therefore, be worth considering what can be learnt about ECPs' experiences at work from surveys undertaken by early childhood sector organisations and charities in England. However, online surveys are subject to two significant methodological constraints: the inability to accurately define the population being surveyed and the potential issues of bias from respondents. As a result, findings from such surveys could result in misleading conclusions (Andrade, 2020).

Whilst the limitations of sector surveys are recognised, they can, still, provide useful subjective insights into the perspectives and experiences of practitioners. In May 2018, the EYA conducted an online survey in England about ECPs' mental health and wellbeing. According to the survey, 74% of respondents said they had experienced stress as a result of their occupations 'quite' or 'very often' over the previous month. The findings from this survey indicated that the early years' workforce was under intense strain. Furthermore, 76% of respondents stated that documentation and administration were a frequent cause of stress, with several participants referring specifically to paperwork requested by regulatory inspectors to evidence methods that practitioners use to set standards for children's education and growth. Many of

the survey's respondents considered this paperwork to be superfluous. However, they felt compelled to complete it, out of fear of inspection. In addition, worries about regulation were frequently enhanced by a perceived lack of reliability in the regulator's judgements and practice, with requirements relating to necessary documentation varying between each inspector (Pre-school Learning Alliance (PSLA), 2018).

Respondents to the 2018 EYA survey explicitly criticised the regulator for its administrative demands, asserting that although considered as impractical and unnecessary, documentation must be completed in the event of an inspection. In an attempt to dispel unhelpful myths surrounding inspections, Ofsted (2017) published advice on early years inspections that stated,

> *"Ofsted does not want to see a particular amount or type of paperwork during an inspection. Settings should use whatever approach to paperwork that suits them and are free to file it however they like. Each inspection is unique, and inspectors will only ask to see evidence they consider appropriate to that individual setting, usually determined by their observations of teaching and learning"* (Ofsted, 2017a, p. 1).

In an attempt to lessen the demands of administration on providers, the regulator has, subsequently, announced that the early years self-evaluation form, known as [3]'SEF', was no longer required (Ofsted, 2018). However, although the regulator was not the sole subject of the concerns raised in the *Minds Matter* sector survey (EYA, 2023), it is notable that despite this myth-busting guidance (Ofsted, 2017a), there has been little evidence of alleviation of the worries and fears of many ECPs in relation to the administrative burden of regulation. It is unclear, from the responses to the survey, whether this is due to a lack of practitioners' awareness of the changes, or if the efforts made by the regulator to communicate guidance were insufficient.

Furthermore, the revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum in England assisted practitioners by placing less emphasis on written evidence of practice and children's progress and more on the professional judgement of

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[3] (SEF) Self Evaluation Form is a document which enabled leader to evaluate and rate their settings; to be discussed with inspectors during regulatory Ofsted inspections

practitioners, when it came into effect in September 2021 (DfE, 2021a; Ofsted 2022a). This revision endorsed methods to lessen the administrative workload and pressures on practitioners, with the emphasis more on the observation of practice during inspections, as opposed to the examination of paperwork and documentation (Douglas-Osborn, 2017).

Despite the regulator's efforts to reduce administrative tasks and workload for ECPs, in November 2021, in an open letter to the regulator, nearly six hundred professionals expressed their concern (Nursery World, 2021) regarding the detrimental inspection processes for early childhood settings, maintained nurseries and schools. The letter claimed that regulatory experiences had an adverse effect on practitioners' confidence, morale and wellbeing. These concerns were especially alarming considering the significant obstacles practitioners faced as a result of the pandemic, the new curriculum framework and additional recovery initiatives to support children and families (Beauchamp *et al.*, 2021). The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2021) emphasises the significant and wide-ranging effects of Covid-19; recognising that the impact varies across the contexts of individual countries.

In a November 2021 letter, early years providers claimed that they were being evaluated by the regulator on pedagogical practices such as curriculum maps and work plans that are not statutory requirements in England (DfE, 2021a). The open letter included concerns regarding some inspectors' misconceptions of young children's development and learning processes, as well as the regulator's interpretation of the curriculum, which the authors alleged, held a restrictive view on children's learning and development. Signatories of the letter asserted that the practices of the regulator resulted in stressful experiences during inspection and caused some practitioners to resign or take prolonged time off work as a consequence of stress. Furthermore, in July 2021, a further survey of 1,458 practitioners employed in nurseries and preschools across England was undertaken by a charity organisation addressing children's and families' mental health. This survey found that 27% of respondents directly cited upcoming inspections and worries about how their workplaces would be judged as a contributing factor of stress at work (Anna Freud Centre, 2021).

During 2023, further questions were raised about the impact of regulatory inspections of education in England, particularly on workforce wellbeing and

mental health, following the death of headteacher, Ruth Perry. The late Ruth Perry's family claim that she committed suicide in January 2023 as a result of a statutory school inspection in November 2022 that diminished her school's rating from 'outstanding' to 'inadequate' (Nursery World, 2023a). In response, in April 2023, *Beyond Ofsted*, a civic society independent inquiry of the inspection process, was initiated. However, early years settings are not presently covered by the inquiry's terms of reference (Beyond Ofsted, 2023). In response, Ofsted's chief inspector released a statement (Ofsted, 2023b) outlining changes to complaint processes. However, this statement was criticised as it omitted the early years sector (Nursery World, 2023b). This further highlighted the extent to which ECPs' concerns surrounding regulation in England are still to be addressed.

Concerns continue to be raised about the impact of regulation on wellbeing in the sector. In April 2023, the EYA conducted a further survey collecting 1,910 responses. A substantial proportion of respondents (45%) reported a negative experience with the regulator during their inspection process, whilst approximately eight out of ten nurseries, preschools and childminders (79%) indicated they were anxious about Ofsted inspections 'fairly' or 'very often' (EYA, 2023). Over half the respondents (52%) considered inspection findings to be unjust, and approximately one fifth (21%) had made an official complaint. Only 14% of respondents believed that Ofsted inspection processes had constructively enhanced the quality of care and education, whereas 37% strongly objected, and 26% somewhat objected to the statement. The results of this study give an indication of the early years sector's sustained concern of the regulator's methodology, highlighting the need for urgent action.

The Alliance's 2023 survey also highlighted that being employed across the early years sector in general is having a substantial detrimental influence on the mental health and wellbeing of practitioners. The survey found that more than eight out of ten (80%) of respondents experienced frequent professionally related stress, with industry-specific Government policy and salary being the second and third most frequent sources of stress, following the main cause: regulatory Ofsted inspections (EYA, 2023b). In addition to the survey conducted by the EYA, a survey conducted by Nursery World Magazine revealed the impact of Ofsted inspections on providers' mental health and wellbeing, labelling

them as "extremely concerning" (Nursery World, 2023c, p. 1). There were 3,066 responses to the survey, revealing that providers, managers and childminders felt tense and anxious preceding an inspection, with many suffering from insomnia and others having panic attacks and depression.

The above analysis of ECPs' perspectives on regulation – as reported in the surveys spanning 2018 to 2023 – suggests that research is required into individual ECPs' experiences of regulatory processes and their perceptions of how this affects their professional wellbeing. Waters and McKee (2022) argue that the regulator must recognise its duty in promoting the welfare and safeguarding of both its constituents and its regulatory inspectors. They assert that there is an ethical obligation on the part of the regulator, and failure to implement duties relating to welfare and safeguarding may be perceived as negligence. While the regulator places emphasis on evaluating the safeguarding procedures applied by school and early years staff during inspections, Waters and McKee (2022) assert that there is a dearth of information suggesting that the regulator itself has conducted a comprehensive examination of its own safeguarding responsibilities. The EYA's report highlights a decline in trust in the regulator across the education workforce, necessitating proactive efforts to work together in restoring it (EYA, 2023a).

Conducting this doctoral study was important because of the potential for it to bring new perspectives on some of the problematic aspects of the professional lives of ECPs in England. The concerns expressed by early childhood sector organisations in England, as explored above, have evidenced concerns surrounding professional wellbeing as it relates to regulation and inspection in England. In this context, sector organisations found multiple challenges for ECPs associated with regulation including, for example, administrative burden and increased workload alongside the negative impact of inspection on wellbeing.

1.3 Personal motivations and positionality of the researcher

Conducting this research has shed light on the injustices surrounding the system of regulation in England and its impact on the personal and professional wellbeing of women ECPs. During the course of this study, my positionality as

the researcher for this study has evolved. The application of both post-structural and feminist theory has led me to develop a dual focus on critical reflection generally, within both my professional work setting and my research practice. Thus, through the process of conducting this research, from an academic, personal and professional standpoint, I consider myself more empowered to address and voice my concerns surrounding injustices across the field of ECE.

With over ten years' experience working in the early years sector in England, I have gained familiarity with a variety of roles, which include ECP, Montessori teacher, senior manager in a provider of early childhood provision and, most recently, early years provider. My experiences within the sector include extreme workloads, stress and pressure, in addition to the confusing and conflicting messages surrounding early years regulation. My lived experiences have influenced my choice of topic and informed my rationale and justification for research into the professional wellbeing of ECPs. However, in order to address bias, I acknowledge the need to maintain awareness of my own preconceived notions and understandings embedded in my subjective experiences. At present, as an early years' provider and manager, I am very concerned about the wellbeing and work/life balance of practitioners across the early years sector, particularly with regard to workloads and the confusion surrounding obligatory standards set by the Government in the statutory framework for the early years (DfE, 2019). This confusion often causes stress and wellbeing issues for practitioners in my professional network. Workload is highlighted in my literature review (Chapter 3), in which early years' staff are found to be overworked and undervalued (Cameron, Owen and Moss, 2001). My concerns align with those in the *Minds Matter* report (PSLA, 2018), and subsequent surveys, which highlight the impact of working in the early years sector on ECPs' mental health and wellbeing, specifically with regard to regulation (EYA, 2023a; Nursery World, 2023c).

It is important that I reflect on my own positioning as an insider (Edwards, 2002) who has shared the same roles and pressures as the participants who volunteered to be part of this research. A possible advantage of my position is that it may encourage openness and honesty from the participants, as I may be perceived as more empathetic than an outsider due to my experience and proficiency within the sector (Hitchcock and Hughes, 1995). On the other hand,

the advantage of an outsider researcher is their likely neutrality. However, I argue that an outsider cannot have the capacity to fully understand participants' experiences. The insider positionality therefore offers the further advantage of accessible exposure to research.

A potential disadvantage to the insider researcher is that of bias (Chavez, 2008), however, maintaining reflexivity as a critical tool will enable me to understand (and mitigate for) how my experiences and identity(ies) might influence my research (Martin, 2010). Indeed, reflecting on insider-outsider positionality throughout my research is essential to the validity of the research methods and findings (Herr and Anderson, 2005).

1.4 Terminology in this thesis

There have been challenges in relation to terminology in this research due to the varied language used to describe ECPs and the ECE sector. Throughout this thesis, the term Early Childhood Practitioner (ECP) has been adopted to refer to practitioners, regardless of the terminology used by other authors. An alternative label is only used if an author specifically focuses on a different phase of education, such as Teachers in primary education. The term Early Childhood Education (ECE), as defined by the UNCRC (2006), refers to the education that specifically caters to children who are under the age of eight years old. This, however, encompasses the entirety of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Key Stage 1 (KS1) in England and it is crucial to emphasise that the term ECE is variously employed by educationalists and researchers to encompass a range of age groups. It should, therefore, be noted that **for this study, the term ECE is applied in reference to educational services for children aged 0–5 years** (of nursery age).

Lastly, The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Service and Skills (Ofsted) is the Government organisation in England operating as the regulator, responsible for inspecting and assessing the quality of early years establishments and nurseries. Therefore, Ofsted is referred to as 'the regulator' throughout this thesis.

1.5 Research aims and questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the professional lives of ECPs working in day nurseries in England, and specifically, their professional wellbeing and the ways it is affected by processes of regulation. This thesis, therefore, provides an insight into the experiences of the early years workforce by creating a platform for participants' voices.

As its framework for analysis, this thesis draws upon post-structural theory, exploring the power dynamics in public policy implementation as it affects ECPs (Foucault, 2002). It also calls upon feminist theory as a secondary lens to explore the lived experiences of women ECPs (Robson, 2002).

In relation to early years, Osgood (2010) highlights the authoritative and performative policy agenda in England and warns against "externally imposed, normalised and normalising constructions of professionalism" (p. 122). Osgood argues for the importance of providing opportunities for voice to practitioners and listening to their concerns. This research, therefore, explores individual experiences of the regulatory process and the effect these processes may have on wellbeing, whilst allowing participants to provide suggestions on how professional wellbeing in nurseries might be improved and sustained.

This study aims to focus on practitioners working in day nurseries and how they manage their wellbeing in the context of statutory regulation, and is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do ECPs understand the concept of professional wellbeing?
2. How, in their view, is professional wellbeing affected by the current regulatory processes in England?
3. How might ECPs' wellbeing be sustained in the future?

As this research explores perceptions and experiences, with a focus on professional wellbeing, a small-scale, interpretivist, qualitative research design is applicable to this study. The data is collected through semi-structured interviews with nine practitioners across one ECEC organisation (involving mostly ECPs with leadership responsibilities). The organisation is a social enterprise providing not-for-profit ECEC to children in England. Recruiting participants for this study presented a considerable challenge due to the

existing burden of work on ECPs. In addition to this, the Covid-19 pandemic had recently presented further specific challenges for these practitioners (Dabrovsky, 2020; Rodríguez *et al*., 2022), along with external factors such as revised national frameworks, regulations, support systems and advisory actions (Beauchamp *et al.*, 2021).

There were initial concerns about the sample size affecting the reliability of the findings, however, Adler (2012) and Morse (2000) propose that a sample size of six to twelve individuals is adequate for a qualitative study. All participants in this study had over two years' professional experience in the early years sector and had experienced an Ofsted inspection in England. The criteria applied was to ensure the participants had experience within the field and familiarity of regulatory processes. In addition, in order to gain a further understanding of their experiences, each participant was asked to keep a short, reflective journal over a period of four months.

1.6 Possible contributions of this study to knowledge

Knowledge of the ways in which ECPs' professional wellbeing is affected by structural issues in the early childhood sector is particularly significant at this time, for the following reasons. First, early years settings remained open for all children in England throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Thereafter, practitioners implemented post-pandemic recovery initiatives to support children and families while, at the same time, reforms to the statutory framework and curriculum were under way (Beauchamp, 2021). Second, at the time of writing, ECE sector organisations are calling for the reform of current regulatory processes in education in England, with the launch of the *Beyond Ofsted* inquiry, which focuses solely on primary and secondary education (Beyond Ofsted, 2023), and ignores the early years sector. It is, therefore, crucial to conduct research focusing, specifically, on how the professional wellbeing of ECPs is affected by regulation of ECE in England.

The results of this research hold the potential to suggest recommendations for the review, development and implementation of early years policy in England in ways that sustain and enhance ECPs' professional wellbeing.

The main contribution of this thesis is that is extends the knowledge of professional wellbeing as it is understood by ECPs. This study contributes to

the existing scholarly literature on professional wellbeing as it relates to regulation and inspection in England. It offers a concise analysis of the lived experiences of women ECPs employed across day nurseries. Moreover, it strengthens the visibility of ECPs' voices within the context of regulation.

1.7 Outline of the thesis

Chapter 2, the theoretical framework, critically reflects and draws upon post-structural theory, exploring the power/knowledge discourse. It also incorporates feminist theory, including a rationale for applying it as a secondary lens. Chapter 2 explains how post-structural theory can be used as a tool for critically reflective practice and examines post-structural theory within the context of education. Truth and power are explored across early childhood practice, including "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1978, p. 60). Finally, an investigation into the regulation of early childhood examines the sector through a post-structural lens.

Chapter 3 is a literature review that begins with an examination of the various definitions of professional wellbeing in early childhood found in existing studies. It then looks at research exploring professionalism and its relevance to professional wellbeing. This is followed by an exploration into the early years sector in the context of the United States. Finally, previous works are interrogated on the diverse factors affecting professional wellbeing in nurseries.

Chapter 4 contains details on the methodology employed in this study and outlines the ethical practice adopted for this research. It explains and justifies the selection of a qualitative approach and provides a rationale for decisions on sampling, data collection and data analysis techniques. This chapter includes a discussion of ethical practice in this research, including compliance to the ethical standards for the University of East London. Lastly, it examines the issues surrounding confidentiality and risks.

In Chapter 5, the findings are presented as they emerge from the process of thematic analysis detailed in Chapter 4. These findings are structured by themes and analysed and interpreted in relation to the literature on professional wellbeing and regulatory processes in nurseries.

Chapter 6 constitutes a discussion of the findings through the lens of post-structural theory and feminism. The theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2 assists analysis of the complex ways in which regulation governs the professional lives of ECPs.

In Chapter 7, the conclusion to this thesis, the main findings from the research are summarised. There is a reflection on the strengths and limitations of this study and some proposed recommendations for further research and policy in England. Finally, the implications for this study are discussed in terms of adding to the body of knowledge on practice in early childhood settings.

1.8 Summary

This introductory chapter has provided an overview of the thesis, including the researcher's personal motivations and aims, as well as a contextual framework for the current concerns relating to ECPs' experiences of regulatory processes and how they affect the wellbeing of personnel in nurseries.

In the next chapter, the theoretical framework for the thesis is detailed.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

2.1 Post-structural and feminist theory as critical tools for this study

The conceptual framework of the post-structural theorist, Foucault (1972; 1975; 1976a; 1976b; 1977; 1978; 1979; 1980a; 1980b; 1982; 1983; 1984; 1988; 1997), may appear far removed from the practical realm of early childhood practice. However, in recent years, academics across the field of early childhood education (ECE) recognise the significance and relevance of his work as the expansion of early childhood services and policies gives rise to concerns about regulatory frameworks and mechanisms of control (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998; MacNaughton, 2005). Thus, incorporating a Foucauldian theoretical framework into this research has provided rich insights into the nature of power and authority that have aided understanding of the mechanisms of control deployed throughout regulatory inspections in the education sector in England (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998). Foucault's (1977) theory on disciplinary power has provided valuable perspectives on the diverse manifestations of power dynamics within regulatory practices, specifically, within the context of the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspection process in England (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998).

The field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has long been a predominantly female domain, with male employees remaining consistently minimal worldwide (Drudy *et al.*, 2005), typically ranging from 1% to 3% of the workforce across the globe (Brody, 2014; Department for Education (DfE), 2019a). Therefore, even before the research process for this study began, it was clear that a feminist, post structural conceptual framework should be adopted as a critical tool due to the feminised ECEC workforce sector.

Inspiration was drawn from the work of Osgood (2006a), who explores the intricate relationship between concepts of professionalism and gendered identity constructions. In alignment with this study, Osgood's research is conducted in England, in a context of heightened state regulation and the growing expectations for performativity across early years settings. Furthermore, Osgood (2006a) evaluates the manner in which identity formation

is influenced by gender and explores agency and its potential to influence policy reform across the early education sector.

In addition, this study has considered the scholarly contributions of Butler (1990), a post-structuralist and feminist scholar. The concept of performativity has been a source of particular interest, here performativity on the part of ECPs is a response to the "normative demands" (Butler, 1993, p. 12). Regardless of the regulatory practice we decide to engage in, and subject ourselves to, we will inevitably exercise resistance. This resistance occurs within the regulatory processes of normalisation; however, we have an inherent inability to consistently execute resistance (Taguchi, 2005).

Resistance occurs within an overly prescriptive context of regulation in England (Wood, 2019). In addition to its initial purpose as an inspection body, Ofsted has become the arbiter of high-quality practice, publishing guidance that impacts and influences how practitioners and providers conduct their practice in order to achieve the desired outcomes for their setting (Wood, 2019). The feminist, post-structuralist perspective, therefore, highlights the need to resist modernist structures of regulation and prompts us to exercise agency by adopting a subjective position in relation ECE regulatory processes. This process, as discussed by Butler (1995), involves an intricate interplay between the subject and their own agency.

Phelan (1990) argues that Foucault's ideas have great significance in the advancement of feminist theory, if not for every feminist concern. Moreover, Foucault should be regarded as an ally for feminism, as he establishes the foundations for a democratic framework, reimagining the principles of liberty and individuality, which play a pivotal role in feminist theory and practice (Phelan, 1990). The primary objective of feminist inquiry is to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of female perspectives on the world and to promote liberation from societal constraints (Robson, 2002).

As this research focuses on specific knowledge, explored through interactions with exclusively female participants, it draws upon literature that represents a feminist standpoint, including Osgood's explorations into professionalisation (2006a; 2006b; 2010). However, the design of this research was principally guided by a post-structural perspective.

Feminist theory has enabled the privileging of the perspectives of women and the way they are positioned by regulation, while post-structural theory has thrown light on the exercise of power through regulation. Both feminist and post-structural theories highlight the phenomenon of normalisation. Therefore, post-structural theory has been employed as the primary theoretical framework, complemented by the application of feminist theory as a secondary lens.

As Habermas (1971) argues, research and its underlying epistemologies are deeply intertwined with, and influenced by, personal interests. These interests include;

1. How do early childhood practitioners (ECPs) understand the concept of professional wellbeing?
2. How, in their view, is professional wellbeing affected by the current regulatory processes in England?
3. How might ECPs' wellbeing be sustained in the future?

Prior reading surrounding the professional wellbeing of practitioners and its relationship to regulation, strengthened the growing inclination towards a post-structural perspective. Concepts of disciplinary power, 'docile bodies', (objects that can be shaped or moulded and are subject to the application of disciplinary force) and power/knowledge raised by Gordon and Foucault (1980) prompted a reconsideration of the environment in the early childhood sector in which this study's researcher participates and the dynamics that unfold within those surroundings. This, in turn, led to a consideration of the concept of subjugated knowledge (Gordon and Foucault, 1980) as a means to explore the marginalisation of perceptions relating to ECE, curriculum and the practitioner's role in educational discourse (MacNaughton, 2005). Furthermore, incorporation of Foucault's concept of productive power (Gordon and Foucault, 1980) has aided enhanced comprehension of the bureaucratic structure of the researcher's own working environment. Post-structuralist theories on knowledge can encourage and empower individuals to critically challenge prevailing power dynamics and resist the tendency to perceive them as inherent or inevitable (Keohane, 2002). That is, comprehending the manner in which 'truths' serve to facilitate the 'normalisation' of discriminatory practices and oppressive systems, specifically within the realm of education, can empower

practitioners to effectively challenge and mitigate their impact (MacNaughton, 2005).

2.2 Post-structural theory as a tool in critically reflective practice

Reflective practice has been identified as a defining characteristic of exemplary practitioners and as the fundamental basis for their professional development (Wood and Bennet, 2000). Reflective practice necessitates that practitioners take responsibility for their own knowledge and the construction of meaning pertaining to their position, education and pedagogy (Wroe and Halsall, 2001). Engaging in reflective activities serves as a method for practitioners to explore and modify their perspectives and practice (Mezirow, 1990; Brookfield, 1995; Cranton, 1996; Bleakley, 1999; Boud, Keogh and Walker, 2013).

The reflective model that has inspired the researcher's own process of reflection is that of Schön (1983), who's 'reflecting-in-action' also aligns with post-structural theory. Through "a reflective conversation with the situation" (Schön, 1983, p. 242), Schön argues that professionals accumulate their institutional and personal knowledge and practices. Reflection, therefore, entails gathering what we can, through and from experience, and using it to acquire knowledge about ourselves. The researcher's professional experience as an ECP, academic knowledge as a researcher, and personal experiences, have, therefore, resulted in personal reflections on the deeply established injustices and disparities witnessed in the profession that have served to drive this study forward.

ECPs might use critical reflection and ideology critique to expose how ingrained injustices and inequalities manifest themselves in their daily lives, with the aim of transformation and reform. This could be a significant step towards equity and social justice, but to be effective, both social and political settings must be considered (MacNaughton, 2005).

The work of Foucault closely connects to the themes identified in this study's review of literature pertaining to the power of regulation in England (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998). Consequently, post-structural theory has also been instrumental in the researcher's own critical reflection on practice in her professional working environment and in this research. As Foucault asserts,

"knowledge is like a luminescence, a spreading light" (Foucault, 2002, p. 8). The accumulation of knowledge and truths acquired through engagement with the journals and interviews of participants in this study can be used to guide both practice and policy, with the hope that professional wellbeing in the context of regulation might be improved and sustained in the future.

2.3 Post-structuralist politics of knowledge within the context of early childhood institutions

Despite the impact of Foucault's ideas across a range of disciplines, academics in the field of early childhood seldom encounter his work or the writings of other post-structuralist theorists (MacNaughton, 2005). Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power, 'docile bodies' and power/knowledge (Foucault, 1975; Gordon and Foucault, 1980) can, therefore, disrupt knowledge within the early childhood literature. As Dahlberg and Moss (2004) state, post-structuralism, encompassing the ideas of Foucault, is not often positioned inside the field study of ECE.

Moss (2007) explains that the field of ECE is driven by the growing capacity of contemporary scientific research that tends to claim irrefutable proof of effective practices (with the implication that there exists a single 'truth'). Foucault's concepts, pertaining to the interplay of power, discipline and knowledge, therefore, are regarded as radical, as he asserts the nonexistence of truth (MacNaughton, 2005). Foucault (1997) argues that our understanding of concepts such as child development or curriculum are not based on objective truths, but rather on constructed narratives shaped by truth games that reflect the prevailing politics of knowing within a certain context. Hence, a significant portion of Foucault's scholarly endeavours examine the interconnections between knowledge, truth and power, as well as the consequential impacts of these interconnections on individuals and the institutions that they establish (Foucault, 1997; MacNaughton, 2005). Post-structural theory brings to the foreground the concept of disciplinary power (Foucault 1977; 1979) and how it functions across diverse institutional contexts. This has been applied to analyse power dynamics within educational settings (Usher and Edwards, 1996; Atkinson, 2002; Aronowitz and Giroux, 2003; Ball, 2013; Peters, 2013; 2016; Wilkins 2016). According to Foucault (1980a), power is dispersed and

permeates social structures rather than being owned by individuals or organisations. Foucault emphasises that power develops and influences information, discourses and subjectivities, in addition to being repressive (Deacon, 2006). When examined from a post-structuralist standpoint, it may be argued that early childhood institutions function as disciplinary apparatus that employ many strategies to exercise control and manage individuals. The origins of these approaches can be understood through a post-structural critical lens on inspection, normalisation and observation (MacNaughton, 2005).

A number of research studies in the field of ECE have applied key concepts from post-structural theory (Grieshaber and Cannella, 2001; Ebbeck, 2003; MacNaughton, 2005). Additionally, within the context of England, further studies provide valuable insights into the way that power can manifest itself in schools, or early childhood institutions, through the disciplinary mechanisms associated with regulation (Jeffrey and Woods, 1996; 1998; Osgood, 2006a; 2006b; 2010; Mikuska and Fairchild, 2020). Children's and practitioners' subjectivities and behaviour are shaped by the norms, regulations and routines established by these institutions (Dahlberg and Moss, 2004). Numerous strategies, including ongoing oversight, grading procedures and behavioural restrictions are used to wield power. These disciplinary practices may be enforced and maintained, in large part, by practitioners and carers themselves, who play a significant role in upholding these behaviours (Ball, 1996; Case, Case and Catling, 2000). Foucault (1980b) draws attention to the potential for abuse of power by institutions. He contends that the application of disciplinary power can result in the marginalisation and exploitation of people, including the creation of uneven power relations. This abuse of power may manifest in early childhood settings through actions such as discipline, regulation, punishment or favouritism, which may be detrimental to both children's development and practitioners' wellbeing (McNay, 2013). Furthermore, Foucault's work illuminates the covert and less visible forms of power that exist across institutions. Power does not just apply to overt acts of force but can also be wielded through regulation and normalisation of situations (Foucault, 1977; 1979). These forces can involve moulding practitioners' behaviour, attitudes and identities in accordance with society norms and expectations within the context of early years institutions (MacNaughton, 2005).

Understanding these power relationships makes it possible to critically analyse oppressive practices, challenge them, and work towards creating conditions that are fairer and more empowering for practitioners across early years institutions (Gutting, 2005). Foucault's (1980a; 1980b) reflections on the two essential notions that underpin all of his work – power and subject – are encapsulated in the concepts of government and the self. These concepts connect to the declaration of the death of the subject and the idea that all knowledge is inescapably entwined in power relations (Bernauer and Rasmussen, 1988).

2.4 Truth and power in early childhood practice

The longstanding aspiration of early childhood educators and researchers to establish the credibility of their pedagogical approaches through rigorous scientific evidence persists (MacNaughton, 2005). As a consequence, the social worlds of ECPs are governed by a regime consisting of formally acknowledged 'truths' that dictate appropriate methods of thinking, behaving and feeling across the institutions they work in. This has led to the establishment of a "general politics" (Foucault, 1980a, p. 131) or "regime of truth" (Foucault, 1978, p. 60) about policies and practices in early childhood practice. Foucault (1980a) asserts that truths elicit stronger emotional responses in individuals – and manifest themselves more prominently through their actions – when they are generated and authorised by institutional entities. This study argues that this is the case in the field of ECE, where the institutional entity is the regulator, Ofsted (Wood, 2019). In England, the regulator has a duty to inspect, evaluate, rate the effectiveness of, and report on, the standard of education delivered across early years settings and schools (Davis, 2017). Their predetermined criteria, categorising 'good' and 'outstanding' practice, are established and defined through policy and outlined in their inspection handbook (Ofsted, 2023d). Furthermore, in England, Ofsted conduct investigations and evaluations on the themes of 'curriculum' and 'milestones' for children, with a specific focus on identifying their own, predefined characteristics of 'preferred' or 'successful' practices (Wood, 2019).

According to Foucault, our lives are governed and regulated by truths that are both generated and approved by institutions (Taylor, 2017). Foucault (1978, p.17) argues that the mechanisms of power exercised by institutions instil within

us a sense of "tact and discretion", influencing our choices regarding the location, manner and content of our discourse. Foucault defined the notion of a "regime of truth" (1978, p. 60) as a framework that establishes a dominant acceptance within specific fields, dictating both the objectives and methodologies that are required to be followed within that domain (Foucault, 1976a). A regime of truth contains both political and ethical significance, since its truths produce power dynamics that encompass the ethical decisions taken within the institution.

Formally recognised truths are interwoven within a regime (or framework for governance) that controls what are considered to be acceptable and appropriate ways of thinking, acting and feeling; all of which can be applied to early years settings. Through engagement in this process, individuals establish a framework of ethical principles that has the endorsement of governing bodies such as the regulator and the Government, enabling them to determine what constitutes a morally acceptable and virtuous approach to the role of practitioner (MacNaughton, 2000). In this way, those working in the sector may privilege (a potentially narrow band of) specific knowledges about early childhood practice as a regime of truth, exerting regulatory and governing influence over the practice and structuring the experiences of children (Alloway, 1997; Cannella, 1997; Wells, 1981; MacNaughton, 2000). Within the context of educational institutions, the concepts of examination, review and judgement are closely intertwined, since practitioners assume the roles of both producers and objects of analysis (Gilroy and Wilcox, 1997).

According to Foucault (1980a), the concept of truth is intricately connected to systems of power that both generate and uphold it. Additionally, it is intertwined with the power dynamics that it engenders and perpetuates, forming a circular relationship. Hence, practitioners may internalise this specific system of truth, and claim to be enriched by it. However, it is possible that their degree of consciousness may not extend beyond that of specific governing systems, perhaps indicating a manifestation of false consciousness (Wilcox and Grey, 1996; Densmore, 2018). The political nature of a regime of truth incorporates the power dynamics and mechanisms that fuel a regime; and its truth – and the exertion of power – generates regulations that structure and direct actions (Foucault, 1984).

In the context of educational research, Gore (1998) used Foucault's post-structural theory to distinguish between eight distinct micro practices of power exercised by education institutions described as surveillance, normalisation, classification, exclusion, distribution, individualisation, totalisation and regulation. A similar exercise was carried out by MacNaughton (2005) for her research. These micro practices serve as analytical tools for this study, too, for examining the ways in which our everyday actions contribute to the establishment and perpetuation of a system of truth within the specific domain of ECE. Gore's (1998) eight micro practices of power are explained in Appendix Ia as they provide a conceptual lens in this study. In her examination of power/knowledge, Gore (1998) identifies these eight distinct techniques of power derived from Foucault's (1977) theory. These techniques are used by Gore to effectively document instances of power dynamics operating at a smaller, micro level in early childhood practice. Each micro practice of power has the potential to provide a critical lens through which to structure a discussion on how regulation governs ECPs' professional lives and the implications for their professional wellbeing. This is elaborated in Chapter 6.

2.5 Regimes of truth regulate conduct in early childhood practice

A regime of truth, in this case, is one in which ECPs employ micro practices of power to rule and regulate their own conduct and such micro practices adopt a moral purpose (Gore, 1998). Institutionally recognised knowledge, included in the regulatory framework and Government policy documents, has the capacity to generate an authoritarian regime that controls how ECPs should think and behave in an early childhood provision. This dominance of knowledge that has been sanctioned by the regulator and Government, makes it challenging to conceive of any alternative mode of thinking, acting or feeling. Foucault explains that the truths acknowledged by society serve to discipline and regulate individuals, effectively governing them. His perspective on truth is characterised as an "art of government" (Gore, 1993, p. 56). Foucault interprets 'government' broadly as "techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour" (1980) cited in Rabinow (1997, p. 81).

The question of power holds significant importance and is frequently addressed in post-structural theory (Foucault, 1977; 1980a; 1980b; 1983). According to MacNaughton (2005), power may be understood as a dynamic interplay, in which individuals attempt to shape and control the construction of truths and discourses surrounding normality. This struggle extends to the regulation and development of ourselves as individuals, our interactions and our institutions, particularly in regard to the establishment of what is considered normal. Foucault (1982) argues that power is ever-present, not due to its all-encompassing nature, but rather because it emanates from multiple sources. This includes the power within any individual. Therefore, in order to be liberated from imbalanced power dynamics and their consequences for particular systems of knowledge (Foucault, 1976b) argues that it is imperative that individuals confront and interrogate their own inclination to comply with the regimes of truth that exert control over us (McNay, 1992). One possible approach to achieving this objective is by evoking parrhesia (Foucault, 1972). Parrhesia refers to allowing free and frank discussion with the intention of presenting 'different' truths, ones that may not usually be recognised or officially endorsed (McNay, 1992) without fear of adverse consequences. Diverse viewpoints allow us to develop novel truths, possibly in opposition to those who exert influence and control within a specific social domain (Foucault, 1988), such as the realm of early childhood. Parrhesia would grant ECPs the freedom and agency to speak out regarding regulation and call out the power it exercises over them. It recognises the agency and knowledges that people hold (McNay, 1992).

In turn, therefore, parrhesia challenges the researcher to consider the views and perspectives of the participants in this study, not only in relation to how they are subject to micro practices of power but also, how they resist them. Of particular inspiration to this study is the work of Mikuska and Fairchild (2020), which is positioned as examining the individual, lived, gendered experiences of ECPs, recognising that "there is no absolute objective truth" (p. 80).

As Osgood (2010) found, practitioners possess agency and are not merely passive recipients of institutional rites and protocols. They exhibit efficacy in debating, challenging and reshaping the labels and positions imposed upon them. Furthermore, Mikuska (2023) contends that despite the difficulties faced

by ECPs, there remains potential for their advancement in repositioning the ECE workforce through these kinds of resistance.

2.6 Regulation of early childhood education – critical perspectives through a post-structural lens

The application of post-structural theory in the academic discipline of early childhood to understand the complex ways in which structures of regulation exercise power is not new (MacNaughton, 2005). Past authors (McNay, 1992; Osgood, 2010a) also apply post-structural theory to reveal the ways in which ECPs resist the power exercised by policy and regulation. Foucault places emphasis on the concept of the "normalising gaze" and "the examination" as a form of surveillance that effectively builds a system of exposure where people are evaluated (Foucault, 1977, p. 184). The primary objective of regulation through inspection in England is to improve lives by enhancing educational standards for children (Ofsted, 2022). The significance of regulatory standards lies in their ability to move above ethical responsibility and provide a framework of expertise and skills that ECPs are required to comply with (Mikuska, 2023).

Inspections and regulatory oversight are, therefore, exercised upon educational settings, and findings are publicly shared (Ofsted, 2022). This process aims to ensure that practitioners across institutions are held responsible and may be compared with one another. In the context of discipline, it is imperative to focus on the subjects involved (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998). According to Foucault (1977), "the visibility of individuals ensures the maintenance of the power that is exerted upon them" (p. 187). The practise of rating practitioners' practice within institutions, therefore, renders them quantifiable and exposes them to sanctions.

Furthermore, Fairchild and Mikuska (2021) emphasise how the impact of the regulator and Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum may hinder the ability of ECPs to advance beyond performative forms of practice.

For example, former chief inspector of Ofsted, Amanda Spielman, in her first annual report in 2017, stated that a considerable number of primary schools were experiencing a lack of progress, primarily attributable to weaknesses in early years institutions (Ofsted, 2017b). This statement created discontent among many ECPs, and Ofsted was criticised for the 'schoolification' of the

early years that constituted a radical deviation from early years best practice. Spielman's statement not only indicates a misconception of the nature of early years provision, but also poses a potential threat to the recognition and professionalism of ECPs.

According to Foucault (1977), this type of surveillance leads to the process of normalisation as a significant mechanism of power. Foucault has identified several forms of knowledge and practices that play a crucial role in the process of normalisation within the social principles and institutions of contemporary society. In their analysis, Jeffrey and Woods (1998) examine the role of inspectors of education more broadly through the regulatory framework in England, as an illustration of Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power. This form of power aims to establish organised institutions and cultivate individuals to be successful, effective and controlled. Osgood (2010, p. 1) describes professionals working across the education sector being subject to a "regulatory gaze in the name of higher standards". Jeffrey and Woods (1998) argue that this diminishes the professionals' autonomy and the impact of this decline in power for practitioners' manifests as a colonisation of their lives, encompassing not only their professional but, potentially, their personal lives, wellbeing, belief systems and individuality.

Osgood (2010) applies the concept of disciplinary technologies (Foucault, 1977; 1979) which relates to, in this case, practitioners as 'docile bodies', produced by these disciplinary technologies, to serve as objects operating from the discourse – in this context, a hegemonic Government discourse of professionalism in early childhood in England. Osgood (2010) emphasises that practitioners are not submissively moulded by social structures and are effective in restructuring, contesting and debating the discourses they labour in (and are labelled by). This possible action sets the prospect for potentially resisting the regulatory gaze. As previously stated, Osgood (2010) emphasises the active role of practitioners and their agency within institutional contexts. Practitioners, therefore, demonstrate effectiveness in shifting, questioning and actively participating in discussions regarding the categorisations and roles imposed upon them.

Osgood (2010) raises a critical awareness of the English education and care system's connection to the interests of central Government through regulation.

She argues that an illusion occurs, whereby central reform claims to permit a larger element of freedom. Instead, it acts to deregulate and subsequently re-regulate, a practice that Du Gay (1996) describes as controlled de-control. Practitioners within this context are supported to define themselves as showing initiative and resourcefulness (Walkerdine, 2003), yet they are dominated by a pre-defined system of professionalism, which has the consequence of de/re-professionalising practitioners (Ozga and Lawn, 1981; Ozga, 2013).

Osgood (2004), however, suggests that there is an element of passive resistance among ECPs, in opposition to what can be regarded as the masculine, neo-liberal policy that has structured the sector in favour of competitiveness within entrepreneurialism. Osgood (2006a) adds that this idea is similar to Butler's (1990) concept of "enacted fantasy" (p. 7), in which practitioners feel obliged to appear compliant with requests regarding their professional performance (thus allowing the authority that authored the rules' of professional performance to continue imposing them, unaware that they might be in dispute). Notions of "passive resistance", "forms of ventriloquism" and "enacted fantasy" (Osgood, 2006a, p. 7) are similar to the ideas of Foucault in relation to "technologies of behaviour" (Foucault, 1978, p. 294) where individuals become "bodies that are docile and capable" (Foucault, 1980a, p. 138). Unfortunately, where, on one hand, there is spirited resistance, on the other, there also exist feelings of hopelessness and fatalistic resignation.

According to Fenech and Goodfellow (2006, p. 1), regulation of ECE in Australia is regarded by ECPs as a "double-edged sword". That is, despite the outward appearance of the regulator's aims, individual ECPs' genuine commitment to quality education and care can be seriously thwarted by regulatory standards that do not, in fact, constitute minimum structural quality and which lack the structures necessary to support their professional practice. To mitigate this, some services go beyond the requirements of regulation, and their quality standards are determined by the philosophy and priorities in each provision. Thus, in Australia, the power that regulation affords ECPs may be diluted. The effectiveness of regulation, including the strategies and measures ECPs may employ to optimise efficacy in serving the best interests of children, their families, and their field of work are all open to questioning. These questions are relevant when considering the significant power wielded by the 'swords' of

regulation and the attractive incentives they provide, such as being highly graded and recognised as an approved service, which may tempt practitioners to streamline and align their procedures for making choices within these regulatory frameworks (Goodfellow, 2006). Goodfellow (2001; 2003) argues that there is a need for those working in early childhood institutions to cultivate a deep understanding of themselves as knowledgeable practitioners and effectively communicate this sense of self-identification to others. As Osgood (2006b) argues, further inquiry is required to determine if practitioners have embraced this obstacle and employed methods of resisting regulatory frameworks in order to safeguard the authenticity of their practical expertise and their professional wellbeing. As highlighted by Fairchild and Mikuska (2021), the neo-liberal demands of education policy reveal that although ECPs find their work to be enjoyable, having to fulfil regulatory standards has a negative impact on their emotional state.

2.7 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter introduces and justifies post-structural theory as a critical tool for this research. Following extensive reading of the literature (as reported in chapter three) surrounding post-structuralism, it became evident that the substantial works of Foucault (1972; 1975; 1976a; 1976b; 1977; 1978; 1979; 1980a; 1980b; 1982; 1983; 1984; 1988; 1997) would be a beneficial theoretical framework for this research. This conclusion is drawn from the researcher's prior engagement with scholarly discourse that explores the various mechanisms of control employed during regulatory inspections within the education sector, specifically in England (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998). The application of Foucault's (1977) theory on disciplinary power has provided insights into the power dynamics within these regulatory practices, all of which can be applied to this research surrounding the professional wellbeing of ECPs within the context of regulation (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998).

Supplementary to this, Foucault's influence is apparent in the development of feminist theory, encompassing, as it does, a wide range of feminist concerns as Foucault reimagines the concepts of liberty and individuality – issues that are central to feminist theory and practice (Phelan, 1990).

Feminist theory has enabled a prioritisation of the viewpoints of women and their positioning within regulatory frameworks, while post-structural theory has facilitated the recognition of power dynamics shown through regulatory mechanisms. Both feminist theory and post-structural theory offer insights into the concept of normalisation. As a result, post-structural theory has been adopted as the predominant theoretical framework, accompanied by the application of feminist theory as a complementary lens.

This chapter began by justifying the combination of Foucault and feminist theory as a theoretical lens in relation to the professional wellbeing of practitioners and regulation. There followed an analysis of the possibilities of applying post-structural theory in this research; as it holds the potential to promote equity and social justice for ECPs and can be applied as a tool for critically reflective practice through engagement with the post-structuralist politics of knowledge (MacNaughton, 2005). Lastly, the concepts of Foucault's writing within the context of ECE were explained by considering the relationship between truth and power.

Chapter 3: Review of the literature

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to critically explore existing knowledge about the professional wellbeing of early childhood practitioners (ECPs) within the context of regulation in England.

Producing an effective literature review involves encapsulating and integrating existing scholarly inquiries that are relevant to the research questions. This helps to build a comprehensive overview of what is known and understood about a given topic, but also facilitates the researcher's learning process; enhancing their scope of knowledge (Denney and Tewksbury, 2013; Paul and Criado, 2020).

The review for this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do ECPs understand the concept of professional wellbeing?
2. How, in their view, is professional wellbeing affected by the current regulatory processes in England?
3. How might ECPs' wellbeing be sustained in the future?

This chapter discusses existing research in the domain of early childhood education (ECE) in England, including that of Osgood (2006a; 2006b; 2010a) and Wood (2016; 2017; 2019), and in primary and secondary education, Jeffrey and Woods (1996; 1997; 1998). Additionally, it includes a review of literature exploring the professional wellbeing of ECPs in the United States (US) (Hall-Kenyon *et al.*, 2014; Whitebook *et al.*, 2016; Schaack *et al.*, 2020; Schaack and Le, 2017).

The review began with a search in databases such as ERIC, EBSCO and JSTOR, among others, for research journals and articles relevant to this study's topic. Keywords for the search included 'early childhood', 'professional wellbeing' and 'regulation'. A gap emerged in the tranche of work relating specifically to the impact of regulation on the professional wellbeing of ECPs in England. However, broadening the scope of the search to the implications of regulation on the professional wellbeing of *teachers* in England, and also of ECE in the US, revealed a substantial body of literature from which to draw.

The structure of this review of the literature is outlined in the next paragraph.

First, there is an exploration of professional wellbeing in ECE practice, incorporating notes on the professionalisation of the workforce, drawing from studies in the United Kingdom (UK) and in the US. Next, there is a look at literature surrounding the impact of Covid-19 on ECPs. After that, there is an investigation into perspectives on the role of regulation in England, exploring the three key themes of de-professionalisation, colonisation and subjectivity. Next, the policy discourse surrounding professionalism within the early years inspection framework is explored, followed by a critical review of control through regulation. To finish, there is an examination of the potential implications of regulation for professional wellbeing.

Throughout this chapter, the term ECP is used to refer to practitioners, even when authors have used different terminology, with the only exceptions being when the research refers to an alternative phase of education, for example, teachers in primary education.

3.2 Professional wellbeing in early childhood practice

There is a marked gap in literature focused on the professional lives of ECPs that offers definitions of professional wellbeing. However, out of an extensive review of literature in the fields of philosophy, psychology and physiology came Cumming and Wong's (2020) definition of wellbeing in the context of early childhood practice as,

> *"a dynamic state, involving the interaction of individual, relational, work-environmental, and sociocultural-political aspects and contexts. [An] educator's wellbeing is the responsibility of the individual and the agents of these contexts, requiring ongoing direct and indirect supports, across psychological, physiological and ethical dimensions"* (Cumming and Wong, 2020, p. 276).

The complexity of this definition indicates the need for a multi-dimensional approach to exploring ECPs' wellbeing in early years settings. Cumming and Wong (2020) add that the definition of professional wellbeing is constantly changing and is influenced by the broader ECE system, itself in a long-standing state of flux. This definition raises important questions surrounding the role of

the individual ECP and the responsibilities of those in leadership (Cumming and Wong, 2019). Fairchild's (2021) work regarding the professional could be applied to the concept of professional wellbeing, and she calls for further investigation into the impact of the broader ECE system in England in relation to the early childhood professional.

A similar, but less complex, definition of professional wellbeing is provided by Schaack *et al.* (2020) who state that "wellbeing is a multi-dimensional construct that includes teachers' physical, emotional, psychological and financial wellbeing" (p. 1026). Schaack *et al.* (2020) emphasise the importance of further research to provide an in-depth understanding of ECPs' lives by analysing variables both inside and outside of early childhood programmes that affect a variety of wellbeing indicators.

Furthermore, McMullen *et al.* (2020) define the phrase 'wellbeing' as a universal label that can be applied across all capacities of our lives. They suggest that, "financial wellbeing, physical health and wellbeing, emotional wellbeing, spiritual wellbeing, *etcetera*, […] is always used to indicate a positive state" (p. 4).

Other researchers highlight the dynamic and contextual aspects of wellbeing of practitioners in the field of ECE, arguing that levels of wellbeing have implications for the quality of ECE (Shpancer *et al.*, 2008; Williamson *et al.*, 2011; Kusma *et al.*, 2012; Royer and Moreau, 2016). These authors, however, neglect to acknowledge the connection between the personal and professional wellbeing of ECPs and this topic remains largely unexplored (Cumming, 2017). Wellbeing, it is argued, can include many dimensions that straddle all aspects of life, including at the intersection between the personal and the professional (Fináncz *et al.*, 2020). Despite the very few definitions surrounding professional wellbeing, it is known that the psychological health and wellbeing of ECPs impacts on their capacity to provide an environment that is responsive, caring and beneficial to the development of young children (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009; Buettner *et al.*, 2015; Zinsser, Christensen and Torres, 2016; McLean *et al.*, 2017). It is, therefore, crucial to supporting ECPs that clear definitions of wellbeing relating to their role are understood by all. It is equally important to the children in their care who may be impacted by practitioners' poor mental health and wellbeing (McLean *et al.*, 2017). Specific programmes could be made available to support ECPs. For example, programme initiatives

surrounding decision-making, problem-solving and other skills to promote ECPs' mental health as their wellbeing could influence their interactions with children (McLean *et al.*, 2017). As Kwon *et al.,* (2021) emphasise, ECPs engage in role-modelling behaviour, which involves embracing and reacting to expressions of emotion, thus promoting children's emotional growth and wellbeing. Therefore, ECPs have substantial responsibility for children's emotional development. However, ECPs may only perform this duty optimally if they hold good physical health and wellbeing themselves (Kwon *et al.*, 2021). The above exploration of definitions of professional wellbeing, reveal its complexity, emphasising the need for a multi-dimensional approach (Cumming and Wong, 2020; Schaack, 2020; McMullen *et al.,* 2020). Furthermore, this exploration reveals the absence of a correlation between personal and professional wellbeing, a topic which remains widely unexplored (Cumming, 2017). A further theme that emerges in comparing different definitions is that although many take a multi-dimensional approach, including for example, physical, financial, emotional or spiritual wellbeing (e.g Schaack *et al.,* 2020 or McMullen *et al.,* 2020) they may give each of these elements a different emphasis. It is therefore necessary to conduct further research in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of ECPs' individual lives in order to support and sustain their professional wellbeing (Schaack *et al.,* 2020).

A sustained and well-qualified early years workforce can benefit society in a number of ways. First, education and care services contribute to the sustainability of parents participation in the labour market (Pascoe and Brennan, 2017). Second, these services enable an established workforce to facilitate high-quality learning and development for children (Productivity Commission, 2019). However, the ability to deliver high-quality learning and development services relies on a sustained, psychologically and physiologically healthy and well-qualified early years workforce. This connection between the health of ECPs and their professional wellbeing implies a need for further research to be conducted from an organisational stance (Logan *et al.*, 2020).

Three recent studies have addressed the professional wellbeing of ECPs. First, Roberts *et al.* (2023) raise concerns about, and advocate the advancement of, ECPs' wellbeing throughout their most recent research, which employs a person-centred methodology. They indicate the importance of psychological

wellbeing, with emphasis on self-care and self-compassion as areas of attention for organisational and systems change initiatives or interventions. Furthermore, building on the earlier definition of wellbeing provided by Cumming and Wong (2020, p. 276), Roberts *et al.* (2023) highlight that existing research consistently overlooks the complex nature of wellbeing, thus illustrating the considerable challenge of isolating a solitary metric that comprehensively conveys the meaning of professional wellbeing for ECPs. Broader research is, therefore, required to incorporate more extensive examinations of ECPs' wellbeing, which should also consider the complex nature of their whole profession. There is also a need for further research to encompass a wide range of variables that could potentially impact the wellbeing of ECPs, for which Gallagher and Roberts (2022) argue, we do not have sufficient metrics.

Second, Walter *et al.* (2023), in raising their own concerns regarding the wellbeing of ECPs, emphasise the significant amount of stress that ECPs experience due to the increasing focus placed on accountability (Hall-Kenyon *et al.*, 2014; Cumming, 2017), which is enforced by rigorous standards of regulation (Brown, 2011). According to Walter *et al.* (2023), current methods designed to promote the wellbeing of ECPs may not fully consider the various components that influence the individual wellbeing of ECPs. Consequently, the authors, additionally, suggest that the examination of ECP wellbeing necessitates a comprehensive analysis using a multi-dimensional lens.

Third, Wong *et al.* (2023) emphasise the importance of ECPs' wellbeing in order to fully achieve the purpose of ECE. They emphasise that the limited knowledge surrounding the professional psychological and physiological wellbeing of ECPs is due to the absence of clear definitions and the use of subjective wellbeing measures. Wong *et al.* (2023) call for a comprehensive examination into ECPs' wellbeing, employing multidisciplinary, contemporary methods to assess wellbeing in relation to ECPs' professional working environments.

Due to the complex and varied ways in which care and education is delivered in the early years sector in England, employment and wellbeing experiences may vary for ECPs (Lloyd, 2015). Factors such as location, financing sources, demographics served, and more, can affect resources, support and workplace culture (Lloyd and Penn, 2012). Several of these factors affect job satisfaction and ECPs' capacity to provide developmentally appropriate care and education

(Silver *et al.*, 2020). The diverse range of settings across England that facilitate early childhood education and care (ECEC), consists of private enterprises, nursery schools and nurseries within schools (Fairchild, 2021). These distinct populations of ECPs, therefore, operate in various contexts as a result of educational requirements (particularly in schools) and disparate pay rates. This has led to practitioners across all contexts reporting being less physically fit and under greater stress than their non-teaching counterparts (Whitaker *et al.*, 2013). ECPs' working environments, therefore, can either undermine or promote their professional wellbeing (Burns and Machin, 2013; Stauffer and Mason, 2013).

While the word 'wellbeing' is referred to in academic writing across the discipline of education, there is yet to be a clear characterisation of what it signifies in relation to the motivators and needs of ECPs (Cumming, 2017). 'Wellbeing' is being used in early years institutions to cover a range of alternative, more familiar and recognised experiences; for example, work fulfilment, stress levels and exhaustion (Hall-Kenyon *et al.,* 2014; Zinsser *et al.*, 2016; Jeon, Buettner and Grant, 2018). Day and Qing (2009) identify professional wellbeing as a form of happiness from work fulfilment. However, participants in their research were primary and secondary school teachers, not ECPs. Other research on teachers in schools has, generally, concentrated more on psycho-physiological issues such as depression, anxiety and burnout (Day and Qing, 2009). According to Chang (2009) and Merida-Lopes and Extremera (2017), these issues may be brought on by long-term exposure to negative emotions that are set off by teachers' impressions of various demanding conditions within their educational settings, such as disciplinary issues and a heavy workload. Their findings indicate that teachers have poorer mental health than the general population, which may be attributed to the demands of their jobs. These include balancing and organising, teaching children and making sure that classroom interactions are of a high standard (Feldon, 2007). In addition, Jeon *et al.*, 2018, identified in their research that depression, stress, and emotional fatigue were all psychological wellbeing variables that substantially correlated with teacher perceptions of their workplace conditions. These results are in line with other research suggesting that teachers who are happier in their working environments show reduced work stress or burnout (Bloom, 1988; Demerouti *et*

al., 2001). It cannot, however, be assumed that findings from studies focused on the wellbeing of teachers in primary and secondary education can be transferred to the context of ECE.

Concerns have been expressed for some time regarding the experiences of ECPs at work and their wellbeing (Cameron, Owen and Moss, 2001; Children's Workforce and Development Council, 2006) and there is growing interest in the psychological health and self-care of ECPs. However, further study is necessary to better understand the nature of wellbeing in their context (Hall-Kenyon *et al*., 2014) and find the most effective strategies for improving mental health.

Thomason and LaParo (2013) found that ECPs still consider working with children to be a gratifying experience, despite their frequent reports that they feel depressed, stressed and overwhelmed. Jeon (2018) suggests that it might be a useful strategy to recognise and acknowledge the needs that ECPs, themselves, express, adding that addressing ECPs' need for improved wellbeing could assist them in feeling more fulfilled in their roles and enable them to perform more effectively.

Mercer (2001) and Tweed (2001) emphasise that ECPs in England endure a status of inadequate recompense, low significance and few opportunities for career progression. Moreover, ECPs are overworked and undervalued and retention problems are prolific (Cameron, Owen and Moss, 2001; Children's Workforce and Development Council, 2006). Issues surrounding staff retention, wellbeing, funding and recognition continue to be of concern in the early years sector in England (Avinash, 2019; Bonetti, 2020).

Children's wellbeing has elicited widespread attention and holds an essential position in policy and curriculum frameworks. This is evident in a number of national policies and guidance in English speaking countries (Cumming and Wong, 2020). For example, England's statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (Department for Education (DfE), 2017) and Aotearoa, New Zealand's Te Whariki Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2017). However, compared with the attention being paid to children's wellbeing, that of ECPs has received very little exploration or research (Cumming and Wong, 2020; Hall-Kenyon *et al.*, 2014). In addition, there appears to be no precise responsiveness to ECPs' wellbeing in policy documents or curriculum guidance

(including those listed above) across national contexts. Research literature also contains limited definitions of wellbeing concerning ECPs (Cumming *et al.*, 2020).

There are evident connections between ECPs' and children's wellbeing and if practitioners' wellbeing is compromised, they are unlikely to be able to offer high quality education and care (Tayler *et al.*, 2016). These links are supported by research revealing both the positive effects for children (Ylitapio-Mantyla *et al.*, 2012; Nislin *et al.*, 2016) and the negative effects when ECPs' wellbeing is affected (Cassidy *et al.*, 2016; Ota *et al.*, 2013). The negative effects of ECPs' wellbeing can also include a financial impact on early years provision (Kusma *et al.*, 2012), low morale, staffing inconsistencies and sickness management and performance issues (Lovgren, 2016). With such evident connections between the wellbeing of ECPs and that of children, it seems pertinent to question why ECPs' individual wellbeing throughout the early years sector is so overlooked in policy and in academic research (Cumming *et al.*, 2020).

Positive, successful early childhood settings benefit and maximise outcomes for children and ECPs (McGinty *et al.*, 2008; Collie *et al.*, 2011). When ECPs consider their working environment to be positive and encouraging, they are not just more motivated towards early education; the level of care they provide improves significantly (Lower and Cassidy, 2007; McGinty *et al.*, 2008; Zinsser and Curby, 2014). Despite the fact that structural, centre-level characteristics, including pay and resource availability, unquestionably, have a significant effect on ECPs' attitudes and quality of provision (Ghazvini and Mullis, 2002; Torquati *et al.*, 2007), research has also identified correlations between interpersonal and centre-level variables. That is, job satisfaction and emotional resilience, for example, are significantly influenced by employees' perceptions of their adult working relationships within their setting, and their sense of community (Reffett, 2009; Zinsser *et al.*, 2016).

Research conducted by Wells (2015) identifies that ECPs' wellbeing is not significantly correlated with income but the views of ECPs' working environments were more significantly associated with staff turnover. Jeon (2018) agrees that income does not impact ECPs' wellbeing; which has, nonetheless, been identified as among the most significant determinants of wellbeing (Barnett, 2003; Bullough *et al.*, 2012).

3.3 The professionalisation of the early childhood education workforce in England is structured by Government

According to Fairchild (2017), the complexity of achieving a unified definition of professional identity for ECPs is illustrated by its multiple descriptions across the corpus of academic literature. Notable works include those by Dahlberg and Moss (2005), Grieshaber and Cannella (2001), Osgood (2006a; 2009; 2010a; 2012), and Urban (2010). Fairchild (2017) adds that professional identity is a multifaceted and dynamic construct that is influenced by various internal, as well as external, variables, which include individual subjectivity, regulation, ongoing education and reflective practice. Based on the theoretical framework proposed by Butler (1990), Fairchild (2017) asserts that the construction of a professional identity is performative. That is, the notion of being professional is conceptualised as a series of actions and behaviours exhibited by ECPs within specific contexts, rather than being a universally fixed characteristic defining their inherent nature.

Lloyd (2010) emphasises the key role that Government plays in shaping the professionalism of ECPs. Lloyd (2010) highlights Government's attempt at achieving professionalisation through a qualification, that of Early Years Professional Status, available to practitioners at graduate-level. However, instead of generating a re-evaluation of the role of ECP; the establishment of the Early Years Professional seems to have intensified existing divisions between ECPs and other professionals engaged in the care and education of young children (Lloyd, 2010). Furthermore, as a result of the Government's failing to consider the potential consequences of the historical origins of various approaches to working with young children (Scheiwe and Willekens, 2009), it can be observed that the division between early childhood care and education, in terms of its historical, practical and philosophical context, had also been further reinforced (Lloyd, 2010). Lloyd (2010) thus raises the question as to whether this professionalisation of the early years workforce should be characterised as an ongoing endeavour or, alternatively, as a lost opportunity, for the ECE sector to establish a professional workforce. According to Fairchild (2017), there is considerable variation in views surrounding the attributes defining the professional identity of ECP graduates. In England, she

argues, a significant influence comes from Government policy, particularly the way in which policy structures professionalisation. This process of professionalisation seems to be primarily focussed on the attainment of specific qualifications, including the completion of relevant training programmes (DfE, 2013; 2014). Fairchild (2021) further suggests that educational policy continually shifts, in line with each Government's fulfilment of their electoral pledges. Such shifts represent and foster concepts of education that align with each existing Government's ideology. Such ideologies are centred on curriculum, encompassing an increasingly authoritative style of teaching and behavioural regulation (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). Fairchild (2021) highlights, more specifically, that the requirement for a professionalised workforce had been associated with the establishment of the EYFS framework. This framework, first introduced in 2008, shaped the field of ECE in England (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), 2008). Furthermore, the recent update to the EYFS framework (DfE, 2021a; 2021b) resulted in an enhancement to the attainment objectives for children, prior to their enrolment in mandatory school education. These revisions resulted in the publication of industry-led, non-statutory guidance entitled *Birth to Five Matters* (Early Years Coalition 2021). Fairchild (2021) suggests that the publication of this guidance was a reaction to the perceived weaknesses of legislative reforms, adding that it constituted an expression of professualism throughout the ECE workforce.

3.3.1 Professionalisation omits consideration of professional wellbeing.

Fairchild (2021) argues that the role of the early childhood professional should be interpreted in connection with the structure of the early years sector. Across England, there are private (for-profit), not-for-profit and publicly managed provisions, which are, largely, components of the neoliberal market system (Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). Fairchild (2021) highlights that within this system, nursery settings are subject to management through the EYFS statutory framework (DfE, 2021a) and the regulator, Ofsted, which judges the quality of the settings.

Osgood (2006a), additionally, emphasises that the prevailing conceptualisation of professionalism has been formulated and endorsed by the UK Government

by means of legislation. Similar to colleagues across the field of education, ECPs undergo a disparaging "regulatory gaze" (Osgood, 2006a, p. 5), intended to achieve enhanced standards, but which excludes consideration of their professional wellbeing. Excessive focus on meeting dominant and externally enforced notions of professionalism, argues Osgood (2006), has limited the opportunities for ECPs to engage in re-evaluating and challenging these existing regulatory processes. ECPs find themselves restricted by the expectations of technical and mechanistic approaches in ECE policy; a result of "deliberate social manipulation" (Osgood, 2006a, p. 10). According to Osgood (2006b, p. 6), the "power elite", comprised of individuals from Government organisations, assume the role of regulators, overseeing the conduct of subservient ECPs. The supposed need for this governance and oversight arises from a perceived "education crisis" (Osgood, 2006b, p. 6), apparently constructed by the current discourse surrounding early childhood programmes, which often portrays ECPs as inadequate in meeting the needs of children and families. This perception, therefore, justifies the requirement for regulation and supports the idea that regulation is both practical and desirable (Osgood, 2006a). As Archer (2020) highlights, the continued alterations to qualification requirements, competency frameworks and regulations across England have resulted in the emergence of power discourses that are shaping ECPs in several diverse, contradictory and interchanging ways. These particular discourses aim to establish specific meanings in relation to ECPs' professional identities (Archer, 2022a). Archer (2022a) further emphasises the significance of neoliberal discourses in shaping the identities and behaviours of ECPs. These discourses consist of 'governmentality' (rational government), 'responsibilisation' (where responsibilities are shifted from the state to the individual), 'performativity', 'accountability', 'surveillance', 'marketisation' and 'commodification'; serving as discursive boundaries that aim to define the characteristics and actions of the 'desirable' ECP. Archer (2022a) highlights the significance of Osgood's (2006b) work in relation to professionalism; indicating that regulatory frameworks can result in ECPs adhering to dominating constructs of professionalism, while the regulatory gaze limits their autonomy. ECPs face growing challenges in meeting the expectations for responsibility, performance and standardised methods across their work, and these demands reflect a noticeable shift towards centralised authority and prescribed methods.

As a consequence, there is a potential risk to ECPs' professional liberty and wellbeing (Mahony and Hextall, 2001).

Inspired by the theoretical framework proposed by Butler (1990), Osgood (2006a) posits that as the act of professionalism is not a fixed and universally applicable characteristic that defines individuals, but rather a dynamic behaviour that is dependent upon the specific actions undertaken by ECPs at given moments, ECPs hold the capacity to challenge dominant conceptions of their professionalism. Osgood (2006b) posits that the confident and knowledgeable ECP, who questions the existing norms surrounding unfavourable working environments and lack of recognition, holds the potential to redefine their professional identity and create an alternative discourse.

3.4 Professional wellbeing: learning from the literature in the context of the United States

In the United States of America, there exists a broader body of research that specifically addresses the professional wellbeing of practitioners across various ECE settings. There are some distinct differences between the system of ECE in the USA and the English context. In the English context, children start formal education by the age of four, beginning with the EYFS framework which sets standards for children from birth to five years (EYFS, 2023). However, across the US, public funding and standards of ECEC varies by state. Dependant on the state, American children begin elementary school, (primary school) later, at around age six (Fabina *et al.,* 2023). While this study focuses on the experiences of ECPs in England, the literature from the USA offers important insights into professional wellbeing. However, there is a need to exercise caution in drawing any comparisons due to the ECE system differences. It is important to take account of knowledge from the USA context including concerns about occupational stress (Lambert *et al.*, 2019), regulation (Franko *et al.*, 2017), high workload with extended working hours (Whitebook *et al.*, 2016; Schaack and Le, 2017) and recruitment issues (Borman and Dowling, 2008; Kelly and Northrop, 2015; Sutcher, Darling-Hammond and Carver-Thomas, 2016). These concerns are also present on the literature within the context of England (Jeffery and Woods, 1998; Osgood, 2010; LGA, 2023; Ofsted, 2023a).

Literature from the US raises concerns relating to occupational stress among ECPs (Lambert *et al.*, 2019). More young children are being enrolled in ECEC programmes than ever before across the US (Fabina *et al.,* 2023) and more research is demonstrating the value of young children's development for long-term results (Campbell *et al.*, 2002; Heckman *et al.*, 2013). The quality of care and education is under examination due to an increased focus on early years' quality; particularly with regard to its variability (Phillips *et al.*, 2001; Jeon and Buettner, 2015). This has motivated policymakers to conduct research into the influences that shape the level of care and education across early years programmes (Irwin *et al.*, 2016). Programming criteria, assessment methods and compliance requirements are imposed and compulsory for many ECPs (Franko *et al.*, 2017) and the majority, in the US, work long hours for very little recompense in terms of salary or benefits; despite their comprehensive workloads (Whitebook *et al.*, 2016; Schaack and Le, 2017). Most ECPs have extended work responsibilities in understaffed settings, consisting of insignificant, or no, allocated time for planning (Whitebook *et al.*, 2014) with inconsistent timetables (Setodji *et al.*, 2012). Schaack *et al.* (2020) highlight the importance of understanding the influences on the working environments of ECPs who engage in these difficult working conditions and assume increasing responsibility.

In the US, researchers have examined a variety of predictors of ECPs' decisions to leave early childhood settings, over and above poor pay, with a view to better understanding the phenomenon and thereby, retaining personnel in this sector. Increasing levels of stress, poor wellbeing and work-related issues such as low salaries, unfavourable working environments, negative relationships with children, families and colleagues and workplace instability are all stated reasons for high staff turnover (Whitebook and Sakai, 2004; Hall-Kenyon *et al.*, 2014; Wells, 2015). ECPs, dissatisfied with their working environments, suffer with emotional exhaustion and struggle to develop the emotional regulation or coping mechanisms needed to facilitate the development and care of young children (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). ECPs in this situation show increased levels of conflict (Whitaker *et al.*, 2015) and are generally less capable of providing high-quality spaces for young children (Buettner *et al.*, 2016). ECPs seek alternative employment in more

positive working environments due to emotional experiences brought on by all of the above, and/or inadequate pay (Totenhagen *et al.*, 2016).

Across the US, policymakers and researchers are concerned about the number of ECPs who have voluntarily left the early years sector across several decades, leading to an ongoing increase in financial, organisational and educational costs (Borman and Dowling, 2008; Kelly and Northrop, 2015; Sutcher, Darling-Hammond and Carver-Thomas, 2016). ECPs who report high levels of satisfaction and positive experiences in relation to their wellbeing and professional careers are more effective in supporting children's access to high quality learning and development. By contrast, ECPs who report negatively in relation to their professional wellbeing and stress levels construct more stressful environments for children in their care (Pakarinen *et al.*, 2010). When ECPs are introduced to coping strategies such as mindfulness, the interactions and positive relationship between ECPs and children have been enhanced and improvements noted (Singh *et al.,* 2013). Whilst there is increasing research relating to ECPs, most studies focus on operational factors relating to stress (Zellars *et al.*, 2004), which include income (Loeb and Luczak, 2005) and class sizes (French, 1993). Operational and structural factors, although relevant, obscure the individual psychological aspects of ECPs' daily lived experiences and such factors are frequently disregarded. Consequently, research constructs a partial conclusion of how ECPs' stress and wellbeing operate across the early years sector (Jepson and Forrest, 2006).

Furthermore, although professional stress among ECPs is a phenomenon recognised across literature in the US, there is limited research relating to the demands of the job role in comparison to the accessibility of sufficient resources required for ECPs to fulfil that role (Meurs and Perrewe, 2011).

Gilbert, Adesope and Schroeder (2014) report that exposure to professional stress within their working environment has led to some ECPs feeling burnt out, with a reduction in the enjoyment of their role, and Aloe *et al.* (2014) add that stress leads to a lack of effective teaching and management strategies. Lambert *et al.* (2019) report that ECPs exhibit low commitment levels regarding their profession compared with elementary and secondary school teachers, as well as less interest in remaining in the sector due to work-related stress. Other literature supports this study highlighting the links between ECPs' stress and

their commitment to their profession in addition to an intensified desire to leave their role (Jepson and Forrest, 2006; Klassen and Chiu, 2011).

Lambert *et al.* (2019) report that regulatory processes begin by evaluating requirements and resources, therefore, when it has been identified that resources fail to meet the demands required for the ECP's job, risks related to occupational stress are heightened. Furthermore, when ECPs continually endure stressful experiences in their workplace over time, indicators of stress, such as fatigue and breakdowns in performance, occur. These constant indicators of stress can often lead to ECPs examining their commitments to their occupation, and furthermore, investigating possible changes in careers or possibly leaving the sector altogether. ECPs' appraisals of their responsibilities can, therefore, provide insights for policymakers on the individual psychological processes that contribute to ECPs leaving the sector (Schaack *et al.*, 2020), and this requires further investigation (Totenhagen *et al.*, 2016).

The emotional and psychological experiences of ECPs in the US are frequently excluded in research exploring turnover and working circumstances (Buettner *et al.*, 2016). Research on wellbeing in early childhood could be extended beyond exploring the structural factors that impact on wellbeing to include individual lived experiences. Compared with most other vocations, ECPs in the US suffer poorer wellbeing and increased levels of stress (Kyriacou, 2001; Whitaker *et al.*, 2015) in which expectations from children and families, workloads, surroundings and personal lives may all be contributors (Lambert *et al.*, 2015; Montgomery and Rupp, 2005). The continued stress of ECPs can result in emotional exhaustion, a feature of burnout, presenting as fatigue (Chang, 2013; Lazarus and Folkman, 1987). In addition to their own social and emotional capability, ECPs' wellbeing is significant to enhancing the atmosphere and standards of learning environments for children, which has implied impact on their developmental outcomes (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009, Jeon *et al.*, 2014). Studies conducted in the US have also demonstrated that increased stress and emotional fatigue reduces ECPs' professional engagement and can lead to ECPs leaving their jobs (Manlove and Guzell, 1997; Montgomery and Rupp, 2005; Kim and Kim, 2010). The literature from the US throughout this section provides valuable insights into the professional wellbeing of ECPs; however, it is important to acknowledge that these findings may not be universally applicable.

3.5 The impact of Covid-19 on early childhood practitioners

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, the national media consistently posed questions to Government regarding the closure of schools and nurseries (Morton, 2020). This line of questioning arose due to the requirement for nurseries and schools to continue operating for key worker families. In response, the Government (DfE, 2020) put in place a requirement for the continuation of early years provision for children of key workers. Providers were also held accountable for supporting vulnerable children, implementing effective safeguarding procedures and collaborating with agencies, services and settings; thus maintaining the protection of children whose vulnerability to harm had increased as a result of Covid-19. Furthermore, providers were expected to continue to promote the learning, development and overall wellbeing of children – maintaining adherence to the statutory EYFS framework (DfE, 2018).

Concerns over the potentially negative consequences of closing nurseries and schools emerged via the media; and Government debates revolving around potential harm to the wellbeing of children tried to balance the dual threats of exposure to Covid and negative consequences associated with prolonged absence from school (Mikuska, 2021). As the pandemic progressed and began to impact on the educational sector as a whole, it emerged that institutions were unprepared for the pedagogical and mental health challenges it posed for ECPs (Dabrovsky, 2020; Rodríguez *et al*., 2022).

The role of ECPs with leadership responsibilities was crucial in facilitating children's adaptation to the crisis, encompassing the periods preceding, concurrent with, and subsequent to the pandemic (Ebbeck, Yim and Wei, 2020). However, there is a scarcity of academic research that addresses the coping mechanisms employed by leaders and practitioners in the field of ECE in relation to managing change across early years settings before the pandemic. Leaders across the field of ECE encountered significant obstacles and underwent substantial transformations over a limited period of time (Trauernicht *et al.*, 2023). The magnitude of this global crisis was unprecedented in modern times, surpassing any previous experiences in living memory. Therefore, the executive committee of the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education

(OMEP[4]) developed a position document emphasising the significance of maintaining high-quality ECE during the pandemic; in which particular attention was shown towards children's wellbeing (OMEP, 2020). OMEP deemed it crucial to pursue resolutions through collective unity in order to mitigate the transmission of Covid-19 and alleviate its adverse consequences for children and families. The document, therefore, emphasised the significance of the early years sector, highlighting the importance of implementing specific measures aimed at safeguarding children and fostering favourable living conditions that prioritise the needs of the child, in compliance with the stipulations outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2010). However, this document omitted to consider the wellbeing and support required for ECPs.

Research conducted by Beauchamp *et al.* (2021) during the Covid-19 pandemic in England suggests that many external circumstances, including national structures, mandates, support mechanisms and advisory measures, impacted the responsiveness of leaders as nursery settings continued to operate. According to Beauchamp *et al.* (2021), the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in an overwhelming feeling of uncertainty and anxiety among individuals as a significant number of ECPs felt a deficiency in energy and the necessary drive required for their professional duties. Leaders believed it to be of utmost importance to foster and inspire their team, attentively addressing and engaging in dialogue regarding concerns. The pressures of unpredictability, the increased need for tolerance and the threat to wellbeing arising from these constantly changing circumstances were among the many challenges facing leaders as they struggled to maintain a presence and availability across their settings.

Beauchamp *et al*. (2021) report leaders demonstrating a willingness to engage in discussions regarding relevant concerns with staff members, which had a beneficial impact on working environments. The significance of leaders' involvement in relation to employee motivation, wellbeing, training and development and guidance throughout the pandemic can, therefore, be recognised (Trauernicht *et al.*, 2023).

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[4] OMEP stands for Organisation Mondiale pour l'Éducation Préscolaire

The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2021) highlights the profound impact of Covid-19 on individuals worldwide and shows that impact varied across the contexts of individual countries. This brings to light enduring disparities based on factors such as wealth, age, race, sex and geographic region. Despite the recent advancements in global health, individuals worldwide still encounter multifaceted and interrelated challenges to their overall health and wellbeing, emerging from various social, economic, political and environmental factors, and it is these that influenced health outcomes significantly during 2020 and 2021.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, leaders across ECE settings played a pivotal role in upholding the physical and psychological welfare of staff, children and their families (Park *et al.* 2020). The spread of the Covid-19 virus during the spring of 2020 resulted in the implementation of a series of stringent legislative measures, which swiftly and significantly affected both the personal and professional lives of individuals (Park *et al.,* 2020; Lafave, Webster and McConnell, 2021). In the English ECE sector, in order to mitigate the spread of Covid-19, the range of implemented precautions resulted in the establishment of major changes to regulations (DfE, 2020). Institutional leadership, therefore, held a pivotal role in both the preparation and execution of these adaptations to policy and regulatory changes across settings. In order to assure the provision of high-quality ECE and effectively manage resources, it had rapidly become imperative for leaders to possess a novel and diverse range of skills, resulting in a significant level of stress (Park *et al.,* 2020; Lafave, Webster, and McConnell, 2021).

In Europe, Lunneblad and Garvis (2017) draw attention to the existing obligations of leaders across ECE settings. These include maintaining the quality and financial performance of ECE and their responsibilities towards guardians and local authorities (Park *et al.,* 2020; Lafave, Webster, and McConnell, 2021) – intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic. Leaders across early childhood institutions, consequently, demonstrated significantly higher average levels of stress compared with ECPs who did not hold managerial responsibilities (Nagel-Prinz and Paulus, 2012; Almstadt, Gebauer and Medjedovi, 2012; Timmermann, Hogrebe and Ulber, 2021). Viernickel, Voss and Mauz (2017) also highlight the potential health risks associated with an

increased workload, particularly among individuals in managerial positions across early childhood settings, further exacerbated by the pandemic (Lunneblad and Garvis, 2017).

3.6 The role of regulation in education in England: a critical perspective

As an agency of the Government, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) is central to the inspection of early years settings in England (Ofsted, 2020a). Ofsted's duty is to inspect, evaluate and publish information regarding the standard of education delivered in funded settings, in addition to rating their effectiveness (Davis, 2017). In England, Ofsted inspects registered early years provision under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005 (Ofsted, 2022) and is in receipt of public funding. This is for a variety of settings such as small, privately run, for-profit day nurseries; large nursery chains; nursery schools attached to primary schools; non-profit voluntary settings and childminders. Private early years businesses function within a mixed market economy, together with state-run nursery schools (Lloyd and Penn, 2012; Eurydice National Education Systems, 2019). Ofsted inspectors produce reports for each location, which, in turn, inform His Majesty's Chief Inspector's (HMCI's) yearly updates on the extent to which requirements of the statutory framework are met (DfE, 2021a). Ofsted, additionally, produces curriculum-themed reports and evaluations centred on definitions of high-quality practice, thus attempting to define practice. In addition to its initial purpose as an inspection body, Ofsted has now acquired authority as the arbiter of high-quality practice because it has published guidance impacting and influencing how ECPs and providers conduct their practice in order to achieve the desired outcomes for children in their settings (Wood, 2019). Since the implementation of the Childcare Act 2006, it has been mandatory for all early childcare providers in England to be registered and subject to inspections by Ofsted (Mikuska, 2023). Ofsted has a role in England's audit and accountability infrastructure by monitoring and evaluating the quality of services based on national standards set by government. Their mandate is to examine, assess, and document the calibre of education offered throughout government funded educational institutions and to evaluate their overall efficacy (Wood, 2019). Ofsted inspectors create reports for each establishment, which in turn

contribute to the overall findings on the education sector, as presented in the annual reports of His Majesty's Chief Inspector, concerning the attainment of standards (Ofsted, 2023a). In addition to generating inspection reports, Ofsted additionally conduct surveys on curricular subjects and age phases, as well as thematic reviews that specifically identify what they consider excellent or effective practice (Ofsted, 2015). Throughout the subsequent sections of this literature review, Ofsted will be referred to as 'the regulator'.

According to Clarke and Newman (1997), the use of public management strategies within a marketised framework prioritises information being shared with the public and has weakened the connection between policymakers and practice. Government agencies operate control that is asserted remotely and immune from critique (Hargreaves, 1994). The DfE, with its Government priorities, establishes curricula and statutory structures for inspection, including the standards to which educational settings, as unique entrepreneurial facilities, are obliged to conform (Davis, 2017). The level of collaboration between settings and the regulator, therefore, remains limited, and institutions are subjected to control and direction. Consequently, there exists a greater degree of engagement and negotiation between ECPs and those with leadership responsibilities compared with the level of collaboration among regulatory inspection teams (Hargreaves, 1994). This division between the setting and the regulator has become more apparent. As the regulatory framework separates and isolates, further power and control is granted to regulatory authorities, diminishing the influence of people subject to regulation in educational settings (Lonsdale and Parsons, 1998). The authority of the regulator's inspectors stems from two main sources: the legitimacy bestowed upon them by the Government, and secondly, the accumulation of information they create. The regulator, therefore, does not only own and regulate knowledge, through the practise of analysis and dissemination, it constructs a potent discourse throughout the education sector (Wood, 2019). The centralised repository of data collected during the inspection process consequently places the regulator in a favourable standing as holder of expertise, possessing the capacity to replicate and reframe this information in the process of establishing and adapting policies (Lee and Fitz, 1997). Inspection processes for ECPs, consequently, become a highly controlled and problematic process (Perry, 1995).

There are valuable critical perspectives about accountability and control in the education sector that emerge from the broader literature on education. Although the literature does not specifically address the early years sector, it does provide significant critiques on the role of regulation in England that are relevant to this study. Through this review of the literature, three key themes have emerged, to be explored below. These are de-professionalisation, colonisation and subjectivity.

3.6.1 De-professionalisation

Power (1997, p. 4) conducted an analysis on the concept of the "audit society", highlighting two key aspects: the financial burden associated with the 'regulatory state' and the conclusion that inspection fails to effectively address the issue of trust, but rather shifts it. According to Case, Case, and Catling (2000), the term de-professionalisation is an informative process. De-professionalisation is widely recognised as an integral aspect of teacher's everyday lives; as evidenced by the testimonies of the professional experiences in their study of primary school teachers in England (Case, Case, and Catling, 2000). De-professionalisation is multifaceted; it includes the loss of pedagogical autonomy in addition to restraints surrounding teaching practises as result of bureaucratic requirements imposed by the regulator. These requirements apply to development plans, policies, teaching methods, documentation, evaluation and similar aspects. Research suggests that these requirements make teachers feel that their professional standing is jeopardised (Jeffrey and Woods, 1996; Woods *et al.*, 1997; Woods and Jeffrey, 1998). Furthermore, according to Jeffrey and Woods (1998), corporate ideology prioritises a collective commitment to fulfilling regulatory obligations while disregarding the interests of individuals. Hence, the integration of regulation, constraints, societal pressure and oversight serves as a driving force for those with leadership roles to exert efforts towards producing a favourable outcome from the process of inspection (Casey, 1995). The managerialist method embedded within the regulator's structure is, therefore, characterised as a policy-driven strategy, wherein settings are required to develop a collection of procedures that confirm to national standards. Adopting these corporate strategies forces teachers to prioritise the attainment of favourable outcomes, above the implementation of pedagogical approaches suited to the needs and interests of each child

(Jeffrey and Woods, 1998). As a result, teachers exhibit diminished assurance of their professional capacities, thoughts of insufficiency, a decline in authority, dehumanisation, restricted freedom and compromised dedication as a result of regulatory inspection. Moreover, Jeffery and Woods (1998) argue that professional responsibilities of teachers cannot be dissociated from their authentic identities. They found that teachers perceived de-professionalisation as a direct attack on their personal, as well as professional, identities, more specifically during the period when inspections were due and as a consequence their workload being increased. The regulator's inspections, therefore, establish an ongoing system of power and observation, in which those subject to evaluation and monitoring undergo a rigorous scrutiny that challenges their professional competence. Furthermore, the inspection process operates in opposition to teachers' values, resulting in them experiencing a significant level of distress (Jeffery and Woods, 1998). Teachers' feedback indicates that the inspection process operates as a subtle mechanism for de-professionalisation. As a consequence, individuals encounter professional insecurity, leading to feelings of perplexity, isolation, worry and doubts surrounding their own ability. Furthermore, personal infringement, such as humiliation, dehumanisation, a breakdown of pedagogical principles, diminished peace of mind and decreased dedication are experienced throughout the inspection process. A way that managers mitigate the potential harmful impact of inspection is to transition the role and position from that of a professional to that of a technician (Jeffery and Woods, 1996). Case, Case and Catling (2000) further regard managerialism as developing a completely distinct array of established principles that contradict with teacher's own values. There are concerns surrounding weakened morale and increased anxiety across the teaching sector as a consequence of the pervasive discourse of derision aimed at teachers (Wallace, 1993, Woods *et al.*, 1997). The presence of regulatory demand is, therefore, of significant concern, with the regulator often referred to as the coloniser (Hargreaves, 1994).

3.6.2 Colonisation

According to Hargreaves (1994), there is a pattern of administrative colonisation of teachers' which encompasses their time, energy and physical space. In addition, the impact of the regulator's colonisation extends beyond the

confines of the educational institutions into the personal lives of teachers, both within and beyond the setting. Indeed, this process of colonisation exerts influence over the identity of teachers, their personal lives, their positions as professionals and their overall working environments, since the language of the regulator penetrates and dominates their everyday existence. This political discourse underpins the regulator's functions of simultaneously upholding existing power structures and fostering compliance through established norms and the construction of a regime of truth. This truth is defined by managerialism and technification, present in the regulator's handbook, and statutory requirements (DfE, 2021b; Ofsted, 2022). Colonisation can be regarded as a separate system of truth that takes over and considers professionalism to be outdated. Consequently, the method of inspection is seen as a form of colonisation of life, as inspections result in an interruption of normal living routines. The linguistic and communicative practices employed by the regulator maintain a focus on predetermined goals, "perpetuating a state of colonisation among the educational institutions and individuals" (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 113).

3.6.3 Subjectivity

Case, Case and Catling (2000) argue that with any authority-based surveillance framework, there inevitably exist discrepancies surrounding interpretation. However, the inspection is characterised as a technical and standardised methodology derived from its audit-informed "regime of truth" (House, 2020, p. 2). This perspective is based on assumptions surrounding education methods that are subject to considerable debate as they are predominantly rooted within the regulator's pre-established paradigm, which assumes that they are accurate, and emphasises the incorrectness of alternative approaches (Kuhn, 1962). Furthermore, according to House (2020), inspectors have the potential to become fully engaged in the regulator's regime of truth, either intentionally or unintentionally, adopting a strict, 'checkbox mindset' that narrowly prescribes the characteristics of an exemplary educational environment for the judgement of early years settings (House, 2020).

According to Fitz-Gibbon (1998), the absence of reliable information concerning inter-inspector consistency undermines the objectivity and methodological integrity of judgements made by inspectors. Similarly, Gray and Gardener

(1999) found an absence of uniformity both between and among the regulator's inspection teams. Furthermore, it is evident that the regulator's underlying presumption, as pointed out by House (2020), is that the inspector's presence fails to significantly alter the nature of the observations and questioning. The regulator, therefore, appears to disregard the reality that a significant portion of the phenomena they observe, assess and label may be considerably skewed or even created as a result of their own physical presence and associated factors. House (2020), therefore, claims that the regulator appears to disregard two significant sources of bias throughout their rating method. First, one can argue against the view that observations collected by inspectors provide a more comprehensive understanding of the setting than the professionals working within them. Additionally, the assumption that the predetermined and rigid ideological objective, that is incorporated in inspections through the regulator's handbook, holds greater significance than the educational communities that are subjected to evaluation and scrutiny themselves. Similarly, Cullingford (1999) questions the effectiveness of inspection and the establishment of targets in improving standards. He contends that evidence suggests a correlation between an atmosphere of anxiety and stress and its negative effects on performance. This literature offers important critiques of the function of regulation in England that are pertinent to this study, however it does not explicitly address the ECE sector. It is, therefore, acknowledged that findings from studies across primary/secondary education may not be transferable to ECE.

3.7 Policy discourses surrounding professionalism within the early years regulatory framework

The varying policy obligations surrounding early education and childcare have created a state of ambivalence about the justifications of these two domains, challenging central Government's policymaking across England (Lloyd, 2015). Since 1998, a significant portion of the accountability for developing and enforcing ECE policy in England has, therefore, been delegated from central Government to local authorities (Clark and Waller, 2007). Within the context of regulatory oversight and enforcement, the regulator assumes this prominent position as a Government entity today, responsible for regulating early years settings across England. The regulator's primary objective is to inspect,

evaluate and judge individual institutions; publishing findings publicly (Davis, 2017).

Ofsted, was originally formed as a Government agency in September 1992. Its primary objective, as stated in policy, was to raise the quality of performance and standards of education by means of inspection, public reports and informed ministerial guidance (Ofsted, 2022). Following Ofsted's inception, state and private nurseries have been subject to regulatory inspections conducted by separate regulatory entities. Building upon the legislative framework provided by the Inspection Act 2006 (DCSF, 2007), the regulator has, subsequently, implemented new procedures for inspecting both state and private early years settings. The launch of the EYFS in 2008 presented an opportunity to enhance the uniformity of early years inspection among all early years institutions. The former regime of regulation, which fostered divisions between private and state-run settings, has now been abolished (Greenway, 2011). The statutory framework for the EYFS, established in May 2008, defined the standards for learning, development and care for children aged from birth to five years old. It is legally enforced by Section 39 of the Childcare Act 2006 (DfE, 2008), in which the word 'must' is employed throughout all three components of the framework: learning and development, assessment, safeguarding and welfare requirements. The EYFS statutory framework has undergone multiple revisions since it was first established in 2008, with notable amendments occurring in 2012, 2014, 2017, 2021 and most recently, 2023. In 2012, the EYFS framework (DfE, 2012) underwent a substantial modification, resulting in a notable reduction in the quantity of early learning goals from sixty-nine to seventeen. The revisions focused on early intervention by implementing a progress assessment at the age of two. Furthermore, the Government streamlined administrative processes for practitioners, granting them greater autonomy in eliminating the mandatory requirement of risk assessments for all activities (DfE, 2012). In 2014, modifications were made to the safeguarding and welfare requirements, which included an additional instruction aimed at fostering teaching for healthy oral hygiene. In addition, revisions were made to the early learning goals in order to enhance their clarity and specificity (DfE, 2014). In 2017, the modifications highlighted the non-negotiable nature of the learning and development, safeguarding and welfare standards criteria,

indicating the word 'must', where applicable. The word 'should', however, indicated that providers should have regard in this context and requirements should not be deviated from without valid justification (DfE, 2017). Furthermore, references were made concerning the guidelines provided by the Chief Medical Officers in 2011 (Department for Health and Social Care, 2011) concerning physical activity, specifically emphasising the promotion of children's engagement in physical exercise for a duration of three hours each day. Revisions were also made to incorporate updated references to the *Prevent* duty and *Working Together* documents (Home Office, 2015; HM Government, 2018). Lastly, the GCSE criteria necessitated Level 3 practitioners to possess a Level 2 qualification in English and mathematics, as outlined by the DfE's qualification framework. The inclusion of mandating newly qualified Level 2 and 3 practitioners to possess a comprehensive paediatric first aid certificate or an emergency paediatric first aid certificate within a three-month timeframe on commencement of employment was also incorporated (DfE, 2017). In 2021, changes included further simplifying the seventeen early learning goals, making them clearer for practitioners to make the correct evaluations and simplifying assessment documentation for children aged five (DfE, 2021b). Furthermore, the focus on enhancing language and vocabulary acquisition was also implemented, with specific emphasis on disadvantaged children. This included an additional focus on literacy and numeracy, with the aim of ensuring all children possessed a solid foundation, ready for their transition into Year 1 (DfE, 2021b). Most recently, in 2023, changes confirmed that existing statutory minimum practitioner-to-child ratios for nurseries in England (specifically for two-year-olds) underwent an adjustment from one adult to four children, to one to five (DfE, 2023a). The role of Ofsted has also undergone significant changes since its establishment in 1992. Introduced in September 2008, the standardised early years inspection criteria was implemented through an integrated inspection framework. This framework was created with the aim of ensuring consistent reviews of early childhood institutions via inspection (DfE, 2008). This inspection schedule encompasses the primary assessments that inspectors undertake, including factors they consider when evaluating various forms of early years institutions, leading to published judgement outcomes (Ofsted, 2022).

Despite the lack of existing academic literature in the field of early years that specifically addresses the inspection framework in England, there exist studies preceding its implementation (Greenway, 2011). As Tanner *et al.* (2006) highlight, the early years sector experienced uncertainty, opposition and animosity in response to the growing prevalence of national standards and requirements. These emotions were primarily directed towards what they considered overbearing bureaucracy associated with these statutory requirements, leaving ECPs feeling constrained by the emphasis on learning goals that were promoted by the curriculum guidance and underpinned by inspection procedures (Tanner *et al.*, 2006). Osgood (2006a) argued that the adoption of a standardised inspection framework and the amalgamation of services would result in a predetermined environment that, ultimately, impedes ECPs' professional autonomy.

Wood (2019), in analysing the Ofsted publication, *Teaching and Play* (Ofsted, 2015) raises the impact of the 'Ofsted knows best' discourse. Wood critiques this publication, which outlines examples of effective teaching strategies to illustrate how the foundations of Government principles and agenda are formed, claiming that the authority of regulators appears to be enhanced. This authority includes the power to judge the effectiveness of quality and performance within the early years, based on Ofsted-defined practice. According to Fairclough *et al.* (2004) these processes constitute meaning-laden architectures. Through the employment of meaning-laden structures, the select use of policy-led research contributes to the behaviours and processes that link discourse and authority within early years (Fairclough *et al.*, 2004). Wood (2019) uses the notion of the kaleidoscope to represent the complex nature of concerns surrounding onto-epistemology, ethics, culture and context. This analogy describes the diverse individuality of our lives, how people identify themselves and how they experience the world they live in. The representation of the kaleidoscope can be used by ECPs as a tool to raise awareness of the policy discourse that surrounds early years and the powerful impact this has in addition to holding responsibility rooted within ECPs' specialist expertise.

According to Wood (2019), unions, academia, professionals and companies throughout the early years sector, have attempted to apply an insider approach to early years, involving efforts to deliver approaches led by those working

within the sector, embedding early years ethics and values, supported by current research. This has, however, been unsuccessful because the Government applies wide-ranging levels of controlled hierarchic demands on early years education, including children's learning, ideal pedagogical approaches and the expectations of achievements and their worthiness, in addition to methods of assessment (Wood and Hedges, 2016). These demands, therefore, leave ECPs trapped between two discourses, the first in which they are being entrusted and responsible for transferring professional responsibility, the other, however, being centrally dominated through the ruling of control policies that enforce a culture of inspection and responsibility (Wood, 2019). By referring to a kaleidoscope, it is what practitioners observe when looking through the lens of regulation. They see the reflecting, splitting and refractive action of potent policy discourses when they are applied to early years.

The degree to which practitioners meet the standards for teaching and learning, as outlined in the EYFS (DfE, 2023a), is how quality is defined. Approved examples of excellent or effective activity have now become the prism through which the regulator's inspectors evaluate the standard of the ECE environment (Wood, 2019). As a result, in addition to its original role as a Government inspection body, the regulator now holds the sole authority, making decisions on matters of quality and producing knowledge, through reports, surveys and reviews that guide ECPs' actions and outcomes for children. It is, therefore, crucial to comprehend how the regulator conducts research, given its authority and role within the meaning-filled architecture of early years policy. Here, Wood (2019) identifies a circular discourse, in which the regulator's narrative is blindly supported by policy-led evidence taken from relevant policy frameworks and its authorised research. This raises doubts surrounding the dependability of the regulators' criteria, including the applicability of their conclusions. In summary, the kaleidoscope of practice, seen through the eyes of the regulator, is policy-focused and policy-compliant, raising further concerns regarding the degree of conformity and cooperation that the regulator's inspectors anticipate, in addition to the expansion of their authority beyond inspection to include a power for defining quality and good practice (Wood, 2019). Thus, in terms of attracting and assisting families, professionals are in significant danger of not getting at least a 'good' judgement during inspections. For instance, when ECPs believe

that parents do not value their work, which could be possible without a positive inspection judgement, they become stressed (Curbow *et al.*, 2000).

Nevertheless, ECPs do not adhere to policies blindly or without question or submit to the coercion used within the early years policy framework (Wood, 2019). Furthermore, as Souto-Manning (2014) suggests, we should not assume that the system (institutional discourses) and the lives of people functioning inside it are having a one-way interaction. However, we must acknowledge that there are issues with these kind of micro interventions into the routines of professionals, children and families in the current legislative climate in England (Wood, 2017). Wood (2017) urges that ECPs and researchers must participate in a critical discussion regarding the larger socio-political systems that shape the circumstances in which they operate. This includes how they make meaning of their work via their life experiences in order to recognise operations from a critical perspective, in contrast to the influence held by the regulator (Wood, 2019).

3.8 Regulation and professional wellbeing in education

This search for literature found no empirical research exploring the ways in which regulation affects professional wellbeing in early childhood. However, a study by Waters and McKee (2022) focused on the role of the regulator in the education sector, raising significant questions surrounding the process of regulation and its impact on people. Research has also been conducted on the implications of workloads and psychological stresses on teachers in English primary schools, specifically relating to the role of the regulator and its impact (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998; Case, Case and Catling, 2000; Drake, 2014). The term professional wellbeing is adopted here as it aligns with the exploratory nature of this study. Professional wellbeing offers the opportunity to explore the lived experiences of ECPs from a holistic and multi-dimensional perspective (Cumming and Wong, 2020). It is recognised that a range of terminology is applied in the literature on ECE, for example, emotional labour (Mikuska and Fairchild, 2020) or burnout (Chang, 2009) to describe the experiences of ECPs and each is contextualised within the studies.

It is to be expected that those concerned with the mental health of individuals working in the field of education would be interested in how suicides might be

avoided in the future (Waters and McKee, 2022). Despite legislation in the UK necessitating the disclosure of occupational deaths to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), it specifically disregards suicides, regardless of any link with unfavourable conditions at work (HSE, 2023). A consequence of this omission is that there is no indication of the number of suicides that may be considered as occupational fatalities within the early years or education sectors in England. However, Waters and McKee (2022) claim that there have been approximately eight other teachers, between 1999 and 2023, working in schools across the UK, who have committed suicide in relation to their experience of the regulator's inspection process

The provision of high-quality care for young children is reliant upon the psychological wellbeing of ECPs (Hamre and Pianta, 2004; Gerber, Whitebook and Weinstein, 2007; Jennings, 2015), therefore, it is imperative for ECPs to experience a sense of positive wellbeing (Riseborough, 1981) in order to successfully fulfil their professional responsibilities. There are apprehensions that the regulator's evaluations exert a substantial influence on professional wellbeing in education (Waters and McKee, 2022). Teachers across every stage of education regard the regulator's auditing method as a detrimental process that contributes to increased workloads, elevated stress levels and diminished job satisfaction (Chapman, 2002). Moreover, the emotional impact of inspection procedure extends beyond professional wellbeing into the personal lives of professionals (Jeffrey and Woods, 1996).

Waters and McKee (2022) argue that the regulator should openly acknowledge its responsibility to ensure the wellbeing and protection of both those subject to inspection and the inspectors. They believe there exists a moral need to fulfil this task, and any failure to do so might be regarded as an act of negligent conduct. Ironically, the regulator's inspections prioritise the assessment of safeguarding measures implemented by school and nursery employees, however, there is a lack of evidence indicating that the regulator has thoroughly evaluated its own safeguarding obligations. Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge the reported loss of trust among teachers and ECPs; with a need to actively collaborate with them in order to restore it (Early Years Alliance (EYA), 2023a). In pursuit of the regulator's favourable grading ('good' or 'outstanding') teachers and other professional leaders may neglect the

wellbeing of the broader institution. This can manifest in two ways: first, by implementing initiatives that hinder learning experiences, such as an excessive focus on test-oriented teaching, led by the criteria set within the regulator's inspection handbook; and second, by implementing initiatives that undermine the happiness and psychological wellbeing of teachers (Stones and Glazzard, 2020). According to Day (2012), the standards and principles used by the regulator are often perceived to be a sign of a lack of confidence in the expertise and competency of those working with children. Moreover, the adverse emotional consequences associated with inspections might result in excessive workloads, thereby exacerbating stress levels (Day, 2012). Furthermore Case, Case and Catling (2000) suggest that inspections may be perceived as mere symbolic acts and the regulator as a symbolic entity, established to symbolise the notion that the English public education system is subject to investigation and evaluation. Teachers recognise themselves as staging a show for the purpose of the regulator's auditors, therefore, one could envision the regulator's overall system as embodying the concept of educational accountability with the intention of appealing to a broader public audience. In order for inspection to contribute to the process of improvement, it is, therefore, imperative that it incorporates elements of support and collaboration (Case, Case and Catling, 2000).

House (2020) argues that there is a need to proceed outside of the current regulatory system that operates across England's educational institutions. He refers to the current model as the "Ofsted enforcer perspective" (p. 5), which focuses on adherence and conformation, seeing them as crucial to the regulator's significance, highlighting the effects of stress and dread across institutions. The regulator, therefore, holds the power to significantly affect the wellbeing of staff across educational settings. For Winkley (1999), regulation hinders development in achievement due to its discouragement of imaginative thinking and risk-taking. Consequently, it reduces the potential for reasoning and exploration. Winkley (1999) calls such regulation "a highly controlling and bureaucratic approach, which presumes that all is known about successful teaching and learning" (p. 52). Furthermore, the regulator prioritises a strict adherence to its specific perspective, the 'Ofsted knows best' conformity, as opposed to engaging in a thoughtful and flexible exploration of alternative

perspectives on education. By disregarding other worldviews, the regulator misses out on valuable opportunities for change and growth (Wood, 2019).

The gap in literature relating to knowledge of the impact of regulation on ECPs professional wellbeing was a catalyst for this doctoral study. The literature review had found recent studies on professional wellbeing in ECE practice (e.g Cumming and Wong, 2020) and a small number of studies critiquing the process and the efficacy of regulation in England (e.g. Waters and McKee, 2022). Within the literature there were two distinct but unconnected fields of inquiry. Hence, this doctoral study aims to investigate the implications of regulation, particularly through the experiences of ECPs, in order to propose potential remedies for enhancing, promoting and sustaining professional wellbeing (EYA, 2023; Hall-Kenyon et al., 2014). The distinctive methods adopted in this doctoral study are introduced and justified below in Chapter 4.

3.9 Conclusion

In this review of the literature, professional wellbeing in early childhood practice was explored and the implications for wellbeing arising from the professionalisation of the workforce. A brief look at studies conducted in the US followed and then an examination of the impact of Covid-19 on the professional lives of ECPs. Thereafter, the role of regulation in England was explored, interrogating the three key themes to emerge from the literature, these being de-professionalisation, colonisation and subjectivity. Policy discourse surrounding professionalism within the early years inspection framework was discussed, followed by a review of perspectives on accountability and control through regulation of the education sector. Finally, there was a look at the possible implications of regulation for professional wellbeing. Several key points to emerge from the literature were identified in relation to the research questions for this study.

In relation to Question 1 – How do ECPs understand the concept of professional wellbeing? – the existing literature lacks a comprehensive definition of professional wellbeing in relation to the needs and motives of ECPs (Cumming, 2017). Furthermore, the literature highlights that the professional wellbeing of ECPs in England may vary due to the complex and diverse methods through which care and education are provided across an

array of settings (Lloyd, 2015). With regard to Questions 2 and 3, the examination of existing scholarly works yielded no empirical investigations that specifically examine the implications of regulation on the professional wellbeing of ECPs and how it might be sustained in the future. However, a recent study by Waters and McKee (2022) examines the broader role of the regulator in education and offers important findings regarding the regulatory process and its effects on those working across the education sector. Several studies examined the effects of the regulator on workloads, stress and psychological pressures on teachers in primary schools in England (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998; Case, Case, and Catling, 2000; Drake, 2014).

This review of the literature has revealed the need for further research in relation to the professional wellbeing of ECPs and their experiences of regulation. In relation to Question 2 on how wellbeing is affected by regulatory processes, Waters and McKee (2022) assert that it is crucial for the regulator to recognise its obligation to safeguard the wellbeing of the ECPs it regulates. Although there is growing interest in the psychological health and wellbeing of ECPs, this review of the literature revealed that further study is needed to comprehend the position of ECPs' wellbeing, including the most effective strategies for improvement and sustainment (Hall-Kenyon *et al.*, 2014). Throughout this research, the plan has been to move existing knowledge forward, facilitating a perspective of professional wellbeing and regulation through the voices of ECPs in England. The next chapter describes the methodology adopted for gathering data representing those voices.

Chapter 4: Methodology and ethical research practice

4.1 Introduction

As highlighted in the literature review chapter, concerns have been raised about the wellbeing of early childhood practitioners (ECPs) in England (Beauchamp, 2021; Waters and McKee, 2022; Early Years Alliance (EYA), 2023a). As a proprietor and manager of an English nursery setting, the researcher has an 'insider' perspective, with working knowledge of the regulatory standards governing early childhood education (ECE) and direct experience of their impact on the daily lives of professionals working in the sector. This experience provided the personal imperative to initiate this study investigating the implications of regulation, particularly through the eyes of ECPs, in order to propose potential remedies for enhancing, promoting and sustaining professional wellbeing (EYA, 2023; Hall-Kenyon *et al.*, 2014). This research study, therefore, has the potential to contribute to the advancement of knowledge within the field of ECE in England on the matter of practitioners' professional wellbeing.

This study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How do ECPs understand the concept of professional wellbeing?
2. How, in their view, is professional wellbeing affected by the current regulatory processes in England?
3. How might ECPs' wellbeing be sustained in the future?

Research in the discipline of education is a purposeful and systematic endeavour (Coe, 2017) characterised by deliberate planning and intentionality, aimed at addressing specific inquiries that guide its scope and trajectory (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). Transparency is achieved when the objectives, methodologies, justifications and assertions of a study are plainly and clearly articulated (Coe, 2017). This chapter aims to address the above statement.

First, a rationale is provided for selecting an interpretivist, qualitative approach to this research. Then, there is a discussion on the ontological and epistemological positionality of the researcher. This is followed by a justification of this study's approach to sampling of participants and selection of methods for

data collection. Thereafter, the choice of thematic analysis is justified as a strategy for analysing the collected data, as are the procedures to support this process. Finally, there is a discussion on the ethical practice that underpins the methodological approaches to this research study.

4.2 Interpretivist and qualitative research: a rationale

4.2.1 A brief explanation of qualitative research in the interpretivist paradigm

Conducted within an interpretivist paradigm, this research seeks to explore and understand the mechanisms through which practitioners comprehend and interpret their social surroundings (Hughes, 2010). An interpretivist paradigm is one in which reality is open to interpretation and as such, this interpretivist research study "is guided by the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 22).

Qualitative research is of particular importance in the field of education, as it delves into the 'how and why' of research inquiries. By employing qualitative methods, researchers are able to gain an understanding of experiences, phenomena and contextual factors. A qualitative approach allows for the investigation of issues that cannot be readily quantified and facilitates a richer comprehension of human experiences (Lichtman, 2023; Hatch, 2023). It can, therefore, provide insight into the realities, emotions and views of participants' individual experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2014). As this research seeks to explore perceptions and experiences of ECPs in relation to professional wellbeing as it is affected by regulation, a qualitative approach was applicable to this study aimed at obtaining a deeper insight into the authentic realities, feelings and perspectives of participants' personal, lived experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2014).

4.2.2 The researcher's place in an interpretivist paradigm

As an academic researcher, I acknowledge the existing concerns that have already been highlighted surrounding the wellbeing of ECPs in England (Beauchamp, 2021; Waters and McKee, 2022; EYA, 2023a). Consequently, I also acknowledge the imperative and significance of conducting additional

research in this area, specifically with regard to regulation and its impacts. Within an interpretive paradigm, "knowledge is relative to particular circumstances – historical, temporal, cultural, subjective – and exists in multiple forms as representations of reality" (Benoliel, 1996, p. 407). As an interpretivist researcher, therefore, I maintain a receptive stance towards the diverse realities that individuals encounter in their lived experiences of professional wellbeing. This encompasses the numerous ways in which practitioners' views of professional wellbeing may change over time. For example, throughout the pandemic, as emphasised by Beauchamp *et al.* (2021), ECPs experienced overwhelming feelings of uncertainty and fear, over an extended period and has subsequently given way to a different raft of day-to-day experiences.

Interpretivists accept multiple meanings and ways of knowing and acknowledging; they believe that "objective reality can never be captured. I only know it through representations" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 5). The interpretive paradigm places a responsibility on researchers to identify and record the meaning of human experiences and actions (Fossey *et al.*, 2002). Guided by this principle, I have focused on the subjective experiences of ECPs and leaders within the early years sector. My thesis, consequently, has become a platform for ECPs to share their individual, subjective experiences of regulatory processes and their effects on their professional wellbeing (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). According to Humphries *et al*. (2020), the aim of subjective research is to acquire understanding and increase sensitisation to ethical and moral issues, including personal and political emancipation.

Subjectivist epistemology recognises that people cannot be separated from their knowledge; the knower cannot be separated from what is known as there are multiple truths (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Subjectivism is, therefore, the belief that knowledge is *"always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity"* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 21). A qualitative, subjective and interpretivist research design can be justified in this study due to the focus on ECPs' lived realities, perceptions and experiences.

Furthermore, as philosophical matters represent the internal dialogue of the researcher, they must be explored throughout my research process (Walford, 2001). My ideas about the nature of truth and knowledge influence my interpretation of the experiences of participants in this study. Foucault argues

that investigating the truth is important to recognising its effect over the history of society (2002). I believe that the truths research participants construct surrounding professional wellbeing (which I, subsequently, interpret) hold the potential to create new knowledge, informing new research, practice and policy in the future. Central to this process is my optimism, as a researcher, that the professional lives of ECPs can be improved. This notion reflects Foucault's assertion that "knowledge is like a luminescence, a spreading light" (Foucault, 2002, p. 8). The knowledge acquired through engagement with participants, through their reflective journals and interviews, can, therefore, collectively facilitate the construction of new truths.

The concept of positionality pertains to a researcher's perspective of themself and others, and how these perspectives, along with their values, are considered in relation to research processes and outcomes (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). In engaging in reflective thinking regarding my positionality throughout the duration of my research project, it has become evident that my personal background, the manner in which I situate myself, my social positioning, and the underlying views and experiences that shape my perception of the world, hold direct relevance for both my research and my intentional selection of methods, and theoretical frameworks (Wellington *et al.*, 2005). Consequently, I acknowledge that my epistemological assumptions exert a substantial influence over the data collection process (Cohen *et al.*, 2017). In my capacity as an academic researcher and practitioner, I recognise the current concerns that have been previously emphasised surrounding the wellbeing of ECPs in England (Beauchamp, 2021; Waters and McKee, 2022; EYA, 2023a). Hence, the epistemological assumptions that I uphold have significantly shaped my decisions surrounding the methodology and procedures implemented in my research. The data provided by the participants, I perceived as unique, personal, and subjective, therefore, it was my belief that the most optimal method by which to gain a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives and lived experiences of the individuals included in my study was to examine their truths as recorded in their personal journals and by conducting interviews.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggest that the researcher's selection of research topics is influenced by their personal beliefs and principles, and through my reflective practice, it has become evident how my personal and professional

experiences have shaped my research focus, including challenges presented by my role as a nursery manager. The importance of self-reflection is highlighted by Savin-Badin and Major (2013), who recommend that researchers establish their own stance in respect to the topic at hand in order to address the matter of positionality.

Having acquired over ten years' experience working in the early years sector across London, I am familiar with a variety of roles, including ECP, Montessori teacher, nursery manager for a social enterprise and, most recently, early years provider and manager. I, therefore, have extensive knowledge and expertise across various capacities. My own experiences within the sector encompass significant workloads, heightened stress levels and substantial pressure, alongside the presence of perplexing and contradictory messages relating to early years regulatory processes. My personal, lived experiences exert an influence on my research endeavours, facilitating my ability to justify and substantiate the significance and necessity of my inquiry into the subject of professional wellbeing and regulation. In my current role, as an early years provider and manager, I am continually concerned about the wellbeing and work–life balance of practitioners throughout the early childhood sector. Matters of particular concern are the workload, challenges and confusion associated with meeting the mandatory standards established by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) (DfE, 2019b). In my experience, these issues frequently give rise to stress and wellness-related issues among practitioners, both at ground level and those with leadership responsibilities, including myself (EYA, 2023; Pre-school Learning Alliance (PSLA), 2018). However, in order to address bias across this research project, I acknowledge the need to maintain awareness of my preconceived notions and understandings relating to my personal, subjective experiences. In order to effectively mitigate bias throughout this research project, I recognise that it is imperative to be conscious of my pre-existing assumptions that stem from my subjective experiences. I acknowledge the inherent impossibility of conducting value-free research and, therefore, have consciously taken measures to mitigate for this. Thus, I have adopted the critical tool of reflexivity, which entails the act of critically examining one's own assumptions and views (Finlay and Gough, 2003). Furthermore, as previously stated, my study has been conducted

within the framework of an interpretivist paradigm, which aims to investigate and describe the processes by which individuals understand and interpret their social environment (Hughes, 2010). The primary objective of the interpretive paradigm is to comprehend the subjective realm of human experience (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) and conforms to the theoretical perspective that research cannot be examined in an objective manner from an external standpoint. Hence, in light of my objective to comprehend the professional wellbeing of practitioners operating within the context of regulation, I acknowledge my responsibility as a researcher to diligently strive towards comprehending, elucidating, and dispelling any obscurity surrounding, the subjective experiences of the ECPs who serve as participants in this study (Cohen *et al.*, 2017). Drawing upon the work of Guba and Lincoln (1989), I have continuously reflected on my aim to comprehend the subjective components of human experience while being aware of my positionality within an interpretivist paradigm.

In order to facilitate my reflective process, I applied Schön's (1983) reflecting-in action, employing a range of practical and analytical techniques across my research. These techniques incorporated the practice of maintaining consistent reflective notes and engaging in reflective activities during my supervisions, consistent with experiences obtained throughout my professional, academic and personal knowledge and practices (Schön, 1983). These processes enabled me to further reflect upon the voices of ECPs in this study, including being mindful of the burden that their participation in this research had placed upon them.

During the preliminary stages of this study, I contemplated using an alternative research approach, that of narrative inquiry. This approach centres on the examination of individual experiences represented through the participants' personal narratives and life stories (Kim, 2016). Narrative inquiry is a technique that can assist scholars in comprehending the intricacies of human identities, existence and connections through the use of narratives. This technique includes recognising the individual and broader societal realms that generate, absorb, suppress and challenge us (Andrews *et al.*, 2013). The adoption of short story techniques could, therefore, serve as an analytical tool for examining the narratives of ECPs across their local contexts. It could be further applied to

explore the active engagement of ECPs and the broader context in which they are co-constructed across their settings and the wider ECE sector (Mikuska and Lyndon, 2021). Narrative inquiry has been applied by post-structuralist and feminist researchers due to their mutual inclination to regard individual narratives as means of challenging prevailing structures of power (Andrews *et al*., 2013). Studies conducted by Archer (2022b) and Osgood (2010b) provide examples of narrative inquiry that give voice to ECPs, offering previously marginalised or suppressed voices a chance to be heard and to realise their "emancipatory potential" (Osgood, 2010b, p. 15). However, I decided to adopt an interpretivist and qualitative approach due to the exploratory nature of this study.

4.3 Ontological and epistemological positioning

Positionality is understood in this study as a perspective or standpoint, shaped by ontological and epistemological beliefs. Ontology is an academic discipline that investigates the concept of existence and is primarily focused on the fundamental concepts that make reality or the examination of reality (Creswell, 2013). The primary objective of this study is to acquire an understanding of the professional wellbeing of ECPs through an exploration of their lived experiences in relation to the processes of regulation.

During the course of this study, practitioners were invited to share their experience and perspectives in two ways. First, through entries in a reflective journal and second, through semi-structured interviews. The researcher was obliged to acknowledge that each individual was likely to possess a distinct viewpoint and articulate diverse narratives pertaining to their subjective reality. Hence, the ontological stance of this study has permitted the assertion of multitude views, encounters and perceptions, conveyed through the distinct voices of the participants, and holding significance and value in addressing the research inquiries. Throughout the course of this research, it has been essential to establish and emphasise the relationship between its ontological standing and the researcher's epistemological assumptions, which relate to the process of how reliable information is generated. Cohen *et al.* (2017) explain that epistemology pertains to the fundamental inquiry into the essence, manifestations, potentialities and constraints of knowledge. That is,

epistemology concerns itself with inquiry into the processes by which knowledge is acquired and the nature of the knowledge itself – it is "how we know what we know" (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). The researcher's own epistemological presumptions surrounding knowledge are recognised as significantly impacting the process of collecting research data (Cohen *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, the researcher's epistemological presumptions, in turn, exert a substantial influence upon the choices that have been made regarding the methodology and methods employed across this research in order to preserve the unique experiences of the participants. The information shared by the participants is viewed as individual, subjective and distinct. Consequently, the most effective approach to acquiring insights into the lived experiences and views of the participants was considered to be through the exploration of truths as documented in participants' journals and in interview. The combination of the researcher's ontological and epistemological presumptions, therefore, underpin this study's research methodology. The researcher, in acknowledging this, has diligently remained reflective on how, at each stage, their thoughts, subjective theories of the world and personal epistemological and ontological positioning might influence the research design, data collection methods, interpretation and analysis of findings and conclusions.

4.4 Sample

Research encompasses the process of obtaining and evaluating facts in order to address a specific inquiry or resolve the specific answers in question (Peel, 2020). In a purposive sampling approach, the researcher assumes a central role in order to ensure the capacity for reliability and applicability of the acquired data, making the application of purposive sampling necessary for this study (Zirkel *et al.,* 2015). The initial step is identifying individuals who are committed to contributing their knowledge and expertise. The target participants for this study were those who possessed the experience required and who were willing to openly share their experience (Robinson, 2014). The researcher advertised for participants within nursery settings through a large social enterprise, comprising a number of nurseries in England. The choice of social enterprise was based on the researcher's connections across the organisation's senior leadership team. It was therefore based on convenience. The relationship with this institution consequently enabled the researcher to reach participants via their

communication structures, accordingly they advertised the opportunity to participants in this study. To address potential power dynamics or bias, the researcher took the precaution not to include people who might have personal knowledge of her experiences with regulation.

The aim was to recruit twelve participants. Each participant was invited to keep a short, weekly reflective journal over a period of six months and subsequently participate in a semi-structured interview. Unfortunately, it was not possible to fulfil the predetermined conditions for the sample and only nine participants, rather than twelve, were recruited. Furthermore, it should be noted that not all participants satisfied the requirement of having had an inspection within a period of two years. Recruiting participants for this study posed a significant challenge due to the pre-existing workload of practitioners. Furthermore, the data collection phase of this research was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, a period when practitioners were facing additional, extraordinary challenges (Dabrovsky, 2020; Rodríguez *et al*., 2022) including extra regulations, support mechanisms and advisory measures (Beauchamp *et al*., 2021). Further limitations of the sample include the fact that all participants were employees of a single organisational structure, effectively narrowing the breadth and variety of experience across the data.

Participants were recruited through a gatekeeper letter (see Appendix I), and the criteria for recruiting participants was shared across the organisation. The researcher subsequently engaged in telephone conversations with potential participants, outlining and clarifying the research process. Despite the difficult circumstances relating to the pandemic, a total of nine participants were recruited for this study. They all held over two years' experience in their roles, in addition to having undergone a nursery inspection. However, not all met the criteria of experiencing an inspection within the two-year time frame.

Recent changes in the inspection cycle served to impose additional barriers to recruiting the sample. The transition from four-year inspection cycles to six-years, based on the date of the last inspection, applied to nurseries that had been judged as 'good' or 'outstanding' was announced in November 2020 (Ofsted, 2020b). Furthermore, the nine participants, though working across nine individual settings, were employed by the same chain of nurseries.

Additionally, during the researcher's second Annual Meeting Review in May 2022, feedback from the panel suggested that participants' journals should cover a period of only four months, rather than the six originally anticipated. This feedback was accepted and incorporated, to consider the workload of the participants.

The sample for this study consisted of people who held the following roles: four nursery managers (one of these was appointed as a regional manager during the interview stage), three deputy managers, one room leader and one practitioner with no leadership responsibility.

Table 1 Profile of participants in this study

Participant (pseudonym)	Role	Length of practice experience within the early years sector
Bav	Practitioner	15 years
Chris	Manager	16 years
Freya	Manager	20 years
Maya	Room leader	9 years
Harri	Deputy Manager	5 years
Kay	Deputy Manager	10 years
Yara	Deputy Manager	10 years
Abbie	Nursery Manager	20 years
Sandra	Nursery Manager/ Regional Manager	8 years

The participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms chosen by each person in order to safeguard their anonymity. All other statements provided are accurate.

Initially, there was some concern regarding the potential impact of the smaller sample size on the validity of the data, however, Adler (2012) and Morse (2000)

suggest that a sample size ranging from six to twelve participants is sufficient in a qualitative study.

The inclusion of practitioners with leadership responsibilities was crucial to this study. Leaders hold the knowledge of their setting, staffing and pedagogy (McCrea, 2015). Furthermore, the leadership and development team have a significant role in achieving regulatory outcomes and, therefore, relevant to this research. Without the contribution of these experiences by participants, it would have been a challenge to obtain an insight into the overall experience of an inspection. The criteria for achieving 'good' and 'outstanding' outcomes in the inspection of registered early years provision in England includes an appraisal of the effectiveness of leadership and management (Ofsted, 2022). Therefore, it was crucial that potential research participants had some leadership responsibility. However, it can be argued that those practitioners without leadership responsibilities may be more involved with the 'hands-on' characteristics measured against the criteria of the quality of education as set out in the inspection handbook (Ofsted, 2022). The appraisal of leadership also includes a focus on the quality of interactions and observations, as well as the leadership of curriculum and pedagogy of the setting. Thus, the contribution of a practitioner without leadership responsibility was regarded as equal in importance to those of leaders in the sample and added to the rigor of the data and the insight into the experiences of regulatory processes and wellbeing of practitioners at all levels.

4.5 Data collection method: reflective journals

Reflective journaling exercises are regarded as a means of prompting and collecting perspectives and experiences (Iucu and Marin, 2014). The significance of reflective thinking through the composition of journals is emphasised repeatedly by Kerka (2002). Indeed, many academics emphasise the importance of reflective journals in enabling the writer to identify phenomena and challenges to support the restructuring of strategies for solving them (Casanave, 2011; Farrell, 2015; Tamai, Watanabe and Asaoka, 2019; Watanabe, 2016). The capacity for reflection involved in journal writing promotes the growth of reasoning, evaluation, the consideration of other perspectives (Kim and Park, 2019; So *et al.*, 2018; Chittooran, 2015) and

analysis (Laqaei, 2015) with the self-reflective element of journal writing being its most distinctive feature (Kathpalia and Heah, 2008). Journal writing is considered as a means to document one's innermost feelings, ordinary encounters and evolving thoughts; providing participants with opportunities to connect, share thoughts with others (Hiemstra, 2001) and respond to everyday occurrences (Dyment and O'Connell, 2003). Participants in this study had the chance to consider, reflect on and record any challenges they encountered whilst engaged in the reflective process. Entries might include the challenges of negotiating pedagogical alterations, self-reflection on past events, day-to-day adjustments in mood and emotions, awareness of oneself, private experiences and career-related worries (Iucu and Marin, 2014).

Prior to the semi-structured interviews, each participant was invited to keep a short, reflective weekly journal over a period of four months. The journal invited participants to highlight their individual experiences and, additionally, was used as a discussion tool to help facilitate the individual interviews. Participants were provided with a list of questions (see Appendix II) to support the process of the reflective journal, as recommended by Drever (2003), who stated that "this approach guides consistency and enables comparison" (p. 18). Journal writing can be further described as "a device for working with events and experiences to extract meaning" (Boud, 2001, p. 9). Participants fed back, during the interview process, that the journaling method was helpful as a reflective tool and this is supported by many researchers (Yost *et al*., 2000; Bain *et al*., 2002; Pedro, 2005; Pavlovich, 2007; Lee, 2008; O'Connell and Dyment, 2011; Farrell, 2013; Al-Karasneh, 2014). Participants declared that maintaining a journal for reflection allowed them to develop their critical thinking and self-awareness, as described by Abedina *et al.* (2013), resulting in an affirmation of their strength of thought, originality and perception (Lindsay, 2011). Ebadi and Rahimi (2018) assert that the use of journals as a reflective and interpretative tool can help narrow the conceptual gap that exists between past and present information, thereby promoting critical thinking. Yang (2010) suggests that journaling develops considerable reflective self-examination and Roesler (2020) adds that it facilitates the expression of oneself. Lee (2008), in a study of teachers, finds that reflective journals function as a tool that allows teachers to be more introspective regarding their own thoughts and feelings. Therefore, creating a

journal of reflection was a useful technique for participants to convey critically insightful expression into their lived experiences, grounded in routine procedures and alternative subject areas that might promote awareness of the self, occurrences and matters to document within the context of professional wellbeing and regulation (Cogni, 2019).

As this research aimed to gain a deeper understanding into the individual experiences of research participants using a qualitative approach, the use of journals, in addition to semi-structured interviews, further enabled the facilitation of a platform for participants to vocalise their individual journeys in writing in relation to their own personal wellbeing and regulatory processes within their nurseries. Not only were journals used to privilege, in detail, the voice of participants, but they also provided a platform for participants' ideas on how wellbeing might be sustained in the future. Farrell (2012) compared reflective journaling to orienteering with a compass, by describing the process of reflecting as to; "stop, look and discover where they are at that moment and then decide where they want to go (professionally) in the future" (Farrell, 2012, p. 7). Reflective journals, therefore, provided opportunities for participants to consider their actions and how they might impact societal shifts, alongside their own empowerment. The reflective journals encouraged participants in this study to evaluate reflective processes through exchanged thoughts and personal experiences (Iucu and Marin, 2014).

The disadvantages of journal writing include the fact that it is time consuming (Park, 2003; Thorpe, 2004; Sen, 2010; Ahmed, 2019; Donyaie and Afshar, 2019). Collection of data through reflective journals can be challenging. At times, it is difficult to obtain and is demanding of participants' time. Keeping a journal requires dedication. It was important to consider that not all participants would be open to completing journals and some might be reluctant to commit to voluntary journaling due to their overwhelming workloads. Additionally, not all participants would be confident to write journals that reflect so personally on their own professional wellbeing. It was important, therefore, to ensure that participants were fully aware and comfortable with the research and writing involved before taking part.

To provide some flexibility, participants were given a choice of mode – journals could be recorded through audio voice notes or written emails, all of which were stored on a password-protected, university-managed platform. They were given a short guide before they started the journals. This guide was used to support participants throughout the journal-keeping period and aimed to help focus the writing on the research questions for this study (see Appendix II). The weekly, pseudonymised reflective journals took place over a period of four months prior to interviews taking place. Participants had the choice of recording their journal reflections via a written document or record audio journals. They uploaded their journals (audio or word document) directly to a secure one drive that only they and the researcher had access to.

Journal entries were frequently submitted in voice recordings, instead of written pieces, particularly on Friday evenings whilst commuting home from work, or at the weekend. Some participants submitted a combination of written and audio entries. Despite the time-consuming nature of journaling (Park, 2003; Thorpe, 2004; Sen, 2010; Ahmed, 2019; Donyaie and Afshar, 2019), participants demonstrated enthusiasm and commitment in their willingness to engage in the journaling process, fully contributing to the weekly entries over the four-month period that had been settled upon after the aforementioned feedback from the researcher's review panel.

4.6 Data collection method: semi-structured interviews

The rationale behind this study's qualitative research approach is to collect the views, and privilege the voice, of research participants (Merz, 2002). The semi-structured interview aimed to empower interviewees to communicate their understanding of their experiences in working in the early years sector in England. This method aimed to give visibility to multiple realities (Stake, 1995) through the process of questions and dialogue between researcher and participants (Vandermause and Fleming, 2011). Seeking to explore ECPs' lived realities, perceptions and experiences, therefore, justified a qualitative research method as the most appropriate. An in-depth, semi-structured interviewing technique was used as the method to enable participants to express themselves at length, with the application of a topic guide to provide assistance (See Appendix II). As Brenner (2012) argues, the interview process serves to

explore the variety of views and experiences practitioners hold. The interview allows the discovery of knowledge that is relevant to answering the research questions. The interview, consequently, serves to facilitate interpretation, with the purpose not to assess the distribution of certain views or experiences, rather to uncover such views and experiences (Bryman, 2004).

Semi-structured interviews, therefore, provided a glimpse into the lives of ECPs (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). This glimpse was relevant to the research but should be considered within the limitations arising from the small scale of the study. Flick (2002) states that the ability of the researcher to be open is fundamental to the success of interactions in the research interview. This highlights the significance of the connection between a researcher's interview approach and their epistemological positionality, emphasising the important task, for the researcher, of maintaining reflexivity and being mindful of their own presence in their research (Martin, 2010). Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) also focus on the relationship between the researcher and research participant, highlighting the challenges in this dynamic.

As the researcher is an insider who may have shared similar experiences and pressures within the early years sector and had a professional identity that could support the process of dialogue with the research participants, there was an argument for enhanced communication and empathy. However, Cohen *et al.* (2018) maintain that connections between the research participant and interviewee should be established and not presumed.

In this study the method of semi-structured interviews was chosen to facilitate the participants in articulating their thoughts and experiences in depth (Denscombe, 2003). As Cohen *et al.* (2018) confirm, "the interview is not simply concerned with collecting life: it is part of life, its human embeddedness is inescapable" (p. 349). Engaging in dialogue with participants, therefore, became a part of the researcher's professional life as their concerns and those of many of the participants were interconnected.

4.7 Ethical practice in the research interviews

In acknowledgement of the significant challenges ECPs are currently facing throughout the sector, with little consideration being given to their experiences (EYA, 2023), this study's significance is acknowledged, as it entails prioritising

the voices and experiences of ECPs. Nevertheless, the further burden imposed on participants as a result of their involvement in the research is also recognised. This was an ethical consideration across the research fieldwork. Therefore, in order to allow participants some comfort and flexibility, whilst enabling them to articulate themselves in depth, participants were provided with a choice of online, telephone or in-person interview. Moreover, diligent efforts were made to accommodate the schedules of participants, prioritising them and ensuring that interviews were conducted at times that were most convenient for them.

Participants in this study had limited availability for conducting interviews, which were primarily restricted to late evenings, after their regular work commitments, or weekends. This constraint was attributed to their tendency to finish work late and the need to balance their professional and personal responsibilities.

An additional factor was the sensitive nature of the questions being posed throughout the interview process relating to issues surrounding professional wellbeing and regulation. A balance needed to be struck by the researcher/interviewer between pressing for more information to enhance the data, while maintaining sensitivity towards participants (Bourne and Robson, 2015). This phenomenon can be characterised as a combination of artistic and scientific elements (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Follow-up questions were commonly employed throughout the semi-structured interview process as a means of gathering further information and clarification in relation to the journal entries, which had already been transcribed prior to the interviews. These supplementary inquiries into journals were purposefully chosen and were not addressed to all participants uniformly. There were instances throughout the interview process when the prepared supplementary questions had already been answered and articulated in previous responses, rendering it inappropriate to pose further questions. This is acknowledged by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), who emphasise that the expertise of the researcher is in recognising the potential value of supplementary details for enriching data. This ability is developed via the accumulation of interviewing expertise by the researcher. The 'scientific' process involves recognising the need for further data in order to explore the research questions more thoroughly, and the 'art' of interviewing is developed through repetition and experience.

Some participants exhibited emotional distress during their interviews, specifically in reference to their interactions with inspectors, discussing the impact of family bereavements and reliving their experiences of the pandemic. In response, it was, therefore, necessary to take the opportunity to reassure participants and no further questions were asked. In this way, the research interview became an ethical practice. This research was not just about gathering data. As an insider, who often shared similar experiences, the researcher also held an ethical obligation to consider how these journal entries and interviews might impact on participants. According to Bourne and Robson (2015), there is a lack of investigation into participants' perspectives on the research they have been involved in, including their thoughts on the research process and any potential effects it may have had on their life. This knowledge has the potential to enhance our comprehension of individuals' reasons for participating in research studies, especially those that delve into sensitive subjects. While it is considered most effective to create and sustain a neutral and non-judgmental atmosphere during interviews pertaining to personal and sensitive subjects (Knox and Burkard, 2009; King and Horrocks, 2010), determining the degree to which positions are shared prior to involvement in research can, therefore, be challenging. Acknowledging the professional insider perspective of the researcher, it is recognised that all experiences are subjective and unique.

As participants were being asked to disclose how their professional lives had impacted their personal lives, they were offered reassurance at various stages, explicitly emphasising that any information disclosed would be used solely for the purpose of the research objectives and would remain entirely confidential. This included the statements made in the consent forms and gatekeeper letters.

Recognition was given to the fact that participants were being questioned in their personal time, often late in the evening or on weekends. Consequently, efforts were made to avoid burdening participants excessively and encroaching upon their opportunities for relaxation and time with their loved ones. Due to their working schedules, all nine participants expressed a preference for their interviews to take place online. Consequently, all the interviews were recorded via Microsoft Teams and transcribed by hand. According to Opdenakker (2006), the act of capturing and recording an interview offers an accurate account of the

conversation and allows the investigator to fully immerse themselves in the interview. Prior to, and following the interviews, the researcher ensured that participants were duly notified that the dialogues were recorded. An explanation was provided regarding the security of recordings, and reassurance was given regarding the preservation of its anonymity. Participants, consequently, demonstrated a willingness to be recorded and did not display any signs of uneasiness or apprehension.

Despite the significant time commitment required to participate in this research, several participants expressed satisfaction with their involvement and acknowledged the importance of sharing their experiences in relation to regulation and wellbeing. The feedback received, subsequent to the interviews, highlighted the use of research journals and interviews as valuable instruments for engaging in reflective practice and acknowledging the difficult challenges and workload encountered on a daily basis. Following the interviews, participants expressed their views on the journals, in particular, as a platform to articulate their experiences, indicating that they had served as an opportunity to vent experiences and emotions. As Bourne and Robson (2015) highlight, the construction of biographies holds the potential to enhance an individual's self-awareness and facilitate the interpretation of their personal encounters.

University research ethics committees provide governance for researchers and develop rigorous procedures ensuring ethical conduct toward participants and holding researchers to account (McAreavey and Muir, 2011). This research was carried out in accordance with the ethical principles outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018). Following their criteria ensured that this research was conducted in a manner that protected the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. In accordance with the necessary policy requirements of the University of East London (UEL), ethical approval was secured for this study from the university's Research Ethics Committee. Confirmation of the approval from the Research Ethics Committee is included as Appendix VI.

An essential component of ethics throughout qualitative studies, is for the researcher to facilitate a contextualised and reflective technique towards consent and ethical issues during the study's duration (Sin, 2005). The ethical

principles outlined above are also interconnected with the researcher's personal ethics of care as a moral priority throughout this research project. It was deemed crucial to ensure the moral acceptability of this research, demonstrating a high level of care and attentiveness towards all participants. This included the ethical considerations of supporting the wellbeing of participants serving as the foundation for the researcher's ongoing reflective practice during all stages of the research project. This process of reflection began with the design and selection of the research topic and continued through the recruitment of participants, the collection and analysis of the data and, ultimately, the dissemination of results and findings (Noddings, 1984; 1988; 2013; Basit, 2010; The British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2011; Hammersley, 2017). Throughout the duration of this research project, the researcher consistently demonstrated transparency towards research participants. Initially, providing a clear explanation of the substantial time commitment required for the journals and interviews, outlined within the gate keeper letter (see Appendix I). The topic guide (see Appendix II) further outlined the purpose of this research, followed by participants' potential involvement, including the timescale of the journals, interviews and the flexibility offered regarding how participants wished to complete the journals and interviews. Participants were reassured regarding the confidentiality of data, including information which could reveal their identity, see participant information sheet (Appendix VII). As part of the debriefing process, independent support services were also provided to participants (see Appendix VIII) which outlined helplines, recognising that involvement in this research process may incur the re-living of some difficult experiences. Furthermore, during the course of the interviews, it became apparent that particular participants needed a break when displaying signs of distress, at which, interviews were immediately paused.

4.7.1 Pilot interview

Preliminary work, such as piloting data collection tools, can play a crucial role in ensuring the effectiveness and reliability of subsequent primary research (Kim, 2010).

In order to ensure adequate preparation for the fieldwork in this study, a pilot interview was conducted. This instilled a sense of assurance in the selection

and use of data collection devices for the subsequent main project (Malmqvist *et al.*, 2019). Organising a semi-structured interview prior to the main fieldwork also facilitated an assessment of the effectiveness of the interview process that would be employed with the nine participants. No procedural changes were required as a result of the pilot interview, however the process offered greater awareness of my positionality prior to the interviews. For example, I became conscious that some participants may have views of me as an experienced leader in the ECE sector. This meant that I needed to bring to the foreground my role as researcher in the dialogue with participants.

The pilot process also afforded an appropriate chance to engage in data analysis practice. The initial step involved in this procedure was the hand transcription of the interviews. As Reismann (1993) clarifies, the task of transcription can be laborious and occasionally, tedious. Nevertheless, according to Robson (2011) and Braun and Clarke (2006), it is evident that the researcher's capacity to become completely immersed in the research data necessitates a substantial amount of time dedicated to attentive and repetitive listening. The transcription procedure within the pilot study and subsequent main research, therefore, afforded the opportunity to meticulously verify the authenticity of the transcriptions and become immersed in the voices, experiences and lives of the practitioners participating. As emphasised by Braun and Clarke (2006), the transcription process, itself, plays a crucial role in the initial phases of analysis, due to the focus required to carry it out, that provides early insights and facilitates an in-depth awareness of the data content. Lapadat and Lindsey (1999) further highlight the advantages associated with hand transcribing interview material. According to them, the act of transcribing data requires a level of focus that can facilitate the development of the thorough and comprehensive interpretative abilities necessary for data analysis. Although the process of transcription for this study was extremely time consuming, it did facilitate a deep connection between the researcher and the participants, which later contributed richly to the analysis of the collected data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

4.8 Thematic analysis

Recognising that the process of analysis involved understanding the data on participants' subjective experiences, it was understood that any approach used to interpret the data must be suitable for the intended use and uphold these individualised experiences (Cohen *et al.*, 2017). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, thematic analysis was selected as an analytical tool for this research.

Thematic analysis entails the identification of recurring themes within a given dataset (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013). A theme can be defined as a distinct pattern that encapsulates significant details in the data in respect to the research questions, exhibiting consistent meanings throughout the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Themes, therefore, arise related to the specific focus of inquiry (Braun and Clarke, 2019), in this case the professional wellbeing of ECPs as it is affected by the process of regulation. According to Joffe (2012), thematic analysis involves the examination of both the volume of code occurrences and their underlying significance. A code refers to a linguistic or visual representation of data, typically in the form of a word or concise phrase, which serves to symbolically represent and encapsulate the essential characteristics of a specific segment of data (Saldaña, 2016). The analysis phase of research occurs subsequent to the development of codes and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). This approach offers the benefits of rich and comprehensive analyses (Boyatzis, 1998; Guest *et al.*, 2011).

Thematic analysis can be employed across varying theoretical frameworks and used to address a broad spectrum of research questions (Terry *et al.*, 2017). It places significant focus on the social, cultural and structural conditions that exert impact on the experiences of individuals. It, therefore, facilitates the construction of knowledge through the dynamic interactions between the researcher and participants, subsequently unveiling socially constructed meanings (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The application of thematic analysis, consequently, enabled a tailoring of the research to a post-structural, feminist framework within the context of ECPs' professional wellbeing and their experiences of regulation (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). Thematic analysis, therefore, was shown to be a desirable and powerful

approach to comprehending ECPs' experiences, feelings and behaviours surrounding regulation of their professional environments (Braun and Clarke, 2012). This method of data analysis has also supported the researcher as an insider, seeking to explore the experiences of practitioners, and in the effort to be accurate and sensitive when interpreting participants' lived experiences.

4.9 The procedure for thematic analysis within this research

The analysis procedure was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six steps of thematic analysis, which are familiarisation, code generation, theme generation, identifying themes, defining themes and producing the report. Here follows a detailed description of the procedures adopted for this research, addressed through these steps.

4.9.1 Step 1: Getting acquainted with the data

In this study, interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams and transcribed by hand. This process allowed the researcher to become acquainted with the data. In addition to handwritten weekly journals, participants had opted for sharing voice audio recordings as a convenient means for logging their reflections. Through this process of transcription, the researcher developed a comprehensive understanding of the contents of the data set consisting of journal entries and interviews, engaging in repeated and close listening and reading of the voices of participants. This procedure facilitated a comprehensive familiarity with all verbal and written interactions that occurred between the researcher and each participant (Saldaña, 2011).

4.9.2 Step 2: Producing codes

Codes emerged from the familiarity arising from repeated reading of the data. A full set of codes is included in Appendix III. An effective code is characterised by its ability to comprehensively reflect the qualitative, intricate details of phenomenological experiences (Boyatzis, 1998), whilst successfully encapsulating the data (Joffe, 2012). There exist multiple coding tools that are currently accessible, nevertheless, the decision was taken to manually code the data, trusting that this approach would enhance the researcher's acquaintance with the dataset and further preserve the subjective voices of the participants.

Qualitative data analysis software is widely recognised as a crucial tool for organising and handling data (Côté *et al.*, 1993; Bazeley, 2007). However, scholars have also raised concerns regarding the tendency of analysis software to create distance between the researcher and the data, contributing to the potential for its misinterpretation (Richards and Richards, 1994; Weitzman, 2000; Bazeley, 2007; Jackson, Paulus and Woolf, 2018). Throughout the manual coding of the data, recurring words or sentences expressed through the interviews and journals were carefully documented, in addition to any other noteworthy elements that might be significant. All of the preliminary concepts that arose from this procedure were documented on individual transcripts.

4.9.3 Step 3: Developing initial themes

Once the process of becoming acquainted with the data and constructing codes was complete, the next step entailed identifying and exploring themes. By recognising any overarching trends of common significance within the dataset, coded data can be transformed into initial themes that shed light on the research questions (Charmaz, 2001). During this stage, the various codes were categorised into probable themes, and all the applicable coded data extracts were gathered inside the selected themes (Braun and Clarke, 2019). At this stage, the process of analysis was recorded through twenty-three separate tables (see Appendix III), each of which corresponded to one of the twenty-three distinct codes. In each table, the code, participant, quote extracted from the transcript, interpretive notes and potential themes, along with the corresponding data source (journal or interview transcript) and page number were documented. In this phase, shared notions and meanings between and across all participants became visible. This analysis facilitated the tentative identification of themes that encompassed broader shared meanings in relation to the research questions.

4.9.4 Step 4: Identifying themes

During this phase, an evaluation was conducted to assess the alignment between the provisional themes and the data and this strategy supported the validity of the analysis. This was accomplished by referring back to the dataset and re-reading the quotes related to the codes within each theme. A further stage of analysis was conducted to ensure that the identified themes were

coherent and aligned with the coded data within the dataset. The process involved revisiting the twenty-three distinct diagrams, each corresponding to certain codes. These diagrams provided a comprehensive overview of the first coding stage, as well as the emerging findings and themes. They are included as Appendix IV. A subsequent thorough examination of each theme was conducted to ascertain their respective significance in terms of the shared patterns of meaning within the data. This included incorporating the developments established so far in relation to this study's three research questions:

1. How do ECPs understand the concept of professional wellbeing?
2. How, in their view, is professional wellbeing affected by the current regulatory processes in England?
3. How might ECPs' wellbeing be sustained in the future?

The opportunity was taken, at that point, to condense expanded themes into main themes, whilst also merging overlapping themes.

4.9.5 Step 5: Defining themes

This process refers to the establishment and naming of the main themes, in which descriptive labels are assigned to each thematic category. During this phase, the researcher reflected upon the alignment and connections between the initial themes and created an additional table that encompassed the sources of data, emergent codes, main themes and expanded themes, including the connections to literature and theoretical framework. This is included as Appendix V.

4.9.6 Step 6: Generating the written findings

This stage involves the analysis and interpretation of the main themes, referring to extracts taken from the transcripts of participants (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). These extracts are interpreted and compared with existing literature in order to present the findings (Tuckett, 2005). This structure involves extensive engagement with the data and is an intensely reflective process (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

4.10: Evaluating the process of data analysis

The manual transcription of all the journals and interviews, though time consuming and challenging, facilitated a thorough familiarisation with the details of the dataset as it merited close attention and meticulous analysis of the voices of each participant. The manual technique, consequently, enabled the researcher to gain a thorough understanding of all the oral and written logs and exchanges with the participants involved in this research.

The manual coding of the data also presented a formidable challenge while facilitating a deeper understanding of it. The tables, developed during Step 3 of the analysis (see Appendix III), assisted in capturing the complex intricacies of participants' experiences, enabling the researcher to summarise them as themes. Furthermore, the additional diagrams, which corresponded to the codes, facilitated a comprehensive overview of the findings and themes (see Appendix IV).

4.11 Informed consent

It was crucial to ensure that participants fully understood the nature of this research and its intended use, as well as who would benefit from the findings and the rationale behind their participation. A blank participant information and consent form was approved for use in this study by the University Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix VII). In following the established processes for protecting personal information, signatures were obtained and documents were retained by the researcher (BERA, 2018). Verifying their consent, practitioners were requested to provide the signed informed consent form before the data collection commenced. Participants were fully notified of their right to decline participation, including withdrawing from the research at any stage up until the point of data analysis, without consequence or the need for explanation. The participation of all nine practitioners was confirmed via consent forms. Furthermore, each participant was provided with a comprehensive overview of the study during individual meetings prior to its initiation. These meetings created a platform for participants to seek clarifications, address any concerns or express their thoughts regarding the project. Doing so ensured there was no coercion throughout the process of recruitment, and that individuals were not compelled, in any way, to participate in the research (Harcourt and Conroy,

2011). The intention was to uphold this disposition throughout the fieldwork, as indicated by the researcher's interactions and behaviours exhibited towards all individuals. There was consistent engagement and communication between researcher and participants regarding their journal entries, checking in with them and thanking them for their weekly contributions. Furthermore, every effort was made to be mindful of the minute-by-minute experience of interviewees, ceasing conversations when they displayed indications of distress (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995; Mortari and Harcourt, 2012).

Participants were notified that they were able to withdraw from this study at any time up until the stage of data analysis, if they felt uncomfortable or experienced any emotional discomfort. In the event that participants felt they had been adversely affected by taking part in the study and wanted to speak to an independent support service, sources of support through a debriefing were made available (see Appendix VIII). Consequently, the researcher's consistent engagement with the participants throughout the research process facilitated empathy and insight into the ongoing wellbeing of the participants, ensuring their ability to continue participating in the research investigation.

4.12 Covid-19

This research took place across nine nurseries. During the data gathering phase, the Government removed the last remaining Covid-19 restrictions on the early childhood sector and in universities in England. However, it was advised by the University Research Ethics Committee that researchers needed to continue to follow any public health guidance.

As this study did not involve face-to-face meetings, and the pre-recorded journals sent by participants, as well as the interviews that took place 'virtually' via Microsoft Teams (as the preferred choice of participants), the public health guidance did not apply. However, the ethical principles that guided this research were extended to support participants as they were significantly affected by the pandemic. As a practitioner who has worked throughout the sector, the researcher was familiar with the extreme pressures of Covid-19. Regular check-in procedures following the journal entries and throughout each interview were, therefore, applied within the context of the pandemic, recognising the potential effect on each participant.

4.13 Transferring and security of data

Data collected in this study is considered sensitive as participants are sharing experiences of professional wellbeing in relation to regulatory processes. In line with UEL's requirements, a Data Management Plan was drafted and reviewed by the Scholarly Services Team; this is included as Appendix IX. Research data was stored securely on UEL's OneDrive, in password-protected files. Participants were provided with the option of recording their journal reflections in an email or through audio journals. Each participant was invited to upload their audio or email using a OneDrive file that only they had access to. Participants could then upload the audio file/email direct to OneDrive. All interviews were recorded in Microsoft Teams and these interviews were uploaded to the secure OneDrive folder. All were transcribed by the researcher into a Microsoft Word document. No software was used for analysing or processing the data. Participants were asked to select a pseudonym for themselves prior to commencement of the interview recording. The audio journal entries, interview recordings and transcripts are to be kept only for the purpose of research until the writing of the dissertation is completed and the examination process concluded. Similarly, the signed consent forms will be retained securely until the examination process has concluded. They will then be destroyed. Data generated throughout the course of this research has been held in line with UEL's data protection policy and is consistent with the 2018 General Data Protection Regulations.

4.14 Confidentiality

Ensuring participant confidentiality was crucial as they held public facing positions in the sector. In order to protect the participants' identities, pseudonyms were used and a restricted approach was adopted to disclosing identifying information in the reporting of findings that could potentially connect individuals to their respective responses.

Therefore, all recording and transcribing was completed without the inclusion of real names, and participants are identified by pseudonyms of their choice, as agreed with each participant. No sensitive information on the participant has been included.

For the coding process, all direct and indirect identifiers have been removed from the data and replaced by a code, with no record retained of how the code relates to the identifiers. The pseudonym given to each participant has been used for the purpose of transcription, data analysis and reporting of findings. Therefore, the real names of the participants are only known to the researcher and all names, including workplaces, have been changed and anonymised across the thesis.

4.15 Conclusion

This chapter begins by highlighting the importance of the selected methodology in answering the research questions for this study, justifying the use of a qualitative approach within the framework of an interpretivist paradigm and drawing upon a subjectivist epistemology. The chapter discusses the research design, including a summary of the methods used, which include the use of semi-structured interviews and journals to collect data. For this chapter, the voice of the researcher is briefly privileged while she describes her positionality as a new researcher. There is also an outline of the researcher's ontological and epistemological positioning, highlighting the necessity of remaining reflective, at every stage, on subjective theories of the world and the influences they can assert over the interpretation of data and the conclusions drawn.

The selected sampling techniques are included, with some discussion on the limitations, and last, there is an outline and rationale for using thematic analysis. The chapter ends with a discussion of ethical considerations in this study.

Chapter 5: Findings

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the findings are reported arising from the analysis of data collected from participants. The findings emerge from the process of thematic analysis, and they centre on four key themes.

1. Professional wellbeing is a complex phenomenon.
2. The regulatory framework for early years has a negative influence on professional wellbeing.
3. The regulator's inspection process is problematic.
4. Early childhood education (ECE) policy and regulation need reforming.

Below, each theme is explored, providing examples of participants' perspectives and experiences from their journals and interviews and interpreting the findings in relation to the existing literature reviewed in Chapter 3. The four themes address the research questions, recapped below.

1. How do early childhood practitioners (ECPs) understand the concept of professional wellbeing?
2. How, in their view, is professional wellbeing affected by the current regulatory processes in England?
3. How might ECPs' wellbeing be sustained in the future?

A summary of the main themes and expanded themes are provided below in Table 2.

Table 2 A summary of the main themes and expanded themes

Main themes	Expanded themes
Professional wellbeing is a complex phenomena	*Understandings of professional wellbeing are subjective and individual* *Professional and personal wellbeing is interconnected*

	Covid 19 significantly affected practitioners' professional wellbeing
	Practitioners struggle to care for their own professional wellbeing
	Practitioners with leadership roles felt responsibility or took action for sustaining the professional wellbeing of their team
	Practitioners with leadership roles were unable to sustain and support their own professional wellbeing
	Leaders have an increased focus on the professional wellbeing of early childhood practitioners following Covid19
The regulatory framework for early years has a negative influence on professional wellbeing	*Statutory requirements related to sustaining ratios and qualifications are problematic* *The requirements of preparing for inspection and anticipation of the process is challenging*
The regulator's inspection process is problematic	*Practitioners held the perception that they were not valued by the inspector or Ofsted* *Practitioners believed their wellbeing was not considered during the inspection*

	Practitioners believe that the regulator subjectively and inconsistently determines quality of provision
	Early childhood settings mitigate the impact of regulation/inspection by putting in place specific arrangements for professional wellbeing
ECE policy and regulation need reforming	*Practitioners believe that greater recognition for their work would support professional wellbeing*
	Public funding could be reformed to increase staff pay and incentives
	The bureaucratic burden linked to policy implementation and regulation could be reduced
	Participants indicated how the practice of inspection could change?

5.2 Theme 1: Professional wellbeing is a complex phenomenon

Participants experienced professional wellbeing as complex and difficult to define, and this is a significant theme throughout this research. Whilst participants struggled to define professional wellbeing, they were able to articulate multiple examples of situations and events when their wellbeing had been less than optimal. They agreed that professional and personal wellbeing are interconnected and were unanimous on the subject of the Covid-19 pandemic, which significantly affected their professional wellbeing, over and

above the existing challenges of the role of ECP. In addition, practitioners in leadership roles indicated that they struggled to care for their own professional wellbeing while they prioritised sustaining the professional wellbeing of their team. This chapter explores the complex phenomenon of professional wellbeing through five sub-themes which are, 'understandings of professional wellbeing are subjective and individual', 'professional and personal wellbeing are interconnected', 'Covid-19 significantly affected practitioners' wellbeing', 'practitioners struggle to care for their own professional wellbeing' and 'practitioners with leadership roles sustain the professional wellbeing of their teams'.

5.2.1 Understandings of professional wellbeing are subjective and individual

Participants revealed a wide range of perspectives on professional wellbeing as they shared their views on what professional wellbeing meant to them in relation to their role as ECPs within the ECE sector in England. A common standpoint, however, was that they interpreted professional wellbeing as a broad and holistic concept that embraces both physical and mental wellness. For example, Abbie states,

> *Wellbeing, overall is, is just everything really. Your mental state, your health and your physical wellbeing and so it's quite an overall… it's a broad, broad thing for me* (Abbie, interview transcript, p. 1).

Chris held a similar perspective, as she described professional wellbeing to be an expansive and holistic concept. These views aligned with the work of Schaack *et al.* (2020) and Roberts *et al.* (2023) describing professional wellbeing to be a complex construct, encompassing multiple dimensions. Chris, additionally, asserts,

> *Professional wellbeing for me is about understanding the overall, holistic approach towards early years. If I put it in terms of early years, it's the understanding of overall wellbeing and the impact that might have on an individual and how, as a nursery manager or an area manager… then whatever role you do in the company you work in, the impact that it has on your staff members or team members* (Chris, interview transcript, p. 1).

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Chris's definition of professional wellbeing confirms the work of McMullen *et al.* (2020) and Walter *et al.* (2023) who characterise wellbeing as an umbrella concept that encompasses all aspects of our lives. Interestingly, Chris further clarifies that professional wellbeing requires practitioners to reflect upon the potential impact it has on their team, resonating with the work of Cumming and Wong (2020), who regard professional wellbeing as partly the responsibility of the ECP. However, Chris makes an additional reference to the potential impact professional wellbeing holds on the rest of the team for practitioners with leadership responsibilities, similar to Cumming and Wong (2019) who state that professional wellbeing is the responsibility of diverse agents across professional contexts, prompting significant questions regarding the function of individual ECPs and the accountability of those in leadership positions. Sandra reinforced the notion that wellbeing is subjective and based on individual interpretation,

> *You know, what does their professional wellbeing look like to them? Everybody's different* (Sandra, interview transcript, p. 4).

She questioned how professional wellbeing is defined, highlighting the need for further discussions in order to encompass its meaning, which she argued, could potentially enhance and sustain professional wellbeing. Sandra's perspective aligns with Schaack *et al.* (2020) and Gallagher and Roberts (2022) who recommend additional research to gain a comprehensive understanding of the professional lives of ECPs, examining internal and external factors that impact various indicators of wellbeing. McLean *et al.* (2017) suggest establishing a consensus of unambiguous definitions of wellbeing for ECPs that are universally communicated and understood, but this thesis argues that if experiences of professional wellbeing are individual and subjective, then unambiguous definitions in policy may not be helpful as ECPs may not relate to them.

Some participants considered work–life balance as part of their professional wellbeing. For example, Sandra argued that this balance does not exist within the ECE sector. She explains,

> *But by balance I don't mean, you know, a middle ground, because I don't think that necessarily exists in our industry, but just making sure that one is never a priority over the other. And we do have days. You know, the*

day Ofsted called and gives you half a days' notice. You put 110% into
your professional life (Sandra, interview transcript, p. 2).

Sandra's perspective resonates with the work of Walter *et al.* (2023) and
Mahony and Hextall (2001) who contend that regulatory forces could pose a
threat to the professional autonomy and wellbeing of ECPs. Furthermore,
Hargreaves (1994, p. 113) asserts that inspections can be viewed as a means
of "colonising life" as they disrupt ECPs' personal and professional routines,
constituting a state of colonisation. Abbie provided an alternative perspective;
she considered the implications of the absence of professional wellbeing, in the
sense that it means practitioners might lack the necessary skills and abilities to
do their jobs effectively. Similarly, Wong *et al.* (2023), Buettner *et al.* (2015),
Jennings and Greenberg (2009) and Zinsser, Christensen and Torres (2016) all
emphasise the importance of staff psychological health and wellbeing for the
creation of a nurturing and positive environment for the development of
young children.

Some practitioners incorporated support networks and happiness as an aspect
of professional wellbeing. As Bav states,

> *Professional wellbeing means being happy and being supported at work.*
> *Being happy at work and enjoying what you do, I think, to me, that's what*
> *it means* (Sandra, interview transcript, p. 2).

Day and Qing (2009) reinforce the connection between happiness and
wellbeing as they identify professional wellbeing as an independent and
subjective measure of happiness among individuals. Furthermore, Roberts *et al.*
(2023) and Cumming and Wong (2020) regard professional wellbeing as the
responsibility of agents across professional contexts, placing focus on
practitioners with leadership responsibilities in implementing supportive
measures for their colleagues and peers in early childhood settings.

The notion that there is no universal definition of professional wellbeing across
all participants is supported by Cumming and Wong (2019) and Lloyd (2015), as
they regard professional wellbeing as continually shifting, and influenced by the
broader ECE system.

It is clear that wellbeing means different things to different people and is difficult to pin down, making it extremely challenging to address and supporting the assertion that it is a complex phenomenon.

5.2.2 Professional and personal wellbeing are interconnected

Most participants made connections between their personal and professional wellbeing. These perspectives were personal to each practitioner's work context and the circumstances of their family. Describing her understanding of professional wellbeing, Yara illustrates the inherent connection between personal and professional wellbeing when she describes wellbeing as a combination of 'you and your work' (Yara, interview transcript, p. 1). Another example of the connection between personal and professional wellbeing is provided by Abbie, who states,

> *Because, you do go home as a manager and you think of all sorts that's going on at work, then you can't sleep properly because you've got so much on your list* (Abbie, journal, p. 6).

These findings are comparable with the work of McMullen *et al.* (2020) who assert that wellbeing is a universal concept that can be applied to all aspects of our lives. Walter *et al.* (2023) and Fináncz *et al.* (2020) also iterate the connection between personal and professional wellbeing in the context of ECE, indicating that it encompasses various dimensions, as professional wellbeing incorporates all elements of professional life. Abbie's journal entry further reveals the detrimental effects of demanding workloads on ECPs' personal wellbeing. Walter *et al.* (2023), Chang (2009) and Merida-Lopes and Extremera (2017), similarly, verify that prolonged exposure to negative emotions triggered by various demanding conditions within educational environments, including heavy workloads, may, in turn, lead to psycho-physiological problems.

Harri demonstrated her passion and emphasised how her professional environment impacted her relationships with family and her personal wellbeing. She states,

> *I think on a personal level as well, it stays with you when you go home. This is a sector that I care about and this is a nursery I care about, so I don't walk out the door and forget about things. It's… it keeps me up at*

night and this impacts my relationships… and it causes me to overthink
(Harri, interview transcript, p. 6).

Harri accentuates the passion she holds for her career, however, highlights that, as a result, it adversely impacts her personal wellbeing. Thomason and LaParo (2013), similarly, assert that ECPs continue to find working with children to be a rewarding experience, despite regularly expressing feelings of being overwhelmed. Harri, additionally, declared the difficulty she faced as a leader, emphasising the immense challenge of supporting ECPs' professional wellbeing at a time when there are recruitment issues across her institution. Harri's perspective confirms the work of Avinash (2019) and Bonetti (2020) and their concerns regarding retention across the ECE sector in England.

Harri shared that she often required her team to arrive early or stay late, which was an almost daily occurrence. In turn, she expressed that additional working hours affected the recuperation of her team, their family life and their personal and professional wellbeing. Yara, too, refers to the stress of her team, stating that due to the worries that surround their professional lives, her team arrive at, and leave work feeling stressed. Harri and Yara's concerns align with the research conducted by Cameron, Owen and Moss (2001) as they emphasise the ongoing problems surrounding the experiences and wellbeing of ECPs; a consequence of feeling overworked and undervalued.

By contrast, Sandra felt that her professional and personal wellbeing were not interconnected. She states,

> *I wouldn't say that's impacted my wellbeing because I'm not the type of person to go home and worry and be anxious. If I'm there, I will have a plan and sort it. I'm not taking it back with me, but I appreciate it, a lot of the team members do, so just coaching and supporting them and managing one thing at a time. I think that's key* (Sandra, interview transcript, p. 6).

Sandra does, however, acknowledge the interconnection between her team's personal and professional wellbeing, as she finds ways to provide guidance and support.

Sandra, Yara and Harri's concerns regarding the wellbeing of their teams align with the findings of Lunneblad and Garvis (2017) who illuminate the

increased obligations of leaders across ECE settings. Park *et al.* (2020) and Lafave, Webster and McConnell (2021) emphasise the importance of leadership roles, as they bear the responsibility of safeguarding the physical and psychological wellbeing of ECPs across settings.

Freya and Abbie described how family bereavements affected their outlook on professional life. Freya states,

> *Yeah, um, because what has happened to me in my private life as well, just coming back from the situation has impacted how I am looking at the work* (Freya, journal, p. 3).

These accounts further reinforced the connection between personal and professional wellbeing, highlighting its complexity across ECE, and aligning with the work of Walter *et al.* (2023), Wong *et al.* (2023), Shpancer *et al.* (2008), Kusma *et al.* (2012), Williamson *et al.* (2011) and Royer and Moreau (2016), who stress the dynamic and contextual components of wellbeing among ECPs across the field of ECE. Aligning with Freya and Abbie's accounts of how personal wellbeing impacted their views of work, these authors further contend that wellbeing exerts an influence on the standards of education that cannot be easily dismissed. The authors, however, neglect to explore the relationship between the personal and professional wellbeing of ECPs, reinforcing the voices of Wong *et al.* (2023) and Cumming (2017), who argue that the professional wellbeing of ECPs remains largely unexplored.

Some participants expressed difficulty switching off from their professional duties. Yara comments on the lack of work and home life balance, affecting her family life and that led her to feeling 'down',

> *Literally, at the moment, I'm really down as a person because I have my little family – my son and my daughter. I can't really look after them sometimes, when I come home, because I'm too tired from work and I'd like to have, like, a nice balance between work and my personal life as well* (Yara, interview transcript, p. 4).

Maya stated how the inability to switch off led to her feeling anxious, also referring to her high volume of work,

> *Oh, I don't like to use the word 'depressed' because it's too, too strong of a word, but I would say 'anxious'. If, when I'm on holiday and I'm away*

from my laptop, I get anxious. I wonder what's going on. I also worry
about coping with the volume of work when I get back and if everything's
OK (Maya, interview transcript, p. 3).

Maya and Yara's quotes exemplify how professional wellbeing disrupts their personal lives, aligning with Walter *et al.* (2023), Lambert *et al.* (2015) and Montgomery and Rupp (2005), who recognise that factors such as expectations, workloads and personal life all interconnect as they contribute to ECPs' overall wellbeing. Moreover, Chang (2009) and Merida-Lopes and Extremera (2017) confirm that anxiety can be triggered by prolonged exposure to negative emotions resulting from numerous challenging conditions in educational environments, such as extensive workloads.

In summary, ECPs' accounts demonstrate the interconnectedness between personal and professional wellbeing. Participants reinforce this connection by providing perspectives from their lived experiences. These perspectives are individual and personal to practitioners' work contexts and the circumstances of their families, revealing wellbeing within the context of ECE to be in a dynamic state (Cumming and Wong, 2020; Roberts *et al.*, 2023; Walter *et al.*, 2023).

Wong *et al.* (2023), Walter *et al.* (2023), Gallagher and Roberts (2022), Roberts *et al.* (2023) and Schaack *et al.* (2020) highlight the need for further study to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the lives of ECPs, analysing both internal and external factors in ECE that impact various indicators of personal and professional wellbeing and their interconnectivity.

5.2.3 Covid-19 significantly affected practitioners' professional wellbeing

Most participants emphasised that the Covid-19 pandemic affected professional wellbeing across their settings. ECPs with leadership responsibilities often referred to the wellbeing of their teams in relation to the period of the pandemic, showing their concern and responsibility. Furthermore, participants shared individual examples, unique to their settings. Harri emphasised that nurseries were required to stay open throughout the pandemic as the Government in England implemented policy that required the provision of nursery services to continue operating for children of key worker families (Department for Education

(DfE), 2020). She comments on how this transpired operationally, mentioning the lack of support and consideration for ECPs. Harri states,

> *We closed the rooms upstairs and [….] we were operating out of the room downstairs. We had a lot of staff members that were on leave. We had staff members that were here working but we didn't receive personal protective equipment (PPE) and we weren't eligible for an early vaccine. Some nurseries closed and they weren't eligible for any funding when they lost money* (Harri, interview transcript, p. 11).

Harri's experience resonates with the Organisation for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) 2020 position statement, which asserted the importance of upholding high-quality ECE throughout the pandemic, with a specific focus on children's wellbeing (OMEP, 2020). Nevertheless, this document neglected to place consideration upon the necessary provisions required to support the wellbeing of ECPs. Harri further highlights the responsibility of her team to support children throughout the pandemic, resulting in a strained working environment. She states,

> *It's such a daunting and traumatic – in some cases – experience for them, and the pressure that it places on the team is heightened because of the pandemic and the experiences that the children haven't had. So, the staffing team have been under a lot of strain from it and we just haven't had the manpower to be able to fulfil the children's needs, independently and individually, as we wish to* (Harri, journal, p. 5).

Harri's perspective is consistent with the findings of Park *et al.* (2020) and Lafave, Webster and McConnell (2021), who found that during the Covid-19 pandemic, leaders across ECE settings had a crucial role in ensuring the wellbeing of children, both physically and psychologically. Additionally, Beauchamp *et al*. (2021) emphasise that the pandemic led to a pervasive sense of uncertainty and anxiety among ECPs, resulting in a drop-off of the energy and motivation required for ECPs to fulfil their professional responsibilities.

Abbie further highlights the concerns surrounding her team's wellbeing during Covid-19,

> *Since Covid, there's been a lot of [new] staff being employed, and then,*
> *they say they've got some sort of wellbeing concerns* (Abbie, interview
> transcript, p. 10).

A cause of these concerns can be aligned with Park *et al.* (2020) and Lafave,
Webster and McConnell (2021), who argue that the rapid spread of Covid-19 in
spring 2020 led to the enforcement of strict legal regulations, which promptly
and profoundly impacted the personal and professional life of individuals.
Sandra refers to the emphasis placed on the professional wellbeing of her team
as a consequence of the pandemic, stating:

> *…looking after their own professional wellbeing and other things, I*
> *suppose, just more of an emphasis on it. I think, certainly, much more so*
> *since Covid* (Sandra, interview transcript, p. 5).

Chris further reinforces the impact of Covid-19 upon ECPs' wellbeing and the
need for extensive support. She states,

> *…I've observed, coming back from Covid, is the impact that Covid has*
> *had on staff members' personal, social, emotional development. I've*
> *never worked in a nursery where I've had such high number of staff*
> *members who's emotional wellbeing needs extensive support* (Chris,
> interview transcript, p. 5).

Yara consolidates Chris's statement by highlighting,

> *…because nowadays, there's so many things around the world, and*
> *people have lost so many loved ones as well, due to Covid, and things*
> *like that. A lot of people are really affected* (Yara, interview transcript,
> p. 4).

Sandra, Chris and Yara reflect upon the wellbeing of their teams as affected by
Covid-19. This resonates with Trauernicht *et al.* (2023) who highlight the
importance of leaders' engagement in employee motivation and wellbeing,
throughout the pandemic. Furthermore, Beauchamp *et al.* (2021), state that
leaders held an important duty to express their presence and availability across
ECE settings, which, ultimately, had a positive impact on their
working communities.

Lastly, Kay reinforces how Covid-19 had impacted recruitment issues. She states,

> *I have noticed, after Covid, there's lots of changes. Maybe staff have changed their jobs? I'm not sure if it's being overstressed from their jobs, or hours, or commitment, but I thought… maybe the teachers are not in childcare professions as much as years ago, 'cause, to be honest, it is hard to get support, if we do need support from different agencies, so, after Covid, I have noticed that (*Kay, interview transcript, p. 5).

Kay's perspective reinforces the work of Dabrovsky (2020) and Rodríguez *et al.* (2022) who found that the initial outbreak of the pandemic had a substantial effect on the entire ECE sector, as settings were not equipped to handle the pedagogical and mental health complications for ECPs.

In summary, participants shared their experiences of how Covid-19 significantly affected their professional wellbeing, illustrating examples of how this transpired across their individual settings and teams. Surprisingly, those with leadership responsibilities frequently referred to the professional wellbeing of their team as a whole and neglected to mention how their own professional wellbeing had been affected. This position reflects the substantial responsibility placed upon leaders to maintain wellbeing across their institutions (Beauchamp *et al.*, 2021; Trauernicht *et al.*, 2023).

5.2.4 Practitioners struggle to care for their own professional wellbeing

Participants raised concerns surrounding the professional wellbeing of their teams and their own professional wellbeing. Freya raised concern for her own professional wellbeing following her setting's recent Ofsted inspection,

> *Professional wellbeing, to be honest, isn't there right now, after what happened. I don't think that my professional wellbeing has been met, in a sense that I've not been supported. I don't feel supported, and not being able to talk to anyone about the experience I had, it's giving me stress. I've come to certain decision that, do I really wanna do this job anymore or shall I just say that enough is enough now? Maybe it's time to move on* (Freya, interview transcript, p. 3).

Freya emphasises that her team's professional wellbeing had also been affected following the inspection and that they feel the same as she does. Freya's experience aligns with the findings of Waters and McKee (2022), who emphasise that regulatory inspections can have a significant impact on professional wellbeing. Furthermore, Freya's experience relates to similar investigations revealing that the inspection process can have a detrimental impact on wellbeing (Jeffrey and Woods, 1996).

Yara and Harri both state how their professional wellbeing is affected by long hours and recruitment issues, connecting to current concerns in relation to recruitment and retention throughout the ECE sector in England (Children's Workforce and Development Council, 2006; Avinash, 2019). Yara and Harri, additionally, make reference to their teams' professional wellbeing, stating that their concerns surrounding stress and pressure are leading to their desire to leave the ECE sector. Yara states,

> *OK, the team, they're really down. At the moment, for example, it's everybody. Everybody is trying to leave the sector, anyway, to do something. Good people are better off, maybe, to go and work in a shop for example, rather than in childcare because of, you know, that pressure for people, they're stressed* (Yara, interview transcript, p. 3).

Yara's statement connects with Lloyd and Penn (2012) who argue that factors such as location, funding source, demographics and other influences, might impact the availability of resources, level of support and the overall workplace culture. These elements, consequently, impact the job satisfaction of ECPs, including their ability to deliver care and education (Silver *et al.*, 2020).

Maya, additionally, makes reference to the pressure, lack of support and recruitment issues across her setting, which have impacted her professional wellbeing. Maya refers to the preparation required for her upcoming Ofsted inspection; making connections to how this pressure had impacted her professional wellbeing and led her to take steps to resign. Similarly, Cameron, Owen and Moss (2001) and the Children's Workforce and Development Council (2006) raise concerns surrounding ECPs' professional wellbeing relating to workload, pressure and recruitment. Cullingford (1999) reinforces these concerns within the context of regulation by contending that the intensity of the

inspection itself may hold further negative effects. Additionally, as Day (2012) argues, the negative emotional impact of inspection, potentially, increases workloads, thereby intensifying stress levels.

Bav refers to her conscious decision to decrease her working hours and level of responsibility in order to effectively maintain her professional wellbeing. Similarly, Freya and Maya had been inclined to leave their roles. Furthermore, Yara and Harri raised concerns in relation to their teams' desire to leave the sector. These findings resonate with previous research indicating that ECPs' heightened stress and emotional exhaustion are associated with less professional engagement and lead to greater intentions to seek relief by resigning (Manlove and Guzell, 1997; Montgomery and Rupp, 2005; Kim and Kim, 2010).

In contrast, Sandra emphasises that she believes her team's professional wellbeing remains intact as a result of her diligent efforts across her setting, and her role as a champion for wellbeing throughout her organisation. This connects with the work of Trauernicht *et al.* (2023) who emphasise the value of leaders' engagement in promoting wellbeing across ECE institutions. Sandra, additionally, reported that prior to joining her current organisation, her wellbeing had been low. She believed that in moving forward, she would make positive changes to manage her own professional wellbeing effectively within her new setting. Sandra's experience further resonates with Kim and Kim (2010), Manlove and Guzell (1997) and Montgomery and Rupp (2005), confirming that ECPs have an increased inclination to leave their organisations in order to seek relief from workload and stress.

In summary, participants shared their personal experiences relating to the challenges they face in maintaining their professional wellbeing, each offering insights from their own distinct perspectives. Participants showed awareness of professional wellbeing within the wider context of their teams, reiterating perspectives held by ECPs across their settings. Findings in this sub-theme reinforce the literature highlighting that ECPs struggle to care for their own professional wellbeing as they refer to concerns surrounding regulation, recruitment, pressure, lack of support and workload that impact upon their own professional wellbeing and other ECPs across their settings.

5.2.5 Practitioners with leadership roles sustain the professional wellbeing of their team

All participants who were leaders felt responsibility, and took action, for sustaining the professional wellbeing of their team. In conceptualising the term 'professional wellbeing', leaders, Kay and Chris considered that it related to their obligation as leaders towards their team. For example, Kay states,

> *So, professional wellbeing, I'd say, is about taking care of your staff, your team and even yourself. Our jobs… it can be very stressful, and obviously, looking after the team, looking after the children, and also the families and parents, to reassure them and take care of them* (Kay, interview transcript, p. 1).

These participants' definition of professional wellbeing is consistent with Cumming and Wong (2020), who argue that wellbeing requires continuous direct and indirect support and is partly the responsibility of those who work across ECE settings.

All leaders assumed the duty to ensure the professional wellbeing of their teams and implemented measures across their settings. Chris and Yara, specifically, highlighted their crucial role in sustaining the professional wellbeing of their teams, putting it at the forefront of their priorities. For example, as Chris states,

> *The wellbeing of the staff is paramount and that's something I'm really going to really fight for, at the forefront of what my setting will be. It's making sure [of] the staff wellbeing, not just physically but mentally* (Chris, journal, p. 4).

Freya refers to her nurturing management style, offering an open-door policy for her team and ensuring her ECPs feel comfortable and supported. Sandra, additionally, refers to the specific strategies she has implemented in order to support her team, such as raising awareness of the concept of wellbeing, managing workloads, kindness activities and messages of thanks. Sandra also refers to the training she has implemented across her organisation, supporting managers to develop strategies for enhancing and sustaining professional wellbeing across her organisation.

Abbie and Chris emphasise that managers are responsible for their own professional wellbeing and highlight the lack of support for managers at a time when more emphasis is placed on managers' accountability. Chris states,

> *Yeah, so you don't get checked to see if you're OK for the week, from higher management, you may get an email just to remind you what you shouldn't be doing or to remind you of what you need to do, so that's the downfall from that really, but yeah, we have to always make sure that the staff are all OK as well, with their safety and their wellbeing and mental health and things, so there's no support really for managers and it feels like it's getting worse and worse* (Chris, journal, p. 2).

Abbie further highlights the responsibility of managers in prioritising the sustainability of their team's professional wellbeing above their own. She states,

> *I think when you reach the nursery manager post or area manager post you are, kind of, in charge of your own wellbeing. I don't think there is an overall balance that someone sees above you, checking if you're maintaining or taking care of yourself. It is there for you, yourself to take on board or consider. I think, you tend to be the one that is forever thinking of this holistic approach and wellbeing of your staff, more so than yourself as a leader* (Abbie, interview transcript, p. 1).

Maya confessed that her concerns surrounding her team's professional wellbeing extended into her personal life, reinforcing the connection between personal and professional wellbeing (Fináncz *et al.*, 2020) as she began checking in on her team during her annual leave. Yara strengthened Maya's statement by also admitting to thoughts of her team whilst at home, emphasising that her team rely on her to lead them. Maya and Yara's concerns reinforce the extent of leaders' responsibilities in taking action for sustaining the professional wellbeing of their teams, further aligning with Cumming and Wong (2020) who define professional wellbeing as requiring continuous direct and indirect support. Leaders failing to prioritise their own wellbeing, as stated by Abbie, Chris, Maya and Yara, aligns with the findings of Nagel-Prinz and Paulus (2012), Timmermann, Hogrebe and Ulber (2021) and Almstadt, Gebauer and Medjedovi (2012) as they suggest that leaders in early childhood institutions

exhibit significantly higher than average levels of stress symptoms in comparison to their non-managerial colleagues.

This finding raises an important question as to whether the professional wellbeing of ECPs, in particular those with leadership responsibilities, has been overlooked, not only in the academic literature but also in policy. The lack of attention to professional wellbeing has been highlighted by Wong *et al.* (2023), Cumming and Wong (2020) and Hall-Kenyon *et al.* (2014). Furthermore, the findings of this study draw attention to the responsibility of leaders across ECE settings for professional wellbeing, as the professional wellbeing of ECPs across all roles, according to Cumming and Wong (2020), requires continuous direct and indirect support. Chris emphasised the importance of ECPs taking responsibility for their own professional wellbeing, thus connecting with the work of Cumming and Wong (2020) as they define professional wellbeing as a dynamic concept, partly the responsibility of the ECP.

Chris further confirms that she felt disappointed that her team failed to acknowledge and value her endeavours to provide support. Lastly, some leaders referred to the difficulty they faced in supporting their team's professional wellbeing across their settings due to the pressures and expectations placed upon them. Harri states,

> *It's really hard to support staff in their wellbeing and how that can reflect within the nursery environment where there's so many pressures and expectations* (Harri, journal, p. 2).

Harri's perspective confirms the reality of existing pressures that ECPs face, as stated by Thomason and LaParo (2013), as they continue to report feeling depressed, stressed and overwhelmed. Abbie was concerned about her team's wellbeing because low wellbeing affects the ability to cope under pressure, resonating with Kwon *et al.* (2021) and McLean *et al.* (2017), who emphasise that effectively promoting the growth and wellbeing of children requires ECPs to ensure that they possess a strong sense of personal wellbeing themselves.

In summary, participants shared individual experiences relating to their role as leaders, highlighting how they were responsible and took action for sustaining the professional wellbeing of their team. The findings reinforced the definition of professional wellbeing as it relates to the role of the leader across ECE settings

and clarified professional wellbeing to be a largely unexplored concept, often neglecting the important role of ECPs with leadership responsibilities (Cumming and Wong, 2019). All leaders assumed the duty of ensuring the professional wellbeing of their teams and implemented measures across their settings, often neglecting their own wellbeing, as their team took priority. Participants confirmed the reality of existing pressures faced by ECPs throughout their working environments (Thomason and LaParo, 2013), emphasising concerns surrounding low wellbeing as it affects ECPs' ability to cope with the pressures of their role (McLean *et al.*, 2017; Kwon *et al.*, 2021).

5.3 Theme 2: The regulatory framework for early years has a negative influence on professional wellbeing

Participants reported that their experiences of the regulatory framework negatively impacted their professional wellbeing. Practitioners highlighted how statutory requirements relating to sustaining adult–child ratios in the nurseries, and qualifications, were problematic. They also talked about the stress induced by preparation for, and anticipation of, inspections. In this section, the regulatory framework and its impact upon participants' professional wellbeing are explored through two sub-themes; the first, around statutory requirements relating to sustaining ratios and qualifications and the second, around the stress incurred in the period immediately preceding inspections.

5.3.1 Statutory requirements relating to sustaining ratios and qualifications are problematic

Participants described their experiences of sustaining statutory ratio and qualification requirements as problematic. Harri makes direct reference to the statutory requirements for ratios. From her experience, they impacted upon the wellbeing of her team and nursery expectations. She emphasises that she has only just enough staff to comply with the statutory ratio requirements. Harri states,

> *We're having difficulty in upholding that wellbeing, and the expectations that we want for our nursery and our children, with the regulation, such as the ratios* (Harri, interview transcript, p. 3).

Harri's statement aligns with the work of Mahony and Hextall (2001), who assert that ECPs' compliance with regulatory standards indicates a move towards centralised power and prescribed procedures. Therefore, regulatory influences pose a threat to ECPs' professional autonomy and welfare. These findings further resonate with Casey (1995) as they highlight that leaders adapt their principles to align with the expectations established by the regulator in order to achieve a favourable inspection outcome. That is, leaders prioritise regulatory expectations above all else, leading them, potentially, to neglect the general welfare of the setting (Stones and Glazzard, 2020).

Most participants made reference to the pressures surrounding the recruitment and retention of qualified staff. Chris referred to the recruitment crisis as 'dire'. Maya also talked about the ways in which recruitment pressures impact her team, stating,

> *…but it is hard, with so much pressure, to meet all requirements. It gets people down, and you do have to push to make sure everything is done and up to standard* (Maya, interview transcript, p. 2).

Yara highlights retention issues across the sector, stating,

> *We don't have a lot of staff now because people are leaving the sector* (Yara interview transcript, p. 3).

The problematic context of retention and recruitment of ECPs is consistent with previous research that found a connection between stress experienced by ECPs and their heightened desire to abandon their positions (Jepson and Forrest, 2006; Klassen and Chiu, 2011), further highlighting the concerns surrounding retention across the ECE sector in England (Avinash, 2019).

Harri drew attention to the ECE sector's perceived 'value', highlighting that the ECE has a poor public image, which directly impacts recruitment. This is consistent with the work of Osgood (2006), who contends that the present ECE discourse frequently characterises ECPs as insufficient in addressing families' and children's needs, justifying the need for formal regulation to raise standards. Some participants in this study referred to the qualification requirements and how recent changes in regulation placed additional pressures on them across their settings, leaving practitioners demotivated. Sandra states,

…and the change, in terms of – although not recent – but the requirement of maths and English for qualifications has also had quite a detrimental effect on some of our team members, and I know that's across the country. But just in terms of them now needing to achieve those things, finding the time to do it, creating a new balance in order to achieve it, that has probably been the biggest struggle (Sandra, journal, p. 3).

This statement aligns with the work of Archer (2020), who highlights the emergence of power discourses as a result of the ongoing changes made to qualification criteria throughout England, which have shaped the lives of ECPs in a variety of conflicting and interchanging ways.

Finally, a few participants referred to the high numbers of temporary agency staff required to fulfil statutory staffing requirements. Participants shared perspectives on how the use of agency staff impacted the wellbeing of their team. For example, Yara states,

…we're using agencies. Then, those agency staff, when they come in, they tend not to know, you know, the requirements. We want them to do, you know, help us along. Sometimes, it's a bit stressful, because, you know, like, one staff member against three agency staff, and then it's really hard, especially if you have key children as well and then they all want you (Yara, journal, p. 5).

This statement further reinforces the recruitment crisis across England (Avinash, 2019). Indeed, Bav refers to a recent Ofsted inspection at her setting, where, she believed, her nursery was downgraded from 'outstanding' to 'good' directly due to the high numbers of temporary agency staff at the time of the inspection. This aligns with the findings of House (2020) as he argues that a setting's grading is jeopardised when its features do not correspond with the predefined pattern specified by the regulator.

In summary, the majority of participants experienced difficulty in maintaining the statutory ratio and qualification standards. Participants described how the statutory requirements for ratios impacted the wellbeing of their team and explained the pressures of recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Reference was also made to the change in qualification requirements that has placed

additional pressures upon ECPs. Lastly, participants mentioned that the high level of agency staff required to fulfil statutory staffing requirements due to the lack of permanent staffing across the nursery, had directly impacted on their professional wellbeing.

5.3.2 The requirements of preparing for inspection and anticipation of the process are challenging

The majority of participants reported challenges in preparing for inspection and viewed the anticipation leading to inspection as stressful and problematic. Many participants referred to the position of power held by Ofsted, resulting in a culture of fear across their settings. For example, Yara states,

> *Everything is around inspection, anyway. Everything there is about, you know, around Ofsted. If Ofsted comes, if Ofsted has to come, what happens when Ofsted comes, what about the outcome of the activity when Ofsted come, everything just around Ofsted, really. And then, it's a bit stressful as well because it seems like Ofsted is God* (Yara, journal, p. 6).

Yara's comments are consistent with the work of Wood (2019), who points out that Ofsted's authority has made it the sole arbiter of high-quality practice. This authority includes, first, setting the rules, then having the ability to inspect and judge against those rules, and ultimately, publish its findings, alongside providing guidance on how ECPs should engage in practice to meet its regulatory requirements.

Harri describes a prevailing atmosphere of fear across her nursery caused by the anticipation of an upcoming inspection,

> *I definitely think… because the day means so much, and because so much is riding on that day where you're gonna be graded, that automatically puts fear into people. And people who may be comfortable and may have ten years experience in the sector will suddenly be, be scared and fearful and shy. They could lose their confidence because they know how important this day is and I think as long as inspections are continuing, there will naturally be that fear, especially from people who care, because they want everything to go as smoothly as possible* (Harri, interview transcript, p. 9).

Yara also talked about the anticipation of inspection as it leads ECPs to consider leaving their role due to the fear and panic they endure, regardless of their 'amazing' work.

Further, Day (2012) emphasises how the regulator's standards and guiding principles are frequently interpreted as an indication of a lack of trust in the knowledge and skills of practitioners who work with children. Jeffrey and Woods (1998) also report that educators experience feelings of inadequacy and a loss of confidence in their professional abilities as a result of inspection. Yara emphasises that not everyone does well under pressure, describing the fear of Ofsted as affecting practice and practitioners seeking relief through medication to keep calm and help them sleep as a result of their upcoming inspection. House (2020) supports this, asserting that the regulator disregards all claims that inspections are a distortion of real life and practice, produced as a result of their own physical presence, having an adverse effect upon practitioners (Brown *et al.*, 2000). Some participants described the preparation required for inspection as taking over both their professional and personal lives. For example, Abbie states,

> *I used to go into nurseries a lot at the weekends just to try and get some things done or prepare for Ofsted. And then, by the time you get your Ofsted, you're absolutely knackered.* (Abbie, interview transcript, p. 9).

Freya further emphasises the pressure on her team, affecting their workload and leading to exhaustion and burnout. She refers to her own sickness as a result of working late and weekends. Maya, too, mentions the anticipation of inspection, emphasising the impact on practitioners' personal and professional wellbeing. She tells of practitioners losing sleep and has witnessed members of her team 'trembling' during mock, practice inspections.

These experiences align with the work of Hargreaves (1994), who contends that this colonisation of people's lives by the regulator has an effect on individuals both inside and outside of work, permeating and dominating daily life, impacting upon professional positions, overall work settings and personal identities.

Some participants described inspection as an ongoing process of surveillance that impacted the wellbeing of their team. As Yara relates,

…then I think Ofsted is like…they're like that body that is not there, like the spirit that is not there but the power of them is there. Not even just us, the people above us are scared, like the area managers and often, then, put the pressure on us, and wellbeing is really down because of that. It's just Ofsted, really, that brings us down, but we are amazing in everything we do (Yara, interview transcript, p. 2).

The experience of surveillance connects with Power (1997, p. 4) who examined the idea of the "audit society", pointing out that the lack of faith placed in professionals across the education sector undermines them, causing a complete intrusion over their authority and capabilities, in addition to undermining the extensive range of their work.

A few participants referred to the need to prioritise regulation above their pedagogy and wellbeing of children and practitioners. Yara, for example, makes reference to the need to work on Ofsted requirements rather than prioritising the best outcomes for children, further emphasising that everything is for Ofsted and children and practitioners are deprioritised. Harri also refers to the challenges she faces in sustaining her team's wellbeing as a result of adhering to regulatory obligations. Maya also mentions the prioritising of Ofsted requirements that hold no practical relevance to children's outcomes. These experiences reflect the work of Jeffrey and Woods (1998), who also report that the good work of implementing an array of pedagogical approaches tailored to each child's needs and interests is forced to take a backseat to the pursuit of favourable inspection outcomes. They further indicate that individuals experience a great deal of distress as a consequence of the inspection regime, as they operate against practitioners' own beliefs and values (Jeffery and Woods, 1996).

Conversely, Sandra refers to some positive changes in regulation, specifying that a reduction in paperwork has improved the preparation processes required for inspection,

I think it's better than a couple of years ago, in terms of the amount of paperwork that we were expected to do previously, so I think it has improved (Sandra, interview transcript, p. 2).

Sandra's comments reflect the Government's revisions of the statutory framework, which decreased administrative procedures for practitioners (DfE, 2012).

Lastly, Abbie, Yara and Freya refer to the additional pressures on leaders to fulfil regulatory requirements. Abbie states,

> *As you know, early years, it's, it's quite a 'full-on' role, and the higher you get, the more pressure is on you as an individual to get your role done and fulfil the requirements of Ofsted, etcetera* (Abbie, interview transcript, p. 1).

Freya declares that she feels more pressure as a manager, highlighting the extensive hours she works in order to meet regulatory requirements making her 'sick'. Yara tells how Ofsted has impacted the wellbeing of her team due to pressure, emphasising that as the deputy manager, her own pressure is intensified. These points align with those of Beauchamp *et al.* (2021), who contend that the managers are the main people in charge of ensuring regulatory compliance across educational institutions. Thus, it is not surprising that managerial personnel have been most affected by the pervasiveness ideology of regulation.

In summary, the majority of participants related their challenges preparing for inspection and viewed the anticipation leading to inspection as stressful and problematic. Numerous individuals mentioned how Ofsted's position of authority created a culture of fear across their working environments. A number of participants claimed that the inspection preparation process took over their personal and professional lives, impacting their workload and resulting in burnout and exhaustion. A few participants depicted inspection as a continuous monitoring procedure that affected their team's welfare and some participants indicated that regulation took precedence over pedagogy and wellbeing. Finally, some practitioners emphasised the extra pressure leaders endure in order to meet regulatory standards.

5.4 Theme 3: The regulator's inspection process is problematic

Participants' experiences of regulation in practice, specifically, the inspection processes, negatively impacted their professional wellbeing. Practitioners felt that they were not valued by Ofsted, further highlighting that they believed that their wellbeing was not considered during inspection. They also believed that the regulator's representatives subjectively and inconsistently determined the quality of provision. They reported how settings mitigate the impact of regulation by putting in place specific arrangements for professional wellbeing. This section explores practitioners' experiences of the inspection process through three sub-themes: 'practitioners perceive that they are not valued by Ofsted inspectors', 'practitioners believe that the regulator subjectively and inconsistently determines quality of provision' and 'early childhood settings mitigate the impact of inspection with special arrangements for the preservation of staff wellbeing'.

5.4.1 Practitioners perceive that they are not valued by Ofsted inspectors and wellbeing is not considered

Some participants felt undervalued and misunderstood by Ofsted inspectors whose approach was judgemental and uncollegiate. For example, Freya states,

> *I would say, definitely, be more approachable. Approachable and validate the leaders' values. I think it's very important. Because my value is supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds and getting the children ready for school. But she, this inspector was specific. This inspector, she was looking for more, other aspects of the education and when I was explaining what my nursery went through [over the] last two and a half years, I felt like that hadn't been taken into consideration.* (Freya, interview transcript, p. 3).

Abbie felt that inspectors tried to catch them out, treating practitioners as though they were incompetent, adding to reports that inspectors belittle ECPs. Abbie writes,

> *I swear down that will never happen to me again, I don't care whether the Ofsted inspector thinks I'm rude or not, I will bite their head off, so, yeah, they need to be speaking to people in a better way. Um, I think they*

belittle us and make us feel like we're absolute rubbish, when we do
quite a lot in our day-to-day (Abbie, journal, p. 13).

Abbie reports how she felt bullied by an inspector, which, in turn, made her feel 'useless', and she considered leaving her role, despite her passion for ECE. She explains,

So, I had walls across me and I just… I couldn't get away. No matter
what I did, it wasn't what they wanted to hear, and it just made me feel
like, useless, and that's the one point of where I just thought, you know,
I've had enough. I'm not gonna break everyday going to work to put my
hours in, do more than what I should do for something I have the passion
for. What I want to do is the best for the families and children and the
staff, but then to be treated like that, that's not how it should be (Abbie,
interview transcript, p. 14).

The participants' experiences are consistent with the findings of Jeffery and Woods (1998), who suggest that regulatory inspections de-professionalise individuals, resulting in reduced confidence in professional abilities, feelings of inadequacy, a decrease in authority, dehumanisation, limited autonomy and compromised commitment. These individual encounters further align with the work of Power (1997) who contends that professionals working across education face the additional challenge of not being trusted, by the authority, to act professionally.

Some participants felt that the inspection process did not acknowledge or consider ECPs' wellbeing. Yara states,

Ofsted inspections put people down and then people are being affected.
Now that we are expecting Ofsted people are like, I don't want to come to
work, I can't even sleep (Yara, interview transcript, p. 6).

Freya even opined that some inspectors might be trained to be unapproachable, as they come across as bitter and firm, making practitioners feel uncomfortable. Abbie supported that inspectors fail to value or focus on the difficulties ECPs encounter in their roles, generally. These experiences connect with the work of Chapman (2002) who also finds that individuals working in education perceive the regulator's auditing approach as a harmful procedure and holds the regulator responsible for stress-induced illnesses. Some

participants added their view that Ofsted needs to revisit its regulations to consider ECPs' wellbeing. For example, Yara states,

> *People are leaving the workplace because they feel, "I can go somewhere else without that pressure". So, Ofsted, I think, they need to look into how Ofsted are checking their own regulations as well. We cannot sleep because we're so worried* (Yara, interview transcript, p. 7).

Bav believed that Ofsted has an institutional lack of trust in ECPs and highlighted the need for a more supportive and understanding regulator.

Abbie recommended that inspectors approach wellbeing holistically, arguing that the managers' wellbeing is often neglected in the inspection process, leading to 'brilliant' managers leaving the sector – a situation that will continue if the regulator does not make changes. These sentiments are echoed by the findings of Waters and McKee (2022), who assert that it is crucial for the regulator to openly recognise its duty to protect wellbeing and safeguarding in each of its settings and in its inspectors. They add that there is an ethical obligation to fulfil this duty, and any failure to do so could be regarded as negligent.

5.4.2 Practitioners believe that the regulator subjectively and inconsistently determines quality of provision

Some participants perceived that uneven levels of expertise across the inspectorate and too much leeway for subjectivity in the inspector's role impacted regulatory judgements, making Ofsted reports unreliable – a situation that is untenable while Ofsted holds so much power. Harri states,

> *I think it's how it's interpreted by that inspector on that day of your inspection, and that could change absolutely everything because you could be putting everything in place, following the inspection handbook, but if that inspector walks through the door and hasn't got any experience within early years or they view things differently, they don't agree with what we've put in place then that will be challenged and all of that work that you're putting it in as a team and as a nursery will be discredited. It won't be valid and that will impact your final outcome* (Harri, interview transcript, p. 9).

From Yara's perspective, practitioners can have no idea what inspectors might be looking for as inspectors have their own ideas and varied knowledge outside of the inspection framework. Bav refers to her experience of inspector subjectivity, declaring that no matter how hard practitioners try, some inspectors will not provide an 'outstanding' rating. The experiences of practitioners are consistent with Fitz-Gibbon (1998) and Gray and Gardner (1999) who advise that it is likely that the inspectors appointed by the regulator may have their own, distinct ideas and influences, leading to partiality and disparities among regulatory evaluations.

Participants, additionally, made reference to the short 'snapshot' period in which nurseries were inspected, and how they viewed inspectors as 'outsiders' of their settings. Freya states,

> *Before Ofsted come in, you work so hard. I know what my nursery is and my team, what they are capable [of]. They do most of the things they've been asked to do, you know? Er, and after that, someone comes in and they say that, you know what, it's not good enough and they make their decision based on the day, what they, they say and they don't take any other things into consideration. They don't think about where you came from. And how did you manage to come from here? And where were you before? And you know, yeah, based on the day, whatever they see and they make the judgment on that. I find that's very unfair. It is a snapshot of it and they don't know the children, they don't know the staff and they don't understand when you explain to them, this is my nursery and it has been going through quite a big crisis, the recruitment crisis and we just come out of Covid and recovered them from that. I have children from disadvantaged backgrounds and there are lots of children and families with a language barrier. I think they've got a set mind when they enter the nursery and they are focusing on that area and they said "OK, I'm gonna go and look at this", they just stay, criticising and penalising, and when I say something to them, their response is, "right you are not 'good' or you are not 'outstanding' because of this"* (Freya, interview transcript, p. 2).

Harri, additionally, emphasises that inspectors know nothing about the setting prior to inspection and regards the one-day inspection period as 'ludicrous'. Participants' perspectives, in this study, are consistent with the findings of

House (2020), who asserts that the regulator fails to consider the assumption that their predetermined and fixed ideology, enforced through the inspection handbook, is of greater significance than the educational settings themselves. Lastly, a few practitioners made reference to the fear and significance of the day of inspection, which they believed to impact the consistency and objectivity of regulatory gradings. For example, Sandra states,

> *I mean, it links to wellbeing again, doesn't it? Everyone hears "Ofsted", and most of them, sort of, crumble before your eyes when you, when you talk about it, whether or not you're due an inspection or not. That comes from fear of the unknown, or fear of not being or not knowing what they're gonna ask you, what they're gonna observe* (Sandra, interview transcript, p. 8).

Freya refers to her recent Ofsted inspection, highlighting that the inspector made some practitioners feel so uncomfortable that they were unable to answer questions and began to cry. Yara highlights the mistakes practitioners make under pressure and worries how these could impact regulatory judgements. Harri also refers to the fear and loss of confidence that highly experienced practitioners endure as a result of the highly pressured inspection process. Participants believed these concerns to impact the consistency and objectivity of regulatory gradings, and this belief aligns with Brown (2000), who concedes that it is plausible that heightened feelings of anxiety can be attributed, to some degree, to the approach employed by the inspector.

The participants' experiences in relation to performance align with Cullingford (1999), who reinforces the association between an environment characterised by fear and tension and its adverse consequences on performance. He specifically refers to the regulator's harmful influence on the quality of education, due to its negative effect on professionals. Furthermore, he argues that there exist questions surrounding the high stakes associated with the one-word grading process (Cullingford, 1999).

In summary, some participants expressed their belief that the regulator subjectively and inconsistently determined quality of provision and highlighted that inspectors' diverse expertise and personal perspectives undermined the validity of regulatory judgements. They added that the short, 'snapshot' period

nurseries were inspected for contributed to a distorted view of reality and viewed inspectors as 'outsiders'. Lastly, some participants made reference to the fear and inflated significance of the day of inspection creating an inaccurate picture of the day-to-day practices of the nursery, leading to unjust and unreliable regulatory gradings.

5.4.3 Early childhood settings mitigate the impact of regulation/ inspection by putting in place specific arrangements for professional wellbeing

Some participants reported that they took measures to minimise the effects of regulation by implementing specific actions intended to promote professional wellbeing. These measures varied and were specific to the context of each participants' setting but were all constructed in anticipation of upcoming inspections with a view to supporting practitioners. For example, Freya refers to her discussions during individual performance meetings that helped prepare her team for inspection,

> *…during the performance conversations, a few staff have mentioned how nervous they are for the Ofsted inspection, so we mainly talk about their wellbeing and why they're feeling nervous and how we can prepare them for the Ofsted inspection* (Freya, journal, p. 2).

Kay indicates that her team collaborates to provide mutual support in anticipation of their forthcoming inspection. Maya refers to the mock Ofsted inspection organised in order to alleviate worries, build confidence and familiarise her colleagues with the inspection process. She further alludes to the use of role playing and scenario-based activities across her setting with the intention to practice, and consequently, calm and reassure her team. Sandra refers to her role across her organisation as she reinforces positivity across settings prior to inspection. She states,

> *So, my role, previously, has very much been supporting in the rooms to boost the team and remind them what they're capable of. Remind them that they know what they're doing, not to stand there and feed them the answers, but to question them, too. To, sort of, give them that positivity that they need in order to achieve the day as well as I know they can* (Sandra, interview transcript, p. 8).

Consequently, individuals required considerable downtime to recover from the stress and exhaustion they had experienced preceding inspection, emphasising the need for settings to put actions in place to support professional wellbeing. Actions taken by practitioners connect with existing research that indicates the inspection process amplifies stress and intensifies anxiety (Jeffrey and Woods, 1996), resulting in a degree of uncertainty and excessive workloads necessary for preparation (Chapman, 2002; Day, 2012). Finally, the measures taken by practitioners to support professional wellbeing reinforces the work of Hargreaves (1994, p. 113), who characterises the process of inspection as an example of "colonising life", whereby the arrangements in preparation for inspection disrupt ECPs' daily routines.

To summarise, participants shared the individual measures they implemented, that were intended to minimise the effects of regulation and enhance professional wellbeing across their settings. Actions were specific within the context of each participants' nursery environment and constructed in anticipation of upcoming inspections to support practitioners. Measures included talking and reassuring techniques, providing mutual support, mock inspections, role-play activities and finally, implementing roles across the organisation to provide positivity and mentor settings prior to inspection. It was notable that participants did not make any attempts to diminish or resist the authority of the inspector. This could be an indication of the extent of the regulatory inspector's power.

5.5 Theme 4: Early childhood education policy and regulation need reforming

Participants held the optimistic belief that ECE policy in England had the potential to be reformed to include consideration for the professional wellbeing of ECPs. They suggested ideas as to how policy could change, focusing not only on regulation but a reform of the wider ECE system. Practitioners held the perception that greater recognition for their work by society would support professional wellbeing, furthermore, they believed that public funding for early childhood education and care (ECEC) could be reformed to enable increased pay and incentives to attract people into the sector. In addition, practitioners made suggestions as to how the bureaucratic burden associated with policy

implementation and regulation could be reduced. Participants also indicated how the practice of inspection could change to support professional wellbeing. Practitioners' suggestions are explored for reform of ECE policy as it relates to professional wellbeing through three sub-themes, being 'practitioners believe that greater recognition for their work would support professional wellbeing', 'public funding could be reformed to increase staff pay and improve working conditions' and 'the bureaucratic burden linked to policy implementation and regulation could be reduced'.

5.5.1 Practitioners believe that greater recognition for their work would support professional wellbeing

Participants emphasised the need for increased acknowledgment of their work from society as a whole. For example, Chris refers to the lack of recognition for ECE, despite its importance, stating,

> *…but I think, in terms of overall general change, for me, I would love to see a highlight of early years within our culture, within our society and be put on a different pedestal and a different platform and seen as something that is as crucial as being a paediatric nurse or being a paediatric doctor, because we're looking after children and we're developing them in a different way. Our role, it's just as important as the medical profession, or if we were to go into somewhere where there is medical support needed. What we are doing is […] working on the personal, social, emotional development of children and supporting staff and families. We're trying to get that to a point where children are grounded, and they can be tough, and they can also absorb, and they can explore, and they can function within this world* (Chris, interview transcript, p. 5).

Chris further refers to the Government's lack of acknowledgment, stressing that they hold the authority to make positive changes in relation to sector-wide recognition, aligning with the work of Lloyd (2010), Archer (2020), Osgood (2006a; 2006b) and Fairchild (2021), who emphasise the critical role that Government plays in influencing the construction of professionalism of ECPs. Chris's statement also connects with the work of Gallagher and Roberts (2022), as they emphasise the additional research required in order to further explore

specific aspects of wellbeing and its connection to the value placed on ECPs across ECE.

Harri and Sandra also referred to the lack of recognition and misunderstanding of ECE in society. Harri spoke of the negative publicity about ECE across society and the broader education sector. She believed that ECPs are adversely affected by the fact that their work is not recognised. These perspectives correspond with the findings of Scheiwe and Willekens (2009), who assert that the Government overlooks the historical roots of various methods required to work with young children. Furthermore, Fairchild (2021) exposes the deficiencies in legislative reforms across the ECE workforce, further reinforcing the misconceptions surrounding ECPs' work, which are that it is largely characterised as a low-skilled, gendered occupation, considered 'natural' and similar to motherhood.

Abbie suggests the need for ECPs to take action, such as going on strike, to support enhanced recognition of the ECE sector, as at present, ECPs are 'too complacent'. Abbie's perspective is consistent with Osgood (2006b) who argues that ECPs hold the potential to rethink the existing norms that neglect the significance of their role, allowing the possibility of redefining their professional identity and furthermore, promoting alternative discourses surrounding their role.

A few participants attributed the contribution of the regulator to the low status of ECPs, stating that Ofsted fails to acknowledge their work. For example, Abbie writes,

> *…lots of pressure, lots of stress and lots of… shall I say, lack of time to get our endless list to be completed. So, not fun at this present in early years at all, so, it's just a shame that Ofsted doesn't see this* (Abbie, journal, p. 15).

These experiences reflect Osgood's (2006b, p. 5) argument that ECPs are subject to a critical "regulatory gaze", that focuses on obtaining higher standards. Furthermore, Mahony and Hextall (2001) reinforce that regulatory forces pose a threat to the professional autonomy and wellbeing of ECPs.

Some participants emphasised that their lack of recognition impacted negatively on recruitment across the sector. For example, Maya states,

People don't want to go into early years because we're not appreciated.
We're not appreciated, and you know, people look upon early years as a
possibly an easy option, which it's not. People think they should be doing
something, you know, more challenging, with more status. They don't
realise how challenging our job is and how crucial it is (Maya, interview
transcript, p. 3).

Chris and Harri also refer to the recruitment crisis, highlighting that the lack of
recognition for ECPs across the sector directly impacts upon recruitment,
reinforcing the work of Cameron, Owen and Moss (2001), who assert that ECPs
are burdened with excessive workloads, lack recognition and face widespread
issues surrounding retention. Lloyd (2010) further adds that many barriers
related to the professionalisation of the ECE workforce in England can be
successfully overcome through interventions implemented by both central and
local Government authorities.

In summary, in providing their personal accounts of their lived experiences in
relation to recognition, participants referred to the need for increased
acknowledgment of their work from society as a whole. Furthermore, they
emphasised the Government's lack of acknowledgment. Practitioners spoke
about the misapprehension of ECE as a low-skilled, low status sector, referring
to the need for action in support of enhanced recognition. They specifically
referred to the regulator, emphasising that it failed to acknowledge their work.
Lastly, some participants believed that their lack of recognition impacted
recruitment across the sector.

5.5.2 Public funding could be reformed to increase staff pay and improve working conditions

Most of the participants referred to the lack of Government funding across the
sector, saying that they would like to see boosted funding being used to improve
salaries and incentives for ECPs to work in the sector. Abbie suggests that
increased funding would lead to an increased sense of wellbeing and
appreciation for ECPs. She adds,

…or if the money and the funding and the resources were there, it would
allow for the natural process of us being appreciated and then having

that balance between our wellbeing and our professional life will come into line (Abbie, interview transcript, p. 3).

Abbie refers to the recruitment crisis, emphasising that increased funding would attract and retain ECPs across the sector, aligning with Avinash (2019) and Bonetti (2020) who reaffirm the concerns raised by the early years sector in England in relation to funding, recognition, retention and wellbeing. Similarly, Totenhagen *et al.* (2016) confirm that ECPs, dissatisfied with their work due to low income, look for other, more fulfilling possibilities, and Ghazvini and Mullis (2002) contend that pay and resource availability have a substantial effect on ECPs' attitudes and the standard of care they provide. Lastly, participants reinforced that despite the existing pressures and the sector's significance, the lack of required funding is the main issue for reform. Chris emphasises the need for the Government to improve funding and acknowledge the sector's value. She states,

> *Because, in terms of the Government – the DfE – and the money and funding that's put towards early years, and the promotion and acknowledgement that needs to be given, if we understand the fundamentals of the fact that at this stage the early years are the most crucial years in a human's life. You know, this is where we develop our core skills and values that will take us through to adulthood* (Chris, interview transcript, p. 3).

These perceptions connect with the work of Kwon *et al.* (2021) who affirm the crucial role of ECPs as holding significant obligations in fostering children's emotional development.

In summary, participants in this study felt that public funding could be reformed to increase staff pay and incentives. They shared their personal perspectives in relation to the lack of Government funding, which, they felt, impacted their wellbeing, resources and pay across their settings. Participants, finally, made reference to the existing pressures across their settings and the need for Government to increase recognition and funding for ECE. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this study to explore the specifics of how public funding is reformed.

5.5.3 The bureaucratic burden linked to policy implementation and regulation could be reduced

All participants referred to the bureaucratic burden associated with the requirements of regulation as problematic. Most participants made specific reference to the inspection process itself, sharing individual perspectives from their working environments and how it impacted upon their wellbeing. For example, Bav states,

> *We have to worry about who's coming, who's watching us, are we doing everything ok? It's scary sometimes, in this job, you're constantly being judged, something changes or there's a new policy, new law, "Ofsted like it this way, so we need to change everything", we have to change what we're doing to please the people higher up. So, the wellbeing is affected, everyone feels it* (Bav, interview transcript, p. 2).

These experiences are consistent with Hargreaves' (1994) argument that the regulator colonises individuals' lives. This control affects identities, personal lives, professional positions and overall work environments, posing a threat to the professional autonomy and wellbeing of ECPs (Mahony and Hextall, 2001). Furthermore, experiences of surveillance are closely related to Power's (1997, p. 4) exploration of the "audit society", which illustrates the erosion of trust in professionals throughout the education sector. This loss of trust undermines ECPs' authority and capabilities and devalues the breadth of their work.

Chris and Sandra refer to the changes in qualifications that have impacted morale and recruitment across their nurseries. As Chris states,

> *There's been a massive impact in a negative way, especially with the changes with the qualification that team members have and new staff coming in. They are really demotivated at the moment just because you have staff members who've come in and they've worked for years as a Level 3 or Level 2 or, you know, have their degrees and then their degrees have been… they've been told that their degrees are just not what they should be, or they're not valid* (Chris, interview transcript, p. 2).

Participants' perspectives further highlight how constant policy changes surrounding ECPs' qualifications have exacerbated the recruitment crisis across England (Avinash, 2019). Their experiences align with Archer (2020),

who makes reference to the emergence of power discourses in the ECE sector, caused by the ongoing changes in qualification criteria in England, indicating that these changes have influenced ECPs in a number of conflicting and changing ways.

Participants described heightened workload and documentation as a bureaucratic burden connected to the regulation, which impacted on their wellbeing. For example, Yara states,

> *I think we need to care about the needs of the children first, and then paperwork can come after. Because… the paperwork, it's just, like, a lot and it never finishes, then it's stressing people out and we are stressed* (Yara, journal, p. 1).

Participants' experiences align with Day (2012) and Chapman (2002), who assert that inspections lead to increased workloads, which has a negative emotional effect on practitioners.

This research did not, however, find that participants were unanimous about the bureaucratic burden. Sandra offered an alternative perspective, in which she recognises some positive changes in regulation, having experienced a reduction in paperwork surrounding the preparation processes required for inspection since the Government's revisions of the statutory framework, which decreased administrative procedures for practitioners (DfE, 2012). Furthermore, she holds a more accepting view of the regulator as she refers to the workload across her nursery as 'do-able'. Sandra's perspective, therefore, shows that there may not be consensus on bureaucratic burden. She states,

> *…that said, in terms of, you know the workload we have day-to-day, it does have a challenge in terms of the time frame I think, but it's do-able.* (Sandra, interview transcription, p. 2).

In summary, most participants viewed the bureaucratic burden associated with policy implementation and regulation as problematic and felt that it could be reduced. In addition, they referred to problems associated with the changes in qualifications, which have impacted morale and recruitment across their nurseries. Participants described heightened workload and documentation as a bureaucratic burden connected to the enforcement of regulation and policy, that has, in large part, impacted negatively on their wellbeing. Lastly, most of the

participants referred to the lack of Government funding across the sector, emphasising that improved funding might be used to improve salaries and incentives for recruitment to the sector.

5.5.4 Participants suggest how the practice of inspection could change

Most participants made specific reference to the need for change in regulatory inspection practices. They shared their views on how the inspection process could better support ECPs' wellbeing. For example, Yara emphasises a need for the regulator to prioritise the wellbeing of the workforce. She states,

> *I think it's the wellbeing of the people really, I think, rather than the requirements of the workforce itself from Ofsted. I think they need to look after the people, maybe in, you know, the organisations* (Yara, interview transcription, p. 11).

Maya also refers to the pressure of the regulator that impacts on the happiness and wellbeing of ECPs, aligning with Jeffrey and Woods (1998), who underline the significance of regulation upon the psychological pressures of those working across educational institutions in England. These participants' perceptions reinforce the work of Waters and McKee (2022), who emphasise that it is crucial for the regulator to openly recognise its duty to safeguard the welfare of its members.

Most participants referred to the need for Ofsted to support and value ECPs, highlighting that the process of inspection should be reformed to a more collaborative and supportive process, as several participants regarded inspectors as lacking compassion and failing to appreciate the value of ECPs. For example, Bav states,

> *The company is good, but they get stressed too, because of Ofsted. Ofsted need to be more supportive, they should help us and be understanding, some of them are really tough and harsh, like they want to see you fail. Some of them like having this power over you, like they're trying to trick you and make you feel inadequate. We need more support* (Bav, interview transcript, p. 2).

These perspectives reinforce the argument of Case, Case and Catling (2000), who contend that in order for the process of inspection to enhance the standard of education, it is crucial to integrate components of support and collaboration with its members. Furthermore, the value of ECPs is minimised to limited observations and written materials reviewed by the regulator's inspectors (Jeffrey and Woods, 1996).

Many participants referred to the need for change due to the subjectivity of inspections. Yara refers to the interpretation of the inspection framework, stating that judgements were more down to the inspectors' individual notions of quality, rather than framework requirements, aligning with Fitz-Gibbon (1998) and Grey and Gardner (1999), who emphasise that regulatory inspectors are prone to influence and have their own unique perspectives, resulting in bias and discrepancies throughout inspections.

Most participants referred to the pressure and fear inspection places on ECPs, consequently affecting its reliability. They emphasised the need for awareness and reform. For example, Harri states,

> *With the stress that it causes and the pressure it puts staff members under, how can staff members be natural and how can they practise being consistent when they know how important that day is to the nursery and to them as individuals professionally and to the team as well? So inspections are something that I don't really agree with and it should be something that is definitely looked at within the near future* (Harri, interview transcript, p. 9).

Abbie reinforces the need for the regulator to openly listen and take the sector's feedback on board. She states,

> *I really hope that Ofsted do take notes and not just park it at the side, because they really need to wake up, otherwise early years is not going to get any better* (Abbie, interview transcript, p.15).

In summary, practitioners indicated the need for change in relation to the process of inspection. They referred to a need for the regulator to consider and prioritise the wellbeing of the workforce. Many participants, additionally, referred to the need for Ofsted to support and value ECPs, highlighting that the process of inspection should be reformed to a more collaborative and supportive

process. Lastly, many participants referred to the apparent subjectivity of inspections, leading to the additional pressure of fear caused by uncertainty and feelings of powerlessness.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter began by examining Theme 1, 'Professional wellbeing is a complex phenomenon', which corresponded to Research Question 1, as it explored how ECPs understand the concept of professional wellbeing. Theme 1 also aligned with Research Question 3, as ECPs provided suggestions on how their professional wellbeing might be sustained in the future.

Theme 2, 'The regulatory framework for early years has a negative influence on professional wellbeing' was examined through an analysis of relevant participant perspectives and experiences in connection with Research Question 2, also on the topic of how regulation impacts ECP wellbeing.

Theme 3, 'The experience of regulation is problematic', was investigated through participants' shared insights and personal encounters in which regulation was a problematic experience for them, and again, connecting to Research Question 2.

Lastly, Theme 4, 'Recognition of ECPs and the need for ECE policy and regulatory reform', aligning with Research Question 3, was explored through participants' ideas on how their wellbeing might be sustained in the future.

The research questions will be revisited in the concluding chapter, with a full evaluation of the degree to which this thesis has answered them.

The results of these findings illuminate the intricate and complex mechanisms through which regulation governs both the professional and personal dimensions of ECPs' lives. The regulator's powerful stance has generated a prevalent climate of fear across ECPs settings, with even the preparation necessary for inspection dominating the personal and professional lives of ECPs. ECPs regard current regulation practice as a continuous process of surveillance that impacts their overall wellbeing and they report that operations related to regulation take priority over focus on pedagogy and the wellbeing of children and practitioners.

The findings also reveal three significant areas in which ECPs recognise a need for regulatory reform.

First, they call for a revision of regulatory inspection procedures, which, in their current form, are considered to have a negative impact on their happiness and wellbeing, with all the attendant implications for the children in their care.

Second, ECPs urge the regulator to adopt a much more supportive approach and to demonstrate that ECPs are valued as professionals, indicating their dissatisfaction with the current inspection process, which they perceive as lacking empathy and failing to acknowledge their worth.

Third, several ECPs strongly stressed the need for reform to address the uneven, subjective nature of inspections.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The preceding findings chapter revealed the complex ways in which regulation governs the professional wellbeing of early childhood practitioners (ECPs) participating in this study. This discussion chapter addresses the significance of these findings by applying the lenses of post-structuralist and feminist theory. The purpose of the findings chapter was to report the four themes emerging from the thematic analysis of data. The themes were:

1. Professional wellbeing is a complex phenomenon.
2. The regulatory framework for early years has a negative influence on professional wellbeing.
3. The regulator's inspection process is problematic.
4. Early childhood education (ECE) policy and regulation need reforming.

In Chapter 5, each theme was explored through participants' subjective experiences gathered from their journal and interview data and interpreted in relation to the academic literature reviewed in Chapter 3. This provided the following insights into the complex ways in which regulation governs the professional and personal lives of ECPS.

First, the position of power held by the regulator resulted in a culture of fear across settings. Second, the preparation required for inspection dominated ECPs' personal and professional lives. Third, ECPs experienced inspection as an ongoing process of surveillance that negatively impacted their wellbeing. Fourth, ECPs lamented the obligation to prioritise tasks associated with regulation above pedagogy and the wellbeing of children and practitioners.

By applying post-structural and feminist theory to discussion of the findings, the complex operations of power exercised throughout regulatory processes begin to emerge, including the way it impacts the professional wellbeing of ECPs. This chapter also addresses how ECPs exercise agency and resist the power of the regulator.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, there is an examination of how regulation colonises the personal and professional lives of ECPs. Next, there is a look at the power of 'truths' over ECPs' professional lives. Thereafter, there is

an investigation into how regulation acts as a form of surveillance, additionally exploring practices of power in regulation. To finish, a combination of post-structural and feminist theory is adopted as a tool for critically reflective practice and to identify how ECPs believe regulatory systems might be reformed to include consideration and prioritisation of their professional wellbeing.

6.2 Regulation colonises early childhood practitioners' personal and professional lives

The majority of ECPs in this study recognised the interconnection between professional and personal wellbeing, acknowledging that regulatory processes had an impact on both dimensions of their lives. Practitioners shared their individual experiences of regulation, emphasising that regulatory processes were imposed upon them. As a consequence, ECPs experience a perpetual state of colonisation, as the regulators' position of power contributes to an environment characterised by fear across their personal and professional lives. This has led to ECPs and their settings prioritising conforming to, and satisfying, the regulator, in pursuit of a favourable inspection outcome above the needs of children, families and the wellbeing of practitioners. In her journal, Yara illustrates the extent of the regulator's control over ECPs, characterising it as 'God' as she emphasises the pervasive colonisation the regulator holds over her nursery,

> *Everything is around inspection. Anyway. Everything there is about, you know, around Ofsted, if Ofsted comes, if Ofsted has to come, what happens when Ofsted comes? What about the outcome of the activity when Ofsted comes? Everything just around Ofsted, really, and then it's a bit stressful as well because it seems like Ofsted is God* (Yara, journal, p. 6).

Furthermore, ECPs provided instances of the extensive preparation necessary for inspection, which significantly influenced both their professional and personal worlds. For example, Abbie stated,

> *I used to go into nurseries a lot at the weekends just to try and get some things done or prepare for Ofsted. And then, by the time you get your Ofsted, you're absolutely knackered* (Abbie, interview transcript, p. 9).

Lastly, several ECPs asserted that the process of preparing for inspections consumed their personal and professional lives, thereby affecting their workload and leading to fatigue. The colonisation of practitioners is consistent with the work of Jeffrey and Woods (1998), who also employ Foucault's (1977) idea of disciplinary power to illustrate the function of inspectors across the regulatory structure for education in England. This style of authority seeks to control organisations, purporting to foster individuals to be accomplished, efficient and regulated according to the standards set by the regulator. Practitioners experience this regulatory authority as a gradual invasion in their lives, compromising their professional and personal lives, their wellbeing, values and personal characteristics (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998). Similarly, Osgood (2010a) contends that ECPs are subject to a "regulatory gaze" in order to uphold standards (p. 1). Foucault draws attention to the role of power and its influence across discourses, emphasising its oppressive nature (Deacon, 2006). The findings of this study are consistent with the observations of Mikuska and Fairchild (2020) in that they reveal nurseries upholding regulation as a disciplinary apparatus in which the regulators' position of power produces fear-driven institutions that colonise and control the personal and professional domains of ECPs as they strive to meet the regulators' requirements. ECPs, consequently, prioritise adhering to the inspection framework and satisfying the regulator in order to achieve an acceptable inspection outcome. Through examining these findings from a critical, post-structuralist perspective, the notion is reinforced that early childhood institutions have become disciplinary apparatus that incorporate multiple methods to exert control over ECPs (Mikuska and Fairchild, 2020), thus, colonising their personal and professional lives (MacNaughton, 2005).

6.3 The power of the regulator's 'truths' over early childhood practitioners' professional lives

Throughout the process of analysing the participants' interviews and journal entries, knowledge was gathered about 'truths' operating within early childhood practice. This helped to reveal the impact of those truths on the personal and professional lives of ECPs. All participants made reference to the regulator's truths and the ways in which their professional and personal wellbeing were adversely affected by their obligation to comply. Participants articulated their

perspectives on the regulatory framework across their settings, revealing how the legislative requirements concerning sustaining ratios and qualifications posed particular challenges. They all, also, mentioned the complex, sometimes inscrutable nature of the regulator's inspection process, which often creates feelings of fraught anticipation leading up to the event.

In addition, participants maintained the belief that they were not valued by the regulator, emphasising that their wellbeing was not taken into account during inspections. Lastly, participants shared the belief that regulatory inspectors made subjective and inconsistent judgements regarding the quality of their settings. An example of the impact of regulator's truths on the professional lives of ECPs is provided by Freya, as she states,

> *Before Ofsted come in, you work so hard. I know what my nursery is and my team, what they are capable [of]. They do most of the things they've been asked to do, you know? Er, and after that someone comes in and they say that, you know what – it's not good enough, and they make their decision based on the day, what they, they say, and they don't take any other things into consideration. They don't think about where you came from. And how did you manage to come from here? And where were you before? And you know, yeah, based on the day, whatever they see and they make the judgment on that. I find that's very unfair. It is a 'snapshot' of it and they don't know the children, they don't know the staff and they don't understand when you explain to them, this is my nursery and it has been going through quite a big crisis, the recruitment crisis and we just come out of Covid and recovered them from that. I have children from disadvantaged backgrounds and there are lots of children and families with a language barrier. I think they've got a set mind when they enter the nursery and they are focusing on that area and they said "OK, I'm gonna go and look at this", they just stay criticising and penalising, and when I say something to them, their response is, "right, you are not 'good' or you are not ''outstanding because of this"* (Freya, interview transcript, p. 2).

Freya is influenced by "games of truth", or 'divergent approaches to truth' (Scott, 1996, p. 97) as she recognises that the dominant politics of Ofsted's own defined truth do not align with her knowledge of her setting, with the result being that her truth is dismissed by the regulator. Foucault (1997) contends that our

comprehension of subjects (the subjects being, in this case, children's development or pedagogy) has no basis in objective truths; and instead, it resides in generated narratives influenced by truth games that embody the dominant politics of knowledge across specific settings. Therefore, Foucault's work focuses on analysing the relationships between knowledge, truth and power, and the resulting effects on people and the organisations that they produce (Foucault, 1997; MacNaughton, 2005).

The power of these truths aligns with MacNaughton's (2005) perspectives, as she emphasises the requirement for ECPs to demonstrate the effectiveness of their teaching methods through robust procedures. The social realms of ECPs are, consequently, subject to the control of an inflexible regime. This regime comprises officially recognised truths that prescribe 'acceptable' thoughts, behaviours and feelings within the organisations in which ECPs are employed. As a result, a "general politics" (Foucault, 1980a, p. 131) including a "regime of truth" (Foucault, 1978, p. 60) is formed regarding procedures and regulations across ECE. The findings revealed the impact on participants of such truths (concerning what is regarded as effective practice across ECE), which aligned with Wood's (2019) assertion that truths evoke intense emotional reactions in ECPs and are more visibly demonstrated through their practice when endorsed by institutional bodies, such as Ofsted. The regulator's truths, consequently, extend beyond the inspection process and into the personal and professional lives of ECPs. For example, Freya highlights the strain placed on ECPs across her nursery in relation to their workload as they strive to meet the regulators' requirements, culminating in fatigue and burnout. Freya attributes her own illness to working long hours and weekends. Maya also raises the issue of anticipation of inspection, highlighting its influence on the personal and professional wellbeing of practitioners. She alludes to ECPs experiencing insomnia and observes members of her team trembling during mock inspections.

Not only does the regulator establish and define the requirements for categorising 'excellent' and 'exceptional' practices in its inspection handbook (Ofsted, 2023d), but the persuasiveness of truths also pertains to the regulator's engagement in carrying out inquiries and assessments on the subjects of ECE curriculum and developmental milestones for children. The regulator specifically

targets the identification of the predetermined attributes of favoured or effective practices for ECPs (Wood, 2019).

The pervasiveness of the core system of truth is revealed by the ways in which ECPs, themselves, use small-scale exercises of authority to govern and control their own individual behaviour, thereby imbuing these exercises of authority with a moral objective (Gore, 1998). Harri demonstrates this as she regards the regulators' safeguarding measures to be central to ECPs' obligation towards keeping children safe. She states,

> *I think with Ofsted being the main one. You know, that the regulations within the statutory framework are something that we abide by because it's keeping children safe and, you know, linking with safeguarding procedures and keeping children safe in education and that those standards are there for a reason, for us to be able to operate in a safe manner and protect the children that are within our care* (Harri, interview transcript, p. 3).

The knowledge that is officially accepted and incorporated into the regulatory framework and Government policy documents in England creates an authoritarian precept for how ECPs should think and act throughout their roles. The prevailing authority of knowledge, endorsed by the regulator and Government, consequently, poses difficulties for ECPs in envisioning alternate ways of thinking, behaving and living for individuals employed across ECE. For instance, Freya illustrates the substantial control exerted by the regulator upon ECPs across her nursery. She states,

> *I am looking at the work and talking about the Ofsted all the time. So, yes, the pressure and workload has become extreme, and sometimes I'm really sick as well. I've started to work late every night and, um, sometimes some weekends as well, to get the job done and do the paperwork. Yeah, it is quite a lot to be honest, I don't know how and when this pressure is going to stop. Maybe being a manager, I feel more than the teachers, but when I spoke to my teachers, um, every other day, they're asking me, do you know what Ofsted are going to look at? Is that what we're going to do? Um, it looks like everything is for the Ofsted* (Freya, journal, p. 3).

Foucault argues that the truths recognised and accepted by society play a crucial role in the discipline and regulation of individuals, effectively directing their behaviour. Foucault's viewpoint on truth is described as an "art of government" (Gore, 1993, p. 56). Foucault's interpretation of 'government' encompasses a wide range of strategies and procedures aimed at guiding behaviour among individuals (Foucault, 1980a; Rabinow, 1994; 1997). ECPs' lives are, consequently, controlled and managed by truths that are produced and recognised by institutions (Taylor, 2017). Foucault, in Hurley (1978, p.17), argues that the mechanisms of power employed by institutions instil within us a sense of "tact and discretion", shaping our decisions about the place, style and substance of our discourse. Foucault, therefore, conceptualises the notion of a regime of truth as a system that produces a prevailing consensus within particular domains, prescribing the objectives and techniques that must be adhered to within that space (Foucault, 1976a). A substantial responsibility is, therefore, imposed upon ECPs to validate and adhere to the regulator's specifications (Mikuska and Fairchild, 2020). ECPs, consequently, privilege and prioritise Ofsted-defined truths above other educational approaches. For example, Maya emphasises the pressure placed on ECPs to meet the regulator's pre-determined requirements. She states,

> *Because all the time, you know, we're thinking about Ofsted.*
> *All the time. And sometimes we do things because it's an Ofsted*
> *requirement that really isn't about the children. We've got to follow all of*
> *these requirements and evidence them. It just takes us away from the job*
> *that we should be doing, which is taking care of the wellbeing of*
> *everyone and educating the children* (Maya, interview transcript, p. 2).

Maya's position is consistent with MacNaughton's (2000) assertion that established truths are integrated into a system of governance that regulates acceptable and suitable modes of thinking, behaving and experience, applicable to ECE settings. By being a part of this process, ECPs develop a set of principles that are consistent with the regulating organisations, making it possible to decide the actions that are acceptable and desirable as practitioners. Those employed across the field of ECE, consequently, prioritise particular forms of knowledge regarding early childhood practice as a system of truth, which has a controlling and governing impact on the delivery and

organisation of children's experiences (Wells, 1981; Cannella, 1997; Alloway, 1997; MacNaughton, 2000).

A further example of the impact such truths have on the professional lives of ECPs is exemplified in the strategies employed by ECPs in their nurseries to mitigate the negative impact on their wellbeing of the regulator's imposed truths. ECPs apply strategies to support professional wellbeing across their nurseries. An example of this is provided by Freya in her journal, as she illustrates the action taken in order to calm the nerves of her team as they prepare for their regulatory visit,

> *…during the performance conversations, a few staff have mentioned, that, how nervous they are for the Ofsted inspection, so we, mainly, talk about their wellbeing and why they're feeling nervous and how we can prepare them for the Ofsted inspection* (Freya, journal, p. 2).

Freya, here, shifts the attention from the regulators' inspection to focus on preparing and supporting her team. Thus, she attempts to disrupt the power of the regulator by participating in subjectivity (Butler, 1995). That is, she exercises agency and shifts focus onto the professional wellbeing of her team.

The findings of this study reveal the significance of disciplinary power and the relationship between power and knowledge discussed by Foucault (1977; 1979) and its specific functioning across nurseries in England. Viewed from a post-structuralist perspective, early childhood institutions are disciplinary apparatus that use various tactics to exert control and regulate ECPs. According to Foucault (1977; 1979), and within the context of ECE, ECPs are docile bodies established by the regulators' disciplinary techniques, functioning as entities performing within the regulatory discourse. Nevertheless, Osgood (2010a) highlights the ability of ECPs to act independently across institutional settings. As demonstrated throughout the findings of this study, Osgood (2010a) reinforces ECPs' efficacy in altering, interrogating, and actively engaging in, the debate on the classifications and obligations imposed upon them. Additionally, Mikuska (2023) argues that despite the challenges encountered by ECPs, it is still possible for them to make progress in repositioning the ECE workforce. This feasible course of action provides an avenue for ECPs to fight back against the regulator. The incorporation of feminist theory as a supplementary theoretical

framework in this study additionally offered a valuable perspective on how women ECPs participate in acts of resistance and advocate for regulatory reform, as demonstrated throughout the findings. Butler (1995) states that women's aims typically coincide with their opposition and regardless of the practice they choose to engage in and subject themselves to, they will exhibit resistance. Resistance, consequently, arises through the course of normalisation through participation.

The methodologies of disciplinary apparatus can, therefore, be explored and understood through the employment of post-structural critical perspectives on inspection, normalisation and observation (MacNaughton, 2005). Gore's (1988) conceptualisation of micro practices of power can be used as an analytical tool to illustrate how the findings of this study reveal the creation and continuation of a system of truth, specific to ECE. (Gore outlines eight micro practices of power, being surveillance, normalisation, classification, exclusion, distribution, individualisation, totalisation and regulation). As an example, the practice of normalisation was visible when ECPs felt a strong obligation to adhere to the predefined criteria of development outlined across the regulators' inspection handbook, which specifies the desired behaviours and specific milestones of young children (Ofsted, 2023d). The findings align with Gore (1988) as she defines normalisation as the process of conforming to a standard that conveys particular truths, in this case, related to components of child development.

Furthermore, the results in this study indicate that ECPs used the regulator's established truths to determine high-quality practice. This involved prioritising instructions and regulations issued by Government agencies, as defined in the standards for effective practice in England (DfE, 2023a), while other methods were eliminated or disregarded by ECPs in this study. One example of this is when Harri describes the difficulty she faced in ensuring the welfare of her team due to her adherence to the regulatory framework, which she placed priority to. Additionally, Freya emphasises the importance placed on prioritising the upcoming regulatory inspection of her setting. As a consequence, Freya confesses to working late evenings and weekends, whilst, consequently, experiencing sickness due to her excessive workload.

Participants in this study are impacted by specific truths, imposed by the regulator, which determine and define the quality of organisations, as well as the ECPs employed across them. Practitioners expressed concern that their setting's grading would be jeopardised when its features did not align with the predefined truths specified by the regulator. Assigning one-word judgements to ECPs and organisations throughout the inspection process constructs them as measurable, leaving practitioners and institutions vulnerable to disciplinary action. This truth is consistent with Gore's (1988) concept of 'distribution', an example being in terminology used, in particular, the word 'inadequate', in use to evaluate individual ECPs' practice (Case, Case and Catling, 2000). The micro practice of 'individualisation', defined by Gore (1988), can illuminate the findings. It entails the application of truths to discern and distinguish individuals. For instance, the same terms used to assess establishments as 'inadequate' may also be applied, as mentioned, to judge ECPs, because their observed practice directly influences their settings' grade (Case, Case and Catling, 2000).

Lastly, the micro practices of, 'totalisation' and 'regulation', defined by Gore (1988), are applicable to the findings throughout this study. The first refers to the pressure on ECPs to conform to the regulator's standards, which are regarded as truths. This pressure is exerted in order to obtain a favourable outcome from the regulator, aligning with Gore's (1988) definition of the practice of 'totalisation' as the technique of using established truths to create a motivation or inclination to comply with them. Participants, consequently, are seen to be complying with the regulatory framework as a reliable standard that determines their individual practice. Frameworks, established by the regulator and its statutory requirements, set a standard that all ECPs across the ECE sector in England must comply with (Ofsted, 2023d; DfE, 2023a). Regulators, consequently, affect the attitudes and behaviour of ECPs using their established truths and standards. Hence, the enforcement of regulatory standards, and the execution of penalties, serve as motivators for ECPs to adhere to the regulator, in order to acquire favourable results (Gore, 1998). ECPs who participated in this research, therefore, adhere to the standards established by the regulator to prevent the negative consequences of being declared 'inadequate' (Jeffery and Woods, 1998).

6.4 Regulation as a form of surveillance

Some ECPs perceived regulation as a type of surveillance that held a substantial influence over their professional wellbeing. For example, Yara states,

> *…then I think, Ofsted is like… they're like that body that is not there, like the spirit that is not there but the power of them is there. Not even just us, the people above us are scared, like the area managers, and often, then, put the pressure on us, and wellbeing is really down because of that. It's just Ofsted, really, that brings us down, but we are amazing in everything we do* (Yara, interview transcript, p. 2).

This is consistent with Gore's (1988) description of surveillance as one of the eight micro practices of power outlined in the last section. Surveillance refers to the condition, or expectation, of being closely monitored and examined, specifically in relation to particular truths upheld by the regulator. ECPs expected close scrutiny and oversight from inspectors and regulators who hold a singular idea of what exceptional teaching methods look like that comes from the guidelines set by the regulatory framework (Ofsted, 2023d) in England. ECPs, therefore, feel under constant observation, obliging them always to exhibit behaviours that align with the predetermined standards set by the regulator (Hargreaves, 1994; Fairchild and Mikuska, 2021).

Foucault highlights the significance of the "normalising gaze" and "the examination" as a means of surveillance that constructs a system of scrutiny in which individuals are judged (Foucault, 1977, p. 184). Consequently, nurseries are subject to inspections and regulatory control, from which the regulator's conclusions are subsequently published (Ofsted, 2022). The objective of this approach is to establish accountability among ECPs from various organisations and enable their performance to be analysed across the neoliberal market of early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision (Fairchild and Mikuska 2021; Roberts-Holmes and Moss 2021).

When examining disciplinary practices, it is crucial to concentrate on the individuals across these institutions (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998). Foucault (1977) argues that, "the visibility of individuals ensures the maintenance of the power that is exerted upon them" (p. 187). The act of evaluating practitioners'

performance across organisations, therefore, makes it possible to measure their effectiveness and, as a result, subject them to punishment. An example that demonstrates this is the use of wording within inspection reports, where the phrase 'inadequate' is used. Providers are informed of these assessment outcomes and, therefore, hold the power to impose disciplinary measures on ECPs who are found to have achieved below the regulators' required judgement for their setting. For example, Yara highlights the impact of knowing that disciplinary measures exist for ECPs who fail to meet the regulators' requirements. She states,

> *You have [a] manager that could literally kill you because of you making that mistake and bringing the nursery grading down* (Yara, interview transcript, p. 7).

Yara explains how this affects the professional wellbeing of ECPs by asserting,

> *Then people's wellbeing is affected because you feel like, I'm in trouble. People are scared of that, really. It's putting people off, just to know that Ofsted could be coming. People are leaving the workplace because they feel, I can go somewhere else without that pressure. So, Ofsted, I think, they need to look into how Ofsted are checking their own regulations as well. We cannot sleep because we're so worried* (Yara, interview transcription, p. 7).

Foucault (1977) argues that the use of surveillance results in the process of normalisation, which is a form of power that regards certain types of knowledge and practices to be essential in the procedure of normalising social values and structures across modern society. Thus, normalisation, in this context, seeks to develop structured organisations that foster ECPs to be accomplished, productive and regulated according to the standards set by the regulator. However, according to Fairchild and Mikuska (2021), these regulatory standards hinder the capacity of ECPs to progress beyond performative forms of practice.

6.5 Complex practices of power in regulation

Participants recognised the application of power through the process of regulation, resulting in implications for professional wellbeing across their settings.

First, most participants stated concerns surrounding the preparation required for regulatory inspections and perceived the period leading up to inspection as problematic. Participants reported that the powerful position maintained by Ofsted led to the construction of a fearful atmosphere throughout their nurseries. For example, Abbie refers to the nerves of her team when the word 'Ofsted' is used. She states,

> *...staff are nervous already, as soon as they hear the name 'Ofsted'* (Abbie, interview transcript, p. 13).

Sandra provides another example of the pervasive culture of fear, highlighting the impact of the power exerted by the regulator, yet countering this with the strategies she implements in order to support the wellbeing of ECPs across her organisation. She states,

> *I mean, it links to wellbeing again, doesn't it? Everyone hears 'Ofsted' and most of them, sort of, crumble before your eyes when you, when you talk about it, whether or not you're due an inspection or not. That comes from fear of the unknown, or fear of not being, or not knowing what they're gonna ask you, what they're gonna observe. So my role, previously, has very much been supporting in the rooms to boost the team and remind them what they're capable of. Remind them that they know what they're doing, not to stand there and feed them the answers, but to question them, too. To, sort of, give them that positivity that they need in order to achieve the day as well as I know they can, so helping to also oversee some of those admin roles so that they are in the most important place, which is with the children.* (Sandra, interview transcript, p. 8).

Sandra's strategies exemplify how ECPs resist the regulator. She actively prepares her team in anticipation of the inspection, with the objective of reinforcing self-confidence in ECPs' existing expertise. Sandra, in effect, challenges regulatory inspections in their capacity to undermine the professional status of ECPs, because the process of the inspections can result in a decline in ECPs' confidence in their own professional competencies, as evidenced in the findings chapter (Jeffery and Woods, 1998).

In summary, participants in this study claimed that the inspection preparation procedure consumed their personal and professional lives, affecting their workload and causing tiredness and fatigue. Some regarded the power of inspection as an ongoing process of surveillance that impacted their team's wellbeing, while others emphasised that the regulator's power resulted in it being given higher priority than the pedagogy and wellbeing of people in their nurseries. Participants, additionally, described the burden that leaders face in order to comply with regulatory criteria. They also reported a perception that the regulator did not value them and that their wellbeing had not been taken into account throughout the inspection process. Lastly, participants believed that the regulator's ratings of the quality of their settings were overly subjective and inconsistent.

In response to all these pressures, specific measures had been implemented to minimise the effects of the power of the regulator upon their professional wellbeing. The data provides numerous examples of efforts taken by ECPs to resist the regulator and safeguard ECPs' professional wellbeing across their nurseries. Freya refers to the dialogue she has with her team to discuss wellbeing and how she can individually prepare ECPs for the inspection process. Maya refers to the mock inspection process she had implemented for her setting with the purpose of building confidence and familiarising ECPs with the inspection process. Lastly, Sandra refers to her role as supporting nurseries across her organisation through reassurance and promoting positivity.

According to Foucault (1984) power produces regulations that organise and guide behaviour. Foucault (1980a) argues that power does not reside among people or institutions, but rather is distributed and penetrates social structures. Foucault highlights the role of power in shaping and impacting knowledge, discourses and subjectivities, highlighting its oppressive nature (Deacon, 2006). From a post-structuralist perspective, ECE institutions can be seen as disciplinary apparatus that deploy various tactics to exert control and regulate ECPs. The origins of these techniques can be comprehended by examining them via a post-structural, critical perspective that focuses on inspection, normalisation and surveillance, which I have examined across the preceding sections of this chapter (MacNaughton, 2005).

This study concurs with previous research that offers meaningful insights into how power is exercised across educational institutions through regulatory disciplinary processes (Jeffrey and Woods, 1996; 1998; Osgood, 2006a; 2006b; 2010a; Mikuska and Fairchild, 2020). The rules, regulations and routines set by institutions have an impact on the subjectivities and behaviour of both children and ECPs (Dahlberg and Moss, 2004). A variety of tactics, such as continuous supervision, evaluation methods and limitations of practice are employed to exercise authority. The enforcement and maintenance of these disciplinary practices are largely carried out by ECPs and carers themselves, who play a crucial role in preserving such conduct (Ball, 1996; Case, Case and Catling, 2000) which is highlighted throughout Chapter 5.

Foucault (1980b) emphasises the propensity of organisations to use their power. He argues that the implementation of disciplinary power can lead to the exclusion and abuse of individuals, as well as the establishment of unequal power dynamics. The misuse of authority can be observed across ECE within this research through behaviours such as discipline, control and punishment, or preferences for particular ECE practices and pedagogy. These actions may have negative effects upon both children's development and the wellbeing of ECPs (McNay, 2013; Fairchild and Mikuska, 2021). In addition, Foucault's post-structural theory sheds light on the hidden and subtle manifestations of power that infiltrate ECE organisations as participants in this study refer to the regulator as an ongoing surveillance mechanism. For example, Yara illustrates the regulator's subtle manifestations of power as she describes Ofsted as the 'spirit that is not physically present' across her setting, yet its power is inescapable. Power is not solely exerted through explicit displays of coercion; it can also be employed to govern and standardise environments (Foucault, 1977; 1979). These factors shape the conduct, mindsets and values of ECPs to align with societal norms and expectations across ECE organisations (MacNaughton, 2005; Fairchild and Mikuska, 2021).

The concept of power is central to post-structural theory (Foucault, 1977; 1980a; 1980b; 1983). MacNaughton (2005) defines power as the interactive process through which people seek to influence and regulate the formation of truths and discourses related to normality. This process encompasses the

control and progression of our own individuality, growth, social relationships and institutions, most especially, in relation to defining societal norms.

Examples of this concept of power can be observed throughout the data, as participants experience a colonisation of their professional and personal lives by the regulator (Hargreaves, 1994). Freya highlights the significant burden placed on her team as they strive to comply with regulatory obligations, resulting in fatigue and extreme tiredness. Furthermore, Abbie asserts that the preparation necessary for the inspection processes consumes both her personal and professional life, as she dedicates her weekends to preparing her nursery for the regulator.

Foucault (1982) in Rabinow (1997) declares that power is omnipresent, not because it is comprehensive, but because it originates from many sources, including ourselves. McNay (1992) argues, therefore, that it is crucial for ECPs to address their capacity to pursue their own truths across truth mechanisms that create disproportionate power dynamics. In order to achieve liberation from these, ECPs must resist the authority exerted over them through multiple regimes of truth. As Mikuska and Fairchild (2020) recognise, "there is no absolute objective truth" (p. 80).

Participants exhibited their resistance through their attempts to disrupt power through exercising subjectivity (the interplay between the subject and their own agency) (Butler, 1995) and parrhesia (free and frank speech without fear of recrimination) (Foucault, 1972) by presenting alternate truths of regulation within the context of their own settings. For example, Yara challenges the regulators' own standards of conduct, emphasising that they should be reformed to consider the wellbeing of ECPs. Furthermore, Harri, Yara and Freya refer to the inconsistencies of the regulator, pointing out that the personal perspectives of inspectors' impact regulatory judgements.

The concepts of disciplinary power, docile bodies and power/knowledge (Gordon and Foucault, 1980a) influence this study's analysis of participants' lived experiences as these notions pertain to the dynamics that occur throughout their institutions. Post-structuralist theories concerning knowledge, thus, urge individuals to critically question existing power relations and refrain from perceiving them as inherent or unavoidable (Keohane, 2002).

Understanding how realities have contributed to the acceptance of discriminatory practices and oppressive institutions can equip professionals with awareness of their own ability to make positive changes (MacNaughton, 2005). The findings of this study show that ECPs were aware of the repressive methods enforced upon them by the regulator. Furthermore, these findings illustrate the power the participants held to question and redirect the dialogue surrounding the roles and duties imposed upon them. According to Osgood (2010a), this viable path of action offers a means for ECPs to resist the regulator (Osgood, 2010a) as they have the ability to reshape the ECE workforce (Mikuska, 2023).

6.6 Early childhood practitioners' acts of resistance and speaking out for regulatory reform

ECPs in this study identified three areas in which regulation might be reformed, as explored in Chapter 5.

First, participants emphasised a need for revision of the regulatory inspection processes as they believed these were having a negative influence on their happiness and wellbeing. Participants suggested ways in which the inspection process might be improved to better support them. For example, Yara asserts that the regulator has a duty to privilege the wellbeing of ECPs over its regulatory requirements. She states,

> *I think it's the wellbeing of the people really, I think rather than the requirements of the workforce itself from Ofsted. I think they need to look after the people, maybe in, you know, the organisations* (Yara, interview transcription, p. 11).

Second, ECPs felt there was a need for the regulator to support and value them, highlighting that the inspection process should be reformed to a more collaborative and supportive process. Several participants regarded the regulators' inspection process to be currently lacking in compassion and failing to appreciate their value.

Third, most of the participants called for change in response to the subjective nature of inspections. For example, Yara addresses the inspection framework, noting that decisions are made primarily based on the inspectors' personal

opinions of quality rather than the requirements outlined in the framework. Participants also believed that the pressure and fear associated with inspections had a direct impact on the reliability of inspectors' judgements. These acts of resistance (suggestions for regulatory reform), when viewed through the lens of post-structural theory, effectively, seek to redefine the role of the regulator, as participants are seen to acknowledge how truths contribute to the normalisation of discriminatory practices and how oppressive structures across their environment impact their wellbeing. The act of redefining the role of the regulator (that is, adjusting how they perceive the regulator), enables practitioners to confront, and attempt to reduce, its influence (MacNaughton, 2005).

The application of post-structural and feminist theory in this study has supported the uncovering of some deep-rooted disparities and injustices, evidenced by participants and identified in Chapter 5. The practitioners who participated in this study experienced the power of the regulator, but analysis of the data also suggests that through their acts of resistance, they aimed for transformative change. Such acts represent a notable advancement towards promoting principles of equality and fairness. However, for them to be successful, they need to influence both social and political contexts (MacNaughton, 2005).

This method of action, as mentioned, provides a means of challenging regulation and there are several examples from the data as to how participants move to transformative change as they admit to acts of resistance and disrupt the power exercised by the regulator by speaking back. For example, Abbie refers to her experience of regulatory inspection, highlighting the significant influence it held in attempting to undermine her professional status. She resists such efforts and asserts:

> *I swear down that will never happen to me again. I don't care whether the Ofsted inspector thinks I'm rude or not, I will bite their head off, so, yeah, they need to be speaking to people in a better way. Um, I think they belittle us and make us feel like we're absolute rubbish, when we do quite a lot in our day-to-day* (Abbie, journal, p. 13).

Yara criticises the adverse effects of the regulator's authority over the wellbeing of ECPs that causes them to leave the sector. She stresses the need for the regulator to examine its own standards, arguing,

> *It's putting people off, just to know that Ofsted could be coming. People are leaving the workplace because they feel, I can go somewhere else without that pressure. So, Ofsted, I think, they need to look into how Ofsted are checking their own regulations as well. We cannot sleep because we're so worried* (Yara, interview transcription, p. 7).

Maya critiques the regulator, arguing that its standards are not always beneficial for children. She adds that regulatory requirements divert ECPs from focusing on children's wellbeing and education. She states,

> *Because all the time, you know, we're thinking about Ofsted. All the time. And sometimes we do things because it's an Ofsted requirement that really isn't about the children. We've got to follow all of these requirements and evidence them, it just takes us away from the job that we should be doing, which is taking care of the wellbeing of everyone and educating the children* (Maya, interview transcription, p. 2).

Lastly, Bav raises the issue of the regulators' apparent lack of recognition or respect for the professional status of ECPs and speaks broadly around the authority that the regulator possesses over her entire organisation, emphasising the need for a more supportive system. She asserts,

> *The company is good, but they get stressed too, because of Ofsted. Ofsted need to be more supportive, they should help us and be understanding, some of them are really tough and harsh, like they want to see you fail. Some of them like having this power over you, like they're trying to trick you and make you feel inadequate. We need more support* (Bav, interview transcription, p. 2).

Similarly, Osgood (2010a) uses Foucault's notion of disciplinary technologies (Foucault 1977; 1979) to examine how practitioners across ECE in England are shaped into docile bodies in Government policy. ECPs, Osgood (2010a) asserts, operate within the discourse of an authoritative Government, with particular emphasis on the concept of professionalism, adding, however, that ECPs possess agency and are capable of actively reshaping, challenging and

engaging in discussions surrounding the discourses they are assigned to and categorised under by Government. For this study, participants shared their experiences and perspectives on regulation through journals and research interviews, and in so doing, exercised agency, as the research provided a protected space where they were free to voice their views outside the environment of disciplinary technologies. This activity enabled participants to defy regulatory scrutiny as they critically reflected upon the challenges associated with deep-rooted injustices and inequalities materialised throughout their daily lives, highlighting suggestions for reform (MacNaughton, 2005; Mikuska, 2023;). Osgood (2010a) highlights the importance of ECPs' ability to take action in institutional settings as they exhibit efficacy in altering, interrogating and actively engaging in discussions concerning the classifications and responsibilities enforced upon them. This feasible course of action provides the chance to challenge the regulator as they illustrate acts of resistance and disrupt the power exercised by the regulator by speaking back. In an earlier paper, Osgood (2006b) suggested research is needed to establish whether ECPs have accepted this challenge and use strategies to oppose regulatory structures in order to protect the integrity of their practice and knowledge. As Woods *et al.* (2005) emphasise, the regulator prioritises restricted conformity to its own framework rather than considering alternative perspectives on ECE. She asserts that by neglecting to consider the multiple perspectives of ECPs, the regulator disregards valuable prospects for improving the regulatory process. Therefore, it is crucial for ECPs to address their capacity to pursue truth within the systems of truths that have power over them, as ECPs have illustrated throughout this study (McNay, 1992) when they challenge and redefine the function of the regulator, suggesting areas for its reform (MacNaughton, 2005; Mikuska, 2023).

Post-structural theory provides possibilities for reimagining ways in which ECPs may disrupt the power of regulation. An effective strategy for accomplishing this goal involves employing the concept of parrhesia, as proposed by Foucault (1972). Parrhesia is the process of openly discussing and expressing alternative realities that are often not acknowledged or publicly supported (McNay, 1992). The inclusion of diverse perspectives enables us to generate new and unique perspectives that challenge the authority and power held by individuals in a

particular social sphere, such as the field of ECE (Foucault, 1988; Mikuska and Fairchild, 2020). The concept of parrhesia has been applied in this study; it enabled ECPs to openly express alternative realities about regulation that are not often acknowledged or publicly supported (McNay, 1992). Heterogeneous perspectives enable ECPs to generate innovative counterarguments in response to those who wield power and authority across the field of ECE (Foucault, 1988). Parrhesia, consequently, empowers ECPs to freely express their perspectives on regulation and openly critique authority. It acknowledges the agency and expertise of ECPs (McNay, 1992). Osgood (2006a) examines this in the context of professionalism as she explores the complex connection between professionalism and the construction of gendered identity. Her work focuses on the relationship between regulation and performance across early childhood settings in England, analysing an increase in regulation and growing demands across ECPs' performance. Osgood (2006a) examines how gender impacts identity, examining the possibility of using agency to reject or modify the prominent policy reform agenda across ECE in England.

Throughout this study, parrhesia has obliged the researcher, as leader/ practitioner, to consider the gendered viewpoints and perspectives of ECPs (Mikuska and Fairchild, 2020). This has entailed not only examining how individuals are subject to subtle exercises of authority, but also exploring their acts of defiance against such power dynamics even in the course of this research.

Furthermore, feminist theory, as a secondary theoretical lens, provides insights into the ways women ECPs, in particular, engage in acts of resistance and speak out for regulatory reform (Mikuska and Fairchild, 2020). According to Butler (1995), women's resistance is a form of opposition. No matter the practice we choose to participate in, and so submit ourselves to, we will resist. This resistance occurs during the process of normalisation that unfolds when we participate; furthermore, our innate reluctance to, effectively and consistently, engage in resistance will be revealed (Taguchi, 2005). The feminist, post-structuralist perspective lens reveals a need for moving beyond modernist structures and embracing a more profound comprehension of how people are both subjected to, and actively participate in, what Butler (1995) terms, 'subjectivity'. In this context, 'subjectivity' describes a complex interaction

between individuals exercising agency and their own ability to take action, illuminated by participants in this study as they disclose the diverse ways in which they have participated in micro acts of resistance. They express their grievances regarding the injustices imposed on them by the regulator, so exposing its authority. In addition, participants propose methods by which regulation might be reformed to enhance professional wellbeing. These examples illustrate how participants used their agency by actively engaging in 'subjectivity' by critiquing the regulator (Butler, 1995). Although the participants displayed their capacity to take action, the challenges they encountered in regularly and successfully participating in resistance became evident as the regulator exerted its authority over them. Comparable with Butler's (1990) concept of 'enacted fantasy' (in which the subject is seen to 'perform for', or 'comply with the 'ideal' behaviours imposed by' 'power'), these challenges align with Osgood (2006a) who describes the feelings of powerlessness in ECPs as they believe their attempts to resist the regulator will have little or no impact. Thus, ECPs feel compelled to adhere to demands of the regulator, which they perceive as essential for their professional success (Osgood, 2006a).

6.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, the research findings were revisited through the joint lenses of post-structural and feminist theory, revealing how regulation infiltrates the personal and professional lives of ECPs.

This chapter explored the influences on the professional lives of ECPs exerted by 'truths', as promoted by the regulator. Interpreting the role of regulation as a means of surveillance and investigating the exercise of power through regulatory procedures, it examined the consequences for professional wellbeing.

Post-structural theory was adopted as a means of engaging in critical reflection on how regulatory processes can be disrupted and reformed, and this was further examined through a feminist lens, offering a key perspective for understanding the experiences of the female participants in this study.

This chapter includes a rationale for the use of post-structural theory as a crucial analytical instrument in this thesis. The works of Foucault (1972; 1975; 1976a; 1976b; 1977; 1978; 1979; 1980a; 1980b; 1982; 1983; 1984; 1988; 1997)

have provided a valuable theoretical framework through which to view the findings. Applying Foucault's (1977) theory on disciplinary power has offered valuable insights into power structures across regulatory practices and the way they exercise control over institutions through the processes of regulation (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998) as experienced by participants in this study.

Viewing the operation of power dynamics through the lens of post-structuralism enables researchers in this field to not only critically examine oppressive behaviours, but also to interrogate them in seeking to establish environments that are fairer and empower professionals across ECE (Gutting, 2005). Participants in this study were observed effectively disrupting the power of regulation through the process of parrhesia (Foucault, 1972) as they presented alternate truths for their own settings; the notion of which is frequently overlooked and seldom acknowledged (McNay, 1992).

The feminist lens added its own critical perspective on the realities of the exclusively female participants in this study (Mikuska and Fairchild, 2020; Osgood, 2010a; 2012). Recognising power dynamics through a secondary feminist lens further deepened understanding of how ECPs are influenced by, and actively engage, in what Butler (1995) calls 'subjectivity', a process involving a complex interplay between individuals and their capacity for action.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

The motivation for this study emerged from the researcher's professional knowledge of the problematic ways in which early childhood practitioners (ECPs) across England are positioned by the regulator, that is, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). At the time of writing, there appeared to be no other empirical studies focused on the ways in which regulation affects the professional wellbeing of ECPs across early childhood education (ECE) in England (Early Years Alliance (EYA), 2023a). Furthermore, there is a lack of specific focus on the professional wellbeing of ECPs in the academic literature about ECE in England (Wong *et al.*, 2023; Roberts, 2022; Cumming, 2017).

This thesis argues that the wellbeing of the early years workforce across early childhood settings is essential in maintaining the quality of education and care provided to children (Shpancer *et al.*, 2008; Kusma *et al.*, 2012; Williamson *et al.*, 2011; Royer and Moreau, 2016). Furthermore, the dedication of ECPs positively impacts the lives of families, young children and their communities (Kwon *et al.*, 2021). This study shows that governments could address the causes of poor wellbeing for practitioners in relation to regulation and take action to enhance their wellbeing (Waters and McKee, 2022).

Further research is needed to examine specific aspects of wellbeing, such as the extent to which ECPs are valued across ECE policy (Gallagher and Roberts, 2022).

This study posits that not only is it ethical and beneficial to encourage employee wellbeing but entirely possible, as there are numerous examples of settings where practitioners report positive wellbeing. Advantages include ECPs' increased ability to positively impact children's lives and establish connections with them, which, in turn, results in ECPs experiencing a sense of worth and validation. Formalised support for wellbeing reinforces an act of commitment towards workers (Douglas-Osborn *et al.*, 2021). However, issues related to professional wellbeing and the impact on it by regulation are complex and multifactorial (Waters and McKee, 2022).

This small-scale study was designed to explore the professional wellbeing of nine ECPs in England through an interpretivist, qualitative research design, where data was collected through semi-structured interviews and weekly journals. This research explores the professional lives of ECPs working in day nurseries, specifically in relation to their professional wellbeing and the ways it is affected by processes of regulation. It offers insight into the experiences of the early years workforce in England as it privileges the voice of ECPs on their experiences and perspectives of professional wellbeing and the effects on it from regulation.

This chapter reflects on the theoretical framework applied in this study. The research questions are revisited, drawing together knowledge that emerged from the literature review, the analysis of the findings and the discussion to consider the contributions to new knowledge made by this research. This is followed by a reflection on the researcher's professional learning and the limitations of this study. Lastly, there are suggestions for further research and recommendations for policy and practice. The thesis concludes with a reflection on the outcomes and research process.

7.2 Concluding reflections on the application of post-structural and feminist theory

The post-structural theoretical framework of Foucault (1972; 1975; 1976a; 1976b; 1977; 1978; 1979; 1980a; 1980b; 1982; 1983; 1984; 1988;1997), initially, appeared detached from the practical domain of ECE as scholars across the field infrequently encounter his work or that of other post-structuralist academics (MacNaughton, 2005). However, post-structural theory has been used to analyse how policies and regulatory frameworks govern practice across ECE settings (MacNaughton, 2005) and the practical relevance of Foucault's ideas across ECE in England is acknowledged in this study. This recognition stemmed from the growing concerns emerging as a consequence of the integration of early childhood services and policies into the wider Education sector's regulating frameworks and systems of control (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998; MacNaughton, 2005).

Foucault's (1977) theory of disciplinary power provided a framework for analysis of the multiple methods of disciplinary power inherent across regulatory

practices in ECE. As reported by participants in this study, it revealed the oppressive practices that impact the professional wellbeing of ECPs (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998).

The decision to apply feminist theory as a secondary lens in this study emerged as a way to prioritise the perspectives and experiences of female ECPs and their positions surrounding regulation. Osgood's (2006a) research on the complex connection between professionalism and gendered identity constructs was inspirational, along with the scholarly writings of Butler, who adopts a post-structuralist and feminist perspective, significantly, incorporating the concepts of Foucault's (1997) disciplinary power (Butler, 1990; 1995; 1997). The primary objective of feminist inquiry is to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of female perspectives on the world and to promote liberation from societal constraints (Robson, 2002). These objectives align with the purpose of this research within the context of female ECPs and their experiences of regulation. Furthermore, Phelan (1990) asserts that Foucault lays the groundwork for a democratic structure by re-envisioning the concepts of freedom and individuality, which are crucial to feminist theory and practice.

Feminist theory also enabled a more profound understanding of regulatory power dynamics, including how ECPs are influenced and engage in subjectivity (Butler, 1995). It also facilitated an understanding of how ECPs demonstrate their ability to act, including the difficulties they face in consistently and effectively engaging in resistance as a result of the control exercised upon them by the regulator.

Thus, post-structural theory, as the main theoretical framework, supplemented by feminist theory as an additional lens, illuminate the voices of female ECPs in this study.

7.3 Revisiting the research questions

This study found that ECPs' encounters with regulation in England were having a detrimental effect on their professional wellbeing. ECPs reported that the system of regulation was problematic for them in their settings; for example, the regulatory criteria for sustaining ratios and qualifications were challenging. Practitioners also highlighted that the process of preparing for inspection and its anticipation significantly impacted on their wellbeing. Practitioners perceived

that Ofsted did not value them and that their wellbeing was not taken into account during inspections. Furthermore, ECPs believed that the regulator made subjective and inconsistent judgements regarding the quality of services. In response, ECPs implemented specific measures to minimise the effects of regulation on their wellbeing. The research questions that have guided the study are revisited alongside a summary of the main findings of the thesis, drawing together knowledge from the literature review, analysis of findings and theoretical discussion.

7.3.1 Research question 1: How do early childhood practitioners understand the concept of professional wellbeing?

Participants in this study understood professional wellbeing as an expansive and holistic concept that covered both physical and mental wellbeing. Practitioners' understanding of professional wellbeing aligned with the research conducted by Schaack *et al.* (2020), Walter *et al.* (2023) and Roberts *et al.* (2023), all of whom identify professional wellbeing as a multifaceted, multi-dimensional concept. Indeed, McMullen *et al.* (2020) define wellbeing as an expansive notion that incorporates all facets of our existence. Personal views on their concepts of wellbeing were collected from participants in this study, yet during the data analysis phase, it proved challenging to formulate a clear definition of wellbeing that encompassed the range of perspectives the participants offered. Cumming and Wong (2019) and Lloyd (2015) argue that the lack of a universally accepted definition of professional wellbeing is further complicated by its dynamic nature and, in the case of this study, its dependence on the broader ECE structure. An important question here is whether practitioners' comprehension of professional wellbeing could be influenced by the broader ECE sector and how definitions might evolve over time. However, addressing this question is beyond the scope of this small-scale exploratory study.

The perspectives expressed by participating practitioners were unique to them and specific to their working environments and family situations; however, despite the diverse circumstances, all made interconnections between personal and professional wellbeing. This aligns with the findings of Cumming and Wong (2020) who concluded that wellbeing, within the context of ECE in England, is in

a constantly changing state, and confirming the work of Schaack *et al.* (2020), Walter *et al.* (2023) and Roberts *et al.* (2023), who emphasise the importance of conducting further research to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the lives of ECPs. They suggest that research should examine both internal and external factors that influence personal and professional wellbeing and explore how they are interconnected.

In relation to this interconnection, participants found themselves in a continuous state of colonisation as a result of the regulators' powerful position, which Foucault (1977) describes as disciplinary power. Thus, it created a culture of fear in both their personal and professional lives as they worked towards obtaining a positive inspection grading. Participants, therefore, perceived regulatory power as a constant intrusion, affecting their professional and personal lives and their wellbeing (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998). Practitioners' experiences align with Osgood's (2010a) assertion that ECPs are subject to a "regulatory gaze" (Osgood, 2010a, p. 1) in order to fulfil the standards determined by the regulator.

Practitioners, in the journals and the semi-structured interviews, relived the individual difficulties they experienced in sustaining their own professional wellbeing. The findings concur with previous studies that highlight the challenges faced by ECPs associated with regulation (Cullingford, 1999; Day, 2012), recruitment pressures (Avinash, 2019), lack of support and workload (Cameron, Owen and Moss, 2001; Children's Workforce and Development Council, 2006). These challenges had a negative impact on the professional wellbeing of all the ECPs interviewed, leading many to consider resigning from their jobs as they sought relief from the pressures (Kim and Kim, 2010; Manlove and Guzell, 1997; Montgomery and Rupp, 2005). This study's findings reflect the argument that ECE institutions are seen as systems of discipline that use various strategies to impose authority over ECPs (Mikuska and Fairchild, 2020), thus colonising their personal and professional lives (MacNaughton, 2005).

This research found that ECPs with leadership responsibilities felt a sense of duty to maintain the professional wellbeing of their teams and this aspect of leadership is often overlooked in models or frameworks of leadership (Cumming and Wong, 2019). All the leaders in this study's sample took on the responsibility of safeguarding the professional wellbeing of their teams and

implemented measures in their respective environments, frequently disregarding their own wellbeing at the expense of their team. They highlighted their concerns surrounding poor wellbeing and its impact on ECPs' ability to handle the pressures of their positions (Kwon *et al.*, 2021; McLean *et al.*, 2017). Practitioners described the detrimental impact of Covid-19 on their professional wellbeing, in which ECPs in leadership roles carried a significant burden to ensure the wellbeing of practitioners across their nurseries both during and after the pandemic (Trauernicht *et al.*, 2023; Beauchamp *et al.*, 2021). This study's findings were consistent with the research conducted by Dabrovsky (2020) and Rodríguez *et al.* (2022), who indicate that the initial outbreak of the pandemic had a significant impact on the entire ECE sector. One surprising observation of the data was that leaders did not express any concerns regarding the impact of Covid-19 on their own professional wellbeing.

7.3.2 Research question 2: How, in their view, is professional wellbeing affected by the current regulatory processes in England?

Practitioners experienced the power of the regulator and reported that it often had a detrimental effect on their professional wellbeing. ECPs reported that they found the regulatory standards for maintaining ratios and qualifications challenging and emphasised the stress they associated with anticipation of, and preparation for inspection. They asserted that the regulator did not appreciate their worth and failed to consider their wellbeing throughout inspections. ECPs also perceived that the regulator exhibited subjective and inconsistent assessments regarding the quality of their nurseries. As a means of responding, ECPs adopted specific strategies to mitigate the impact of regulation upon their wellbeing. The findings of this study align with the work of Jeffery and Woods (1998), who argue that regulatory inspections de-professionalise individuals, and Power (1997), who contends that educational professionals encounter difficulties as a result of the lack of faith placed upon them by authority. Moreover, the results of this study correspond with Chapman (2002) and Brown's (2000) contentions that ECPs regard the regulator's auditing strategy as an adverse process.

ECPs in this study mitigated the impaction of regulation and inspection by putting in place specific arrangements to support their own professional

wellbeing. Aligning with Foucault (1976b), these arrangements are recognised as 'acts of resistance' as ECPs seek new truths, taking action against the authority and the 'truths' exerted over them (McNay, 1992). Acts of resistance included role-playing, practice inspections, mutual support, engaging and reassuring approaches, and introducing designated positions across the organisation to mentor and support settings prior to inspection. Thus, ECPs displayed their ability to take action by actively engaging in subjectivity, as they resisted the power of the regulator through implementing plans of action (Butler, 1995).

Participants' actions to mitigate the impact of regulation also correspond with previous research finding that the inspection process increases stress and anxiety (Grey and Wilcox, 1995; Jeffrey and Woods, 1996), creates uncertainty (Richards, 2001) generates increased workload (Chapman, 2002; Day, 2012) and impacts the wellbeing of ECPs (Mikuska, 2021). Consequently, practitioners' efforts to support their professional wellbeing align with Hargreaves' definition of inspection as a form of "colonising life" as the preparations for inspection disturb the daily personal routines of ECPs (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 113). This process of colonisation aligns with the research conducted by Jeffrey and Woods (1998), who employed Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power to demonstrate the role of inspectors within the regulatory framework in England. This form of power aims to structure institutions in specific ways and cultivate individuals who are skilled, productive and disciplined. Practitioners perceived the consequences of their decrease in authority as a steady encroachment on several aspects of their life, including their professional and personal lives, their wellbeing, principles and individual traits (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998).

This form of surveillance, one of the eight micro practices of power (Gore, 1998), and emphasised by Foucault as the "normalising gaze" and "the examination", acted to construct an efficient framework in making ECPs visible (Foucault, 1977, p. 184). Furthermore, the concept of 'normalisation' (Gore, 1998) aligned with the challenges participants encountered whilst endeavouring to comply with the criteria specified in the regulators' inspection handbook (Ofsted, 2023d). Participants faced additional pressure as they strove to accomplish a positive inspection outcome, in line with Gore's (1988) concept of

totalisation, where established truths created incentives and produce an inclination for compliance. Participants, thus, depended on the regulatory framework as a criterion that guided their practice and defined their standard of conformity (Ofsted, 2023d; DfE, 2023a). As a consequence, they faced the further challenge of avoiding the adverse outcomes associated with being labelled as inadequate (Jeffery and Woods, 1998). These findings imply that nurseries must enforce regulations as a means of discipline. The regulators' authoritative position, therefore, turns nurseries into institutions driven by fear, which dominates and regulates the personal and professional wellbeing of ECPs as they work towards fulfilling its demands (Fairchild and Mikuska, 2021; Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021).

7.3.3 Research question 3: How might early childhood practitioners' wellbeing be sustained in the future?

In this study, participants believed that ECE regulation in England would likely be transformed to improve their professional wellbeing. They presented proposals for changes to policy, with a particular emphasis on addressing not only regulation but also the broader ECE system. Participants believed that receiving greater acknowledgment for their work would enhance their professional wellbeing, aligning with Gallagher and Roberts (2022) who emphasise the need for further research exploring ECPs' wellbeing within the context of how they are valued across ECE.

Lloyd (2010), Archer (2020), Osgood (2006a; 2006b) and Fairchild (2021) clarify the significant impact Government has on shaping the professionalism of ECPs as it holds the power to professionalise and value them. Participants suggested that public funding could be restructured to raise pay for employees and provide additional incentives, in line with Avinash (2019) and Bonetti (2020) who confirm that one of the challenges expressed by the ECE sector across England is the lack of financial incentives for ECPs to join or remain in the workforce. In support of this, Totenhagen *et al.* (2016) emphasise the tendency of ECPs, dissatisfied with their position due to low earnings, to seek alternative, more satisfying opportunities. Ghazvini and Mullis (2002) agree that salaries and availability of resources significantly impact ECPs' attitudes and the quality of care they deliver.

ECPs suggested reducing the bureaucratic demand linked to policy implementation and regulation and this is backed by Mahony and Hextall (2001) who propose that a reduction in bureaucracy associated with regulation could reduce the risk of colonisation by the regulator and address ECPs' fears surrounding loss of professional independence and wellbeing. Finally, participants expressed how the act of inspection could be modified to improve professional wellbeing for ECPs, and this is addressed below.

This study revealed three specific areas where regulation could be reformed, as determined by its participants. First, participants highlighted the importance of adjusting regulatory inspection procedures to consider their wellbeing. Their perspectives were consistent with the argument of Waters and McKee (2022), who argued that the regulator should openly acknowledge its responsibility to protect the wellbeing of ECPs. Second, participants emphasised the need not only for support of practitioners in the nurseries but also, overt recognition of their value. They suggested the need for a reformation of the inspection process to one of collaboration and support, as participants expressed that the existing inspection process lacks compassion and fails to acknowledge the worth of ECPs. The participants' call for reform aligns with Case, Case and Catling (2000) who advocate supportive and engaging measures across inspections to enhance the quality of education in a spirit of positive collaboration. Third, participants emphasised a need for reform in regard to the subjective nature of inspections. They argued that Ofsted evaluations were driven by inspectors' personal views on quality, rather than framework requirements. The issue of subjectivity aligns with Earley *et al.* (1998), Fitz-Gibbon (1998) and Grey and Gardner (1999), who highlight that regulating inspectors are susceptible to external influences and possess their own distinct viewpoints, which leads to biases and inconsistencies across inspection. Participants reported that the pressure and fear associated with inspections directly impacted their performance, which impacted the accuracy of the inspector's one-word judgements. Suggestions for reform, made by participants in this study are, in themselves, acts of resistance and an attempt to redefine the role of the regulator (Osgood, 2010a; Mikuska, 2023). Participants recognised how 'truths' contributed to the normalisation of regulatory practices, and how oppressive

regulatory practices embedded in the early childhood sector, ultimately, influenced their wellbeing (MacNaughton, 2005).

Through parrhesia (fearless speech) (Foucault, 1972), participants demonstrated their agency by actively critiquing the regulator and making suggestions for regulatory reform (Butler, 1995). Participants, consequently, presented alternative truths of power in relation to their experience of regulation and the impact it had upon their professional wellbeing (McNay, 1992). Wood (2019) fuels this argument as she urges educators to engage in critical perspectives and opposing the influence of the regulator. Wood (2017) urges both ECPs and researchers to engage in critical dialogue to make meaning from their experiences through the lenses of larger social and political structures that govern the environments in which they practice.

By reimagining the function of the regulator, participants were able to successfully challenge its power and endeavour to diminish it (MacNaughton, 2005). Participants in this study demonstrated their ability to resist, as their suggestions for reform sought to minimise the power of the regulator. These attempts align with Osgood's (2006a) examination of how gender affects the formation of identity, as she explores how agency may be employed to reject or modify the powerful agenda for policy reform across ECE. Osgood (2010a) highlights the ability that ECPs possess to exert influence and participate in the discourses that the Government assigns them to and categorises them under. Mikuska (2023), additionally, emphasises the potential of ECPs in realigning the ECE workforce.

The ECPs in this study developed a more profound understanding of themselves as skilled professionals as they articulated perspectives of their identity formation across this research (Goodfellow, 2001; 2003). However, despite demonstrating their ability to resist and speak out against the regulator, the participants' difficulties in consistently and effectively engaging in resistance became apparent as a consequence of the regulators' power over them. These difficulties are similar to Butler's (1990) definition of enacted fantasy. According to Osgood (2006a), this concept relates to the hopelessness that participants experienced, since they anticipated that their attempts to oppose the regulator would be ineffective or even harmful to their careers. As a consequence, the

participants believed that complying with regulatory requirements was necessary for their professional security (Osgood, 2006a).

7.4 Contributions to knowledge

The literature review identified a gap in empirical research that specifically examines the ways in which regulation impacts the wellbeing of professionals across ECE in England. Nevertheless, a recent study by Waters and McKee (2022) examines the broader role of the regulator across education and poses important questions regarding the regulatory process, including its effects on teachers. There also exist empirical studies by Drake (2014), Jeffrey and Woods (1998) and Case, Case, and Catling (2000) relating to the effects of workloads, stress and psychological pressures on teachers across primary schools in England, which specifically examine the role of the regulator and its influence. Furthermore, Osgood (2006b) explores the impact of regulatory frameworks, specifically on professionalism, as she argues that regulatory structures can lead to ECPs conforming to dominant notions of professionalism, while also restricting their autonomy through its "regulatory gaze" (Osgood, 2006a, p. 5). ECPs' experiences concerning regulation are documented in surveys conducted in England between 2018 and 2023 (Pre-School Learning Alliance (PSLA), 2018; Nursery World, 2023c; Early Years Alliance (EYA), 2023a), reported in Chapter 1 of this thesis, demonstrate the need for specific research into the professional wellbeing of ECPs and their experiences of regulation.

The main contribution of this thesis is in extending knowledge of professional wellbeing as it is experienced by ECPs. This study extends the academic literature in relation to professional wellbeing and regulation in England. It provides an analysis of the lived experiences of women ECPs working in day nurseries. This research also contributes to knowledge through its investigation of the complex ways in which ECPs' lives are governed by micro practices of power embedded in the processes of regulation and gives visibility to the acts of resistance by ECPs, amplifying their voice as they make suggestions for reform. Finally, this research provides an insight into the ways in which ECPs support their own professional wellbeing.

7.5 Reflections on professional learning from the researcher

This research has provided an opportunity for me to explore the influence of the regulator on the professional wellbeing of ECPs through a disciplined, empirical study – my only previous exposure to the subject having been my own professional and personal experience. From an academic, personal and professional perspective, I consider myself further empowered in actively addressing and voicing my concerns surrounding injustices throughout the field of ECE. This research has served to further illuminate the injustices of the regulatory system in England and their consequent impact on the personal and professional wellbeing of ECPs. The application of parrhesia (Foucault, 1972) in this study has not only given visibility to conditions for ECPs and amplified their voice, but also, brought to the fore my own, academic voice. I feel confident in presenting alternate perspectives of regulation that are often disregarded or not officially acknowledged (McNay, 1992). These perspectives relate to my experience as a nursery manager/owner, as I have highlighted the oppressive systems placed upon me and the ECPs in my nursery, more specifically, in relation to my recent Ofsted inspection. My adverse personal encounters with the regulator emphasised the significance of this study with the hope of inspiring practitioners who may have encountered similar experiences. Furthermore, the discussions I now hold with colleagues in my nursery invite them to explore pedagogical concepts that may be alternative to Ofsted-defined practice. I additionally aim to empower the team, acknowledging that they possess comprehensive knowledge of our nursery environment, instilling confidence in them throughout regulatory inspections to substantiate their practices and positively challenge inspectors who may hold opposing views.

My position as a researcher has enabled me to contribute to symposiums highlighting the issues of structural injustice that surround the ECE sector within the context of regulation, professional wellbeing and beyond. My personal experiences of regulation further enabled me to reflect on my own positionality throughout this research, which was examined and deliberated throughout regular research supervision meetings. An example of parrhesia (Foucault, 1972) within my personal life was my contribution to national radio

regarding existing debates surrounding the reliability of the regulator and its impact upon the wellbeing of educational professionals. These debates have further extended to conversations with family and friends, unaware of the existing pressures surrounding regulation and the role of the regulator.

The works of Osgood (2006) and Mikuska (2023) have been of significant inspiration throughout my doctoral journey as I concur with their arguments that ECPs who are perceptive and critical of current discourses hold the potential to redefine their professional identities, opening up the possibility of change and restructure. It has prompted me to consider how my skills as both a practitioner and researcher may be employed to assist ECPs in becoming more proactive and assertive in redefining and challenging the role of the regulator.

7.6 Limitations of the study

The first major limitation of this exploratory study relates to sample size. The intention was to involve a total of twelve participants, but in the event, only nine were recruited. Finding volunteers to participate in this study proved challenging due to the existing responsibilities of practitioners. Moreover, this research was carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic, which added to the difficulties (Dabrovsky, 2020; Rodríguez *et al.,* 2022). Over and above this, there were external variables including Governmental frameworks, regulatory requirements, support mechanisms and advisory policies (Beauchamp *et al*., 2021) that contribute to the workload of ECPs.

Another limitation of this study is that the contributing ECPs were all employed within one institution, which meant that there was little to no variation in professional setting across the sample.

The third limitation relates to the balance in the sample between those in formal leadership roles and practitioners with no leadership responsibilities. The involvement of leader practitioners played a vital role across this study, as leaders possess a broader overview of their settings, know all the practitioners employed, and are much more instrumental in decisions regarding pedagogical practices adopted at the nursery (McCrea, 2015). Moreover, the leadership and development team play crucial roles in attaining regulatory requirements across their settings, making their perspectives and experiences crucial to this research. Therefore, without the perspectives of leaders, it would be difficult to

gain a comprehensive picture of inspection and regulation in ECE. The intention was to recruit a combination of ECPs and those in formal leadership roles; however, the final sample mainly consisted of ECPs with leadership roles, with only one participant who was a practitioner without these responsibilities. Whilst the inclusion of ECPs with leadership roles was essential for this study, the perspectives of practitioners without these responsibilities are just as valuable and should not be disregarded.

A final limitation of this study relates to the review of the literature (as described in Chapter 3). There was very little academic material that specifically focused on the professional wellbeing of ECPs within the context of the regulatory framework in England throughout the course of the literature search, which, though it identified a gap (and, therefore, an opportunity to add meaningfully to the body of knowledge), nevertheless meant that it was hard to underpin the findings of this study with the directly comparable observations of peers.

7.7 Suggestions for further research

Due to the absence of existing literature surrounding ECPs' experiences of regulation and its implications for professional wellbeing, a larger-scale empirical study is needed to further explore this across a wider area. Furthermore, as highlighted by Schaack *et al.* (2020), additional study is necessary to provide a more exhaustive understanding of the experiences of ECPs in relation to the interconnection between their personal and professional wellbeing. Given the challenge of articulating a precise and all-encompassing definition of professional wellbeing, this study additionally revealed that further exploration into professional wellbeing is required in order to understand how ECPs experience it and how it could be impacted by the wider ECE sector in England. The sample should involve a range of practitioners, including those with leadership roles and those without, across a variety of early childhood institutions. Such a study might consider how understandings of professional wellbeing might shift over time or be specific to a context. As Cumming and Wong (2019) and Lloyd (2015) contend, the absence of a universally acknowledged definition of professional wellbeing among all ECPs is further compounded by the ever-changing nature of professional wellbeing and its reliance on the wider structure of ECE.

Further research might also examine the internal and external factors that impact on professional wellbeing in early childhood practice contexts. Additional investigation should, therefore, build upon this research, which already establishes the interconnectedness between the personal and the professional wellbeing of ECPs.

7.8 Suggestions for policy and practice reform

Findings from this study indicate a need for policy reform to promote and sustain the professional wellbeing of ECPs across the ECE workforce in England. Therefore, an aspect of Government policy could be targeted towards public education, in order to raise awareness of the significant work of the ECE sector. Reforms should focus on providing greater awareness and acknowledgement of the roles of ECPs, including changes to professionalise and acknowledge their value.

Financial incentives for ECPs should be increased, including enhanced public funding across the ECE sector to support nurseries and enable them to attract and retain high-quality practitioners. With regard to regulatory reforms, this study identified four distinct areas. First, regulatory inspection procedures should more effectively consider the wellbeing of ECPs as practitioners currently experience a detrimental impact. Second, there is a need for the regulator to acknowledge and overtly value the work of ECPs, as practitioners report the existing system as failing to recognise their worth. A potential solution could involve eliminating the singular word judgements, which hold the potential of negatively labelling both nursery settings and the practitioners operating within them. Additionally, the culture and tone of regulatory procedures must be reformed to become more collaboratively supportive, as ECPs report that the current inspection procedures lack collegiate empathy. A collaborative approach should involve inspectors working in conjunction with practitioners in a constructive manner to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the setting guided by the practitioners themselves. Finally, an overall reduction in the bureaucratic components associated with regulation should be implemented to support ECPs' workload. Findings from this study indicate the need for urgent reform of policy related to regulation of the sector. Changes are therefore required to ensure ECPs are acknowledged as knowledgeable persons about

their work; their insight and the status of this knowledge should therefore be valued in the reform of the regulatory framework.

In relation to practice improvements across the field of ECE in England, further strategies should be implemented in nurseries to enhance and maintain the professional wellbeing of ECPs. These support strategies should include an increased focus on leaders, who, as this research revealed, are responsible for the professional wellbeing of their teams, often at the expense of their own.

Specific research within this context could, therefore, focus on how leaders promote the professional wellbeing of their team and additionally sustain professional wellbeing of the self, with the aim of implementing effective and supportive strategies. This suggestion aligns with Roberts *et al.* (2023) who advocate an improvement in ECPs' wellbeing by adopting a person-centred approach. Roberts *et al.* (2023) emphasise the significance of psychological wellbeing, specifically focusing on self-care and self-compassion, as key areas to consider for organisational and systemic change endeavours or strategies, whilst simultaneously highlighting the need for further exploration into the wellbeing of ECPs as the implications for this go well beyond the immediate benefits to the ECPs.

7.9 Concluding statement

This exploratory study found that ECPs' experiences of regulation had an adverse impact on their professional and personal wellbeing. It further revealed that practitioners experienced the use of authority through the procedures of control by the regulator, which had consequences for professional wellbeing across their nurseries. Nevertheless, this study found that opportunities do exist for practitioners and other early years professionals to recognise and understand how truths and disciplinary power are deployed through systems of regulation. These opportunities include conducting research and engagement in academic studies intended to oppose and destabilise dominant constructs and discourses (Osgood, 2010a). Engaging in further academic study across ECE is of the utmost importance, as Foucault (1983) highlights, without continuous investigation, discourses are hazardous. Continued investigation and reflective study are, therefore, required in order to establish, re-examine and re-evaluate regulation and its impact upon the professional wellbeing of ECPs across ECE.

As Osgood (2006a) indicates, astute professionals who contest and question existing conditions, including the poor quality of work conditions and poor recognition, can, potentially, present the opportunity for reshaped professional identities and counter-discourses. One approach to achieving this objective is through parrhesia, as defined by Foucault (Foucault, 1972), which pertains to the act of participating in open dialogue with the purpose of exposing alternative facts that are typically not acknowledged or formally approved (McNay, 1992) as ECPs engage in subjectivity (Butler, 1995). In this study, parrhesia supported the process of providing alternative truths about regulation that are typically overlooked or not formally accepted (McNay, 1992). The exploration of alternative truths, therefore, facilitates the development of new and contrasting truths about power and authority within the context of regulation and its impact upon the professional wellbeing of ECPs.

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Appendices

Appendix Ia: Micro practices of power

Surveillance

Surveillance, in this context, pertains to a state – or anticipation – of being under close observation and scrutiny, particularly in connection to specific truths. For example, an ECP who anticipates intensive observation and supervision from individuals who uphold the notion that outstanding pedagogical approaches correspond to practices defined by the regulatory framework (Ofsted, 2023d) in England. ECPs subject to surveillance may demonstrate behaviours that are in line with the predefined requirements of the regulator (Hargreaves,1994).

Normalisation

Normalisation refers to the act of evaluating, invoking, necessitating or adhering to a norm that articulates specific realities pertaining to various aspects of human development, such as child development. For example, an ECP may feel compelled to observe and contrast children's behaviours against established standards of development within the inspection handbook, which outlines children's expected behaviours and personal development (Ofsted, 2023d).

Classification

Classification is the process of using truths to distinguish and categorise what is considered high-quality practice. Guidance and frameworks issued by Government agencies are often given preferential treatment, becoming the agreed 'authorities' on what is considered high-quality practice (DfE, 2023a) while other approaches are marginalised or excluded. The privileging of specific knowledges can be seen as a mechanism of control, shaping and regulating early childhood practice by determining what is accepted as 'good' or 'outstanding' and governing influence over the practice of practitioners (Wells, 1981; Alloway, 1997; Cannella, 1997; MacNaughton, 2000).

Exclusion

Exclusion refers to the use of factual information to delineate the parameters of what is considered conventional, thereby determining the inclusion or exclusion

of specific modes of existence as either favourable or unfavourable, ultimately leading to the characterisation of exclusion. For example, an ECP who adheres to developmental principles may perceive non-developmental principles as unsuitable or incorrect, leading to their rejection. Principles that educational institutions and childcare providers are required to adhere to in order to ensure the educational, developmental and caregiving needs of children between the ages of birth and five years in England are, therefore, outlined as statutory and prioritised (DfE, 2023a).

Distribution

Distribution refers to the process of using certain truths in order to determine the arrangement and rating of individuals in a given space. The act of assigning ratings to practitioners and institutions renders them measurable, making them susceptible to disciplinary actions. One example, in this case, is the vocabulary used in inspection reports, namely the inclusion of the term 'inadequate'. Furthermore, it has been suggested that such language, intended to describe institutions that are not meeting expectations, may also be applied to assess individuals (Case, Case and Catling, 2000).

Individualisation

Individualisation involves the use of truths to distinguish and differentiate between people. For example, as discussed above, the terminology used to evaluate underperforming institutions can also be deployed in the evaluation of practitioners, as their practice impacts upon the rating of the institution (Case, Case and Catling, 2000).

Totalisation

Totalisation refers to the process of using established truths to generate a desire or inclination to comply. For example, practitioners regard regulatory frameworks as a truth; it defines their own practice and the practice of others. These frameworks and statutory requirements establish the criteria that all providers of ECEC must adhere to in England (Ofsted, 2023d; DfE, 2023a).

Regulation

Regulation refers to the act of exerting influence over individuals' thoughts and actions by employing established truths and principles, typically through the implementation of standards and the imposition of repercussions or incentives (Gore, 1998). For example, Woods *et al.* (2005) argue that the regulator privileges a strict adherence to its specific perspective, as opposed to engaging in a thoughtful and flexible exploration of alternative perspectives on education. By failing to consider alternative worldviews, the regulator, potentially, overlooks significant opportunities for improving practice. In this context, practitioners work alongside the criteria set by the regulator to avoid the repercussions of an 'inadequate' judgement (Jeffery and Woods, 1998).

Appendix Ib: Gatekeeper letter

My name is Leonie and I am currently studying for a Doctorate in Education. As part of the course, I am conducting a study, which identifies the experiences of regulatory processes for early childhood practitioners' and how this affects their wellbeing in day nurseries.

I would like to invite you to take part in my research project, which I am completing as part of my professional studies at the University of East London, subject to the approval of the University of East London's Ethics Committee.

I am writing to ask your permission to share this letter in order to seek research participants who have had over two years' experience in their role as well as experienced a recent inspection of a nursery (within two years). Participants also include those with management responsibilities.

Please read this information carefully, and if you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me on the details at the end of this letter. Thank you for reading this.

What is the research project about?
My research aims to gather views and experiences of regulatory processes within nurseries and how this affects practitioners' wellbeing. It is hoped that the findings will contribute to my thesis.

This is an independent research project overseen by my tutors at UEL, and not an evaluation on behalf of Ofsted. Anything that is shared with me will be used purely for the research purposes stated above.

Research participant criteria:
I hope to interview twelve participants across four early years nurseries within your institution. For each nursery, there will be two early childhood practitioners and one with management responsibilities, all of who have had over two years' experience in their role as well as experienced a recent inspection of a nursery (within two years). In addition, I will be inviting each participant to keep a short, weekly reflective journal over a period of six months. What will taking part involve?

Interviews

Semi-structured Interview

I hope to speak to twelve participants in order to conduct twelve individual semi-structured interviews.

and Journals	In order to offer comfort and flexibility, participants will be provided with a choice on how they wish the interview to be conducted. Interviews can take place either face to face at a public place (such as a café) or online via teams or telephone.
	The interview is expected to take up to one hour.
	Journals
	I will be inviting each participant to keep a short, weekly reflective journal over a period of six months. The journal will be used to further allow participants to highlight their individual experiences and be used as a discussion tool throughout the interview.
	Participants will be provided with a choice on the preferred mode, journals can be conducted through audio voice notes or written emails, all of which will be stored on a password protected platform. Participants will be provided with a short guide before they start the journal.

What are the possible advantages or disadvantages and risks of taking part?
I understand that professionals have busy schedules, and the interview will, obviously, be taking up a significant amount of time, for which I am grateful. I hope that participants will find it worthwhile to share their own experiences with me. By taking part in this study, they will be supporting me in meeting the needs of my thesis and contributing to new research within the field of early childhood practitioners' wellbeing.

Thank you for reading this letter and for considering taking part in this research study. Could you please kindly email me at my university email address listed below to confirm that you are willing to share this letter with your employees and if any would like to take part in this study.

Yours faithfully,
Leonie Butler
Email:U0605314@uel.ac.uk

Appendix II: Topic guide and questions

Example

Semi-structured interview questions

1) Can you tell me about your experience of regulation?
2) What are your thoughts on regulatory processes in nurseries?
3) How do you ensure all requirements are met?
4) How do you manage your workload?
5) How do you manage your own professional wellbeing?
6) What practices do you have in place to support wellbeing across your nursery?
7) Could you make any suggestions on how your professional wellbeing could be supported/sustained?

Topic guide

Thank you for taking part in this research project. This study, seeks to identify your experiences of regulation and how it may potentially affect your professional wellbeing.

The purpose of this research

My research aims to gather your views and experiences of regulatory processes within nurseries and how it may affect your wellbeing. It is hoped that the findings will contribute to my thesis.

This is an independent research project overseen by my tutors at UEL, and not an evaluation on behalf of OFSTED. Anything that is shared with me will be used purely for the research purposes stated above.

Points of reflection:

The aim of my study is to explore the experiences of early childhood practitioners working in day nurseries and how they manage their wellbeing within the context of statutory regulation. The study is guided by your experiences and perspectives of the following questions:

1. **How do you understand the concept of professional wellbeing?**
2. **How, in your view, is professional wellbeing affected by current regulatory processes in England?**
3. **How might your wellbeing be sustained in the future?**

Your involvement

Semi- structured Interview & Journals

Interviews

In order to offer comfort and flexibility, you are provided with a choice on how you wish this interview to be conducted. Interviews can take place either face to face at a public place (such as a café) or online via teams or telephone.

The interview is expected to take up to one hour.

Journals

I will be inviting you to keep a short, weekly reflective journal over a period of four months. The journal will be used to further allow you to highlight your individual experiences and be used as a discussion tool throughout the interview.

You are provided with a choice on the preferred mode, journals can be conducted through audio voice notes or written emails, all of which will be stored on a password protected platform.

Yours faithfully,

Leonie Butler

Email:U0605314@uel.ac.uk

Appendix III: List of codes and an example of coded data

List of Codes:

1. **Agency**	13. **Qualifications**
2. **Covid-19**	14. **Recognition**
3. **Diversity**	15. **Recruitment**
4. **Facilities**	16. **Regulation**
5. **Funding**	17. **Retention**
6. **Morale**	18. **Sickness**
7. **Parents**	19. **Staffing**
8. **Passion**	20. **Support**
9. **Pay**	21. **Tiredness**
10. **Personal wellbeing**	22. **Value**
11. **Pressure**	23. **Workload**
12. **Professional wellbeing**	

Code	Participant	Quote	Interpretative notes	Possible theme
Agency	H	"we're looking at more agency staff. We can't rely on the team that we've got because they're absolutely exhausted as I am. You can't get through the day or night wondering if we're going to have a full team in and that team just about meets the ratio and meets the requirements for level 3 staff members. You can't have apprentices running the rooms that we've got here. We're looking at agency staff members that will cover full time, that they'll be here as long as we need them. Page 7- Journal	Practitioners are exhausted. Practitioners worry about meeting ratio requirements. Practitioners worry about meeting qualification requirements. Unqualified learners are required to lead at times. There is a need for agency staff to cover nurseries full time.	Practitioners are exhausted. Practitioners are worried about meeting ratio requirements. Practitioners are worried about meeting the level 3 staffing requirements. Apprentices are required to lead the rooms at times. Agency staff are required

				to cover full time.
Covid-19	C	"I've observed coming back from COVID is the impact that Covid has had on staff members personal, social, emotional development. I've never worked in a nursery where I've had such high number of staff members who's emotional wellbeing needs extensive support." Page 5- Interview transcript	Covid-19 has affected practitioners' wellbeing. Practitioners' emotional wellbeing requires extensive support following Covid-19.	Covid-19 impacted practitioners' wellbeing. The emotional wellbeing of practitioners requires extensive support following covid-19.
Diversity	A	"In all the inspections I've had two I've had the most issues with. I did not feel valued or understood and they were sadly both white in that area. I've lived there and worked there but never again, I'm always happier in a richly diverse setting and area. Also, interesting in this job,	Practitioners do not feel valued by Ofsted. Ofsted inspectors lack diversity.	Practitioners do not feel valued or understood by inspectors. Ofsted inspectors are not representative of the diverse communities they inspect.

		have you noticed there are no male inspectors in OFSTED." Page 14- Journal		
Facilities	A	"I think something needs to be looked at within early years and heat conditions. A lot of staff were really struggling with the heat, but there's nothing against staff having shorter days or something. You know, a lot of the nurseries have not got air conditioning units in. I think our local authority, they're looking to put them in for the company, I don't know if it's the whole local authority. But, yeah, some of the facilities are just ridiculously too hot, um, so yeah, the children still have energy, despite it being so hot and sweaty. The working conditions for hot	Practitioners work in hot conditions. Practitioners are struggling with the heat. Practitioners work usual hours during extreme heat. Nursery buildings are very hot. Working conditions are poor for practitioners working in heat. Local authorities are trying to support nurseries with	Heat conditions are difficult for practitioners to work in. Practitioners struggle with the heat. Practitioners are required to work usual hours during extreme heat. Nursery buildings are very hot. Working conditions are poor for hot weather.

		weather, I mean, it's going to get worse every year, so, I don't know what's going to happen, but some rooms were 31 degrees, you know, that's just mad isn't it really. It's bad enough in your house when it's hot, let alone, the children running around, you're trying to keep them busy, keep them happy." Page 7- Journal	air conditioning. Some rooms were 31 degrees. Practitioners work hard to keep children cool and happy.	The local authority try to support nurseries with air conditioning. Some rooms were 31 degrees. Practitioners work hard to keep children happy and cool when they are hot themselves.
Funding	B	"more funding for the nurseries so they can get good staff and pay people more." Page 2- Interview transcript	Early years isn't receiving enough funding. Poor pay reflects the quality of staffing. Increased funding would	Funding isn't sufficient for the sector. Poor pay across the sector impacts the quality of staffing. The sector requires

| | | | lead to better paid practitioners. | investment from government.

Funding affects practitioners' pay. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Morale | Y | OK, the team, they're really down. At the moment, for example, it's everybody. Everybody is trying to leave the sector anyway to do something. Good people are better off, maybe to go and work in a shop for example, rather than in childcare because of, you know, that pressure for people, they're stressed.

Page 3- Interview transcript | Morale is low.

Stress and workload leave practitioners wanting to leave their nursery or the sector altogether.

Pressures and expectations across the nursery leave staff feeling demotivated. | Morale is low across the nursery.

Practitioners talk about leaving their setting and the sector altogether due to stress and workload.

Practitioners feel demotivated due to pressures and expectations. |
| Parents | H | "we're continuously facing an uphill battle that isn't good enough | Practitioners are under | Practitioners are constantly |

		and we're waiting for that email or that comment as to accusing us of something that we haven't done or something that they're not happy with and we're continuously just not good enough for the family." Page 3- Journal	constant pressure. Practitioners are not always good enough for families. Practitioners do not feel valued by families at times. Families are not always satisfied with the level of care provided.	under pressure. Families do not believe practitioners are good enough at times. Practitioners do not always feel valued by families. Families are not always happy with the level of care and education provided.
Passion	S	"I think stripping it back to the thing that we all started the job for in the first place as much as possible and trying to retain. We all go into childcare initially, certainly because we want to see children grow and thrive and be	Practitioners are passionate about their career. Children's progression motivates practitioners.	Practitioners are passionate about their career. Practitioners are motivated

		a part of that journey and I think that sometimes with everything else around us, we forget about that one basic thing." Page 5- Interview transcript	Pressure affects the way practitioners view their role.	by children's progression. Pressures across the nursery affect the way practitioners view their role.
Pay	C	"Considering that we know that the early years sector is one of the lowest paid in, you know, the country." Page 4- Journal	The pay across the early years sector is one of the lowest in the country.	Early years is one of the lowest paid sectors in England.
Personal wellbeing	Y	"then they can't really balance that like, you know with the work life with home life and being able to take care of themselves and family. Then it becomes too much, so people are really, really low. Really. The mental health is really low, especially now, nowadays." Page 3- Interview transcript	Practitioners are unable to balance home and work life. Practitioners do not always take care of themselves and their family. Practitioners feel low.	Practitioners are unable to balance their home and work life. Practitioners cannot always take care of themselves and their family. Practitioners feel low.

			Practitioners mental health is low.	The mental health of practitioners is low.
Pressure	B	"I needed to step down again because of the pressure, so I'm now working as a practitioner, part time. I work three days a week now. The pressure was just too much, the paperwork, the responsibility, so I'm happier now working less, with less responsibility. There is still pressure, but not as much." Page 1- Interview transcript	Practitioners' face pressure at work. Leaders step down from their roles to reduce pressure. Practitioners reduce their working days to reduce pressure. Pressure is reduced through the reduction of responsibilities and working days.	Practitioners' face pressure at work. Leaders step down from their roles to alleviate pressure. Practitioners reduce their working days to alleviate pressure. Practitioners are happier at work with less responsibility and working days.
Professional wellbeing	F	Professional wellbeing to be honest isn't there right now after what	Practitioners' professional wellbeing has	Practitioners do not believe that their

		happened. I don't think that my professional wellbeing has been met, in a sense that I've not been supported, I don't feel supported and not being able to talk to anyone about the experience I had, it's giving me stress. I've come to certain decision that, do I really wanna do this job anymore or shall I just say that enough is enough now? Maybe it's time to move on. Page 3- Interview transcript	not been met following inspection. Practitioners do not feel that they have been supported following inspections. Practitioners do not feel they have anyone to talk to about their experience with Ofsted. Practitioners have suffered stress following inspection. Practitioners reflect on if they want to continue in their role	professional wellbeing has been met following Ofsted inspections. Practitioners do not feel that they have been supported following Ofsted inspections. Practitioners do not feel they have been able to talk to anyone about their experience with Ofsted. Practitioners have suffered stress following their Ofsted inspection.

			following their inspection.	Practitioners reflect on whether they want to continue in their role following their Ofsted inspection.
Qualifications	C	"I'm doing lots of interviews, so lots of people are coming in, it's the compliance side of things, which is taking forever and er, the impact of staff that are qualified after 2014, having to have their GCSE's, is having a real impact on the workforce, as in, we know we don't particularly need GCSE level maths and English to be good practitioners with the support of a strong leadership team its possible. It's having a huge impact on the recruitment process, the staff that are	Practitioners are active in interviews and support the recruitment process. GCSE's required for early years qualifications is having an impact on the workforce. Practitioners do not always need maths and English at GCSE level to be good practitioners.	Practitioners take part in interviews to support recruitment. Qualification compliance for GCSE's negatively impacts the workforce. Practitioners do not always require maths and English qualifications to be good practitioners.

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| | | coming in, people getting demotivated, you know, staff getting questioned around their qualification, it's a really personal thing and the staff are really taking it quite personally. And then you have other organisations that don't do a thorough check, don't ask these questions, so for the organisations that do, you see that we're less likely to get those staff in and following the stronger safer recruitment process. So that's what I've struggled with this week."

Page 4- Journal | Compliance in qualifications is impacting on recruitment.

Practitioners take it personally when they are questioned regarding their qualification.

Qualifications are not always checked thoroughly by organisations.

Safer recruitment processes are followed thoroughly.

Practitioners struggle with processes | Qualification compliance related to GCSE's is having a huge impact on the recruitment process.

Practitioners take it personally when they are questioned regarding their qualification.

Some organisations do not check qualifications thoroughly.

The organisation follows a thorough safer recruitment process. |

			relating to recruitment. Practitioners struggle with recruitment processes.
Recognition	M	"You know, we don't really feel. sometimes that we get the recognition within early years that we deserve. The importance of our job is not always recognised." Page 2- Interview transcript	Practitioners are not recognised.	Practitioners have a crucial role which is not recognised.
Recruitment	H	"How can we hire Level 3 staff members if there's a recruitment crisis." Page 4- Interview transcript	Many nurseries are struggling to recruit qualified staff. Nurseries are suffering with a recruitment crisis.	Nurseries are struggling to recruit qualified staff. There is a recruitment crisis.
Regulation	F	"I went through quite a lot of that inspection process and all my Ofsted inspections were quite painful, in a	Regulation affects practitioners' wellbeing.	Power is exercised through the regulator.

		sense, that even when I was working as a practitioner, I was, was scared, actually scared from them when I heard Ofsted are coming. At that time, I couldn't understand exactly why I was like that. When you have experience and then when you work as a manager, when you start thinking from a different perspective, you have more understanding but still there are lots of questions there." Page 3- Interview transcript	Regulation creates feelings of fear and worry.	The pressure of regulation affects wellbeing.
Retention	K	"I know it's like all nurseries or all workplaces, there are staff that may leave or change which can affect the dynamic. So, to make sure, we have to get that routine and the bonds and the flow of the team again, which could be quite	Team dynamics are affected when staff change/ leave their roles. Changes in staff are difficult and	Staff changes affect the dynamics of the nursery team. Staff changes are difficult and stressful for the team.

		long and quite hard or stressful for the team, even the parents, they may question things." Page 1- Interview transcript	stressful for the team. Parents require consistency. Team bonding takes time.	Parents require a consistent staff team for their children. It takes time for new teams to bond.
Sickness	M	"Hi Leonie, so it's been a tough week this week as we had so many staff sicknesses." Page 5- Journal	Sickness levels are high across the nursery. The week is tough due to sickness levels.	Sickness is high across the nursery. Staff sickness impacts wellbeing.
Staffing	S	"I'm definitely tired, the chef has been off, so I've been cooking and one of my deputy's who is fairly new has been in the rooms and my other deputy has been supporting the manager of another nursery. It's been challenging in the	Practitioners are required to complete additional duties for children, such as the preparation of food.	Practitioners' complete additional duties such as cooking. Managers are unable to fully focus on their own setting due to

		sense of being here, there and everywhere- wearing multiple hats as we always do- just adding the 'cheffing' to it." Page 3- Journal	Managers are busy supporting other settings, therefore do not always get to focus on their own setting.	supporting others.
Support	Y	"What we do normally, me as a deputy, when I see someone is down really, I just reach out. You can call them into the office and then try to talk to them and ask how they are and then sometimes they tell you about themselves, you know their life and what is going, what is going on in the family for example." Page 4- Interview transcript	Leaders support their team. Leaders support personal and professional wellbeing across their team.	Leaders are supportive towards their teams. Leaders support the personal and professional wellbeing of their team.
Tiredness	M	"it's been really hard this week. I've been really tired and I've been actually really struggling on trying to make time for myself in	Practitioners are tired and they struggle to make personal time	Practitioners are tired and struggle to make time for themselves.

		the evenings. I literally work all day, come home, have an hour to myself and then have an early night to get up for the next day. There's a lot of pressure on, not just myself but my team at the moment." Page 2- Journal	for themselves. Practitioners and their teams are under pressure.	Practitioners highlight the pressure on themselves and their teams.
Value	A	"this is the first time we've done that in the company, giving managers and staff time to get to do bits. So, I did lots of treats for the staff and awards and appreciation and you know, talking about team building and those kinds of stuff really." Page 4- Journal	Leaders arrange staff awards and opportunities for appreciation. Practitioners do not always receive the time required to complete their workload.	Leaders arrange treats and events to support staff appreciation and team building across the nursery. Practitioners are not always provided with the time required for their workload.
Workload	B	"Just the work and life balance in general. I	Practitioners reduce	Practitioners reduce their

		didn't have a life before, I was so stressed. Getting calls from work."	working days to reduce stress.	working days in order to reduce stress.
		Page 3- Interview transcript	Practitioners do not always have a positive balance between work and home life.	Practitioners do not always have a positive work/ life balance.
				Practitioners receive calls from work in their personal time.
			Practitioners receive calls from work in personal hours.	

Appendix IV: Diagrams: Phase 4 of thematic analysis

Alignment between the provisional themes and data within codes

Identifying themes through codes: <u>**Agency**</u>

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries
- Practitioners are exhausted.
- Practitioners are worried about meeting ratio requirements.
- Practitioners are worried about meeting the level 3 staffing requirements.
- Apprentices are required to lead the rooms at times.
- Agency staff are required to cover full time.
- The use of agency staff affects the quality of education and care provided to children.
- It is difficult to meet statutory ratio requirements.
- Agency staff do not know the children or the routine well.
- The responsibility falls solely on employees.
- Practitioners' professional wellbeing is affected by staffing shortages.
- Agency staff are not always reliable.
- Staffing requirements cause stress for practitioners.
- Practitioners work in a stressful environment.
- Agency organisations are short staffed.
- Routines are affected by staff sickness.
- There is a high number of agency staff due to staff shortages.
- Practitioners want to work with agencies due to the flexibility it offers.
- The use of agency and bank staff impacts the workload for practitioners.
- The use of agency staff can be powerful when planned and managed effectively.
- Practitioners find it useful to think positively during challenging times.
- Practitioners are passionate.
- The use of agency increases stress for practitioners.
- The use of agency staff affects the quality of education and care provided to children.

Emerging Findings

➢**Practitioners**
- . Practitioners are worried about meeting ratio and level 3 staffing requirements.
  - The responsibility falls solely on employees.
  - Practitioners' professional wellbeing is affected by staffing shortages.
  - Staffing requirements cause stress for practitioners.

➢**System and structure**
- It is difficult to meet statutory ratio requirements.

➢**Children and families**
- The use of agency staff affects the quality of education and care provided to children.

Emerging Themes

❖**Theme 1:**

Statutory ratio and qualification requirements are difficult to meet which consequently affect the professional wellbeing of early childhood practitioners'

Identifying themes through codes: **Agency**

- There is a high ratio of agency staff across the nursery in comparison to permanent practitioners.
- Practitioners are strained.
- Some agency staff have no background or qualifications related to childcare and education.
- Nurseries use agency due to high levels of sickness and annual leave.
- Nurseries use bank staff from different settings across the organisation.
- Nurseries use agency as staff are on annual leave.
- Nurseries manage by using agency and bank staff.

Interviews
- Agency organisations are short staffed.
- The use of agency and bank staff affects the quality of education and care provided to children.
- The use of agency and bank staff impacts the workload for practitioners.
- Practitioners want to work with agencies due to the flexibility it offers.
- Practitioners are attracted to working with agencies due to the increased financial incentive and reduced workload.
- There is a high ratio of agency staff across the nursery in comparison to permanent practitioners.
- Some agency staff have no background or qualifications related to childcare and education.
- Practitioners are required to work long days.
- It is difficult to meet statutory ratio requirements.
- Practitioners rely on agency staff to cover statutory ratio requirements.
- Agency staff do not know the children well.
- Practitioners do not want to come to work due to the high level of agency staff.
- Agency staff do not know the children well.
- Practitioners are unable to focus on the children as they spend time guiding and supporting some bank and agency staff members.
- The use of agency staff affects regulatory outcomes.

Identifying themes through codes: **Covid-19**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries
- The impact of covid-19 has increased work load for practitioners.
- Children and parents require further support from practitioners when children settle.
- Children and families have been impacted by covid-19. Funding has been provided to support.
- Face to face meetings were paused for practitioners during covid-19.
- Practitioners have made an impact on children's learning despite covid-19. Covid cases increase.
- Children require further support for their learning following covid-19 in preparation for school.
- The early years sector has been negatively impacted by covid-19.
- Covid-19 continues to impact staffing and children's attendance. Bank and agency are used.

Interviews
- The impact of covid-19 has increased work load for practitioners and impacted lifestyles.
- Children require further support for the development of their communication and relationship building following covid-19.
- Children require further support from practitioners to settle into nursery.
- Professional relationships between practitioners and families were affected due to covid-19.
- Practitioners supported key workers throughout the pandemic. Covid-19 impacted staffing.
- Practitioners took risks to support key worker families throughout the pandemic.
- Practitioners' health and safety was not prioritised during the pandemic.
- The impact of covid-19 caused nurseries to close.
- Children's wellbeing and 'normality' was prioritised throughout the pandemic.
- Children's learning continued throughout the pandemic.
- Children require further support for their learning following covid-19- in addition to preparation for school. Face to face meetings were paused for staff.

Emerging Findings

➤**Practitioners**
➤Covid impacted wellbeing- including the focus on proffessional wellbeing.
➤The impact of covid-19 increased workload for practitioners and impacted their lifestyles.
➤Funding from the DFE has been provided to support practitioners and families.
➤Face to face meetings were paused for practitioners.
➤Practitioners took risks and their health and safety was not prioritized.
➤**System and structure**
➤The early years sector has been negatively impacted by covid-19.
➤Nurseries closed due to the impact of covid-19.
➤**Children and Families**
➤Children and families require further support with settling.
➤Children and families have been impacted by covid-19.
➤Children require further support with their learning and school readiness following covid-19 (particularly with regard to early communication and relationship building).
➤Covid-19 continues to impact staffing and children's attendance.
➤Agency and bank staff are used to support staff absences following covid.
➤Professional relationships between practitioners and families were affected.
➤Children's learning continued- their wellbeing was prioritized. 'Normality' continued.

Emerging Themes

❖Theme 1:
Covid-19 significantly affected early childhood practitioners' professional wellbeing

❖Theme 2:
There has been an increased focus on the professional wellbeing of early childhood practitioners across nurseries following Covid-19

Identifying themes through codes: **Covid-19**

- Practitioners continued to support families throughout the pandemic.
- Covid-19 impacted staffing and practitioners' wellbeing- including the focus on prof wellbeing.
- The quality of training was affected by covid-19.
- The sector has been negatively impacted.

Identifying themes through codes: **Diversity**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries

- Ofsted inspectors are not representative of the diverse communities they inspect.
- Ofsted are not representative of modern Britain.
- Practitioners do not feel valued or understood by inspectors.

Interviews

- Ofsted inspectors are not representative of the diverse communities they inspect.

Emerging Findings

➤**Practitioners**
➤Practitioners do not feel valued or understood by inspectors.

➤**System and structure**
➤Ofsted inspectors are not representative of the diverse communities they inspect and modern Britain.

Emerging Themes

❖Theme 1:

Practitioners held the perception that they were not valued by the regulator and that their wellbeing was not considered throughout regulatory processes

Identifying themes through codes: <u>**Facilities**</u>

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries

- Heat conditions are difficult for practitioners to work in.
- Practitioners struggle with the heat.
- Practitioners are required to work usual hours during extreme heat.
- Nursery buildings are very hot.
- Working conditions are poor for hot weather.
- The local authority try to support nurseries with air conditioning.
- Some rooms were 31 degrees.
- Practitioners work hard to keep children happy and cool when they are hot themselves.

Emerging Findings

➤**Practitioners**
- Practitioners work hard to keep children happy and cool when they are hot themselves.
- Heat conditions are difficult for practitioners to work in.

Emerging Themes

No themes identified

Identifying themes through codes: **Funding**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries

- Funding isn't sufficient for the sector.
- Funding affects practitioners' pay.
- The sector faces a difficult future due to underfunding.
- The lack of funding impacts the ability to purchase new resources.
- Financial strains limit accessibility to resources, aimed at benefiting children's learning.

Interviews

- Funding isn't sufficient for the sector.
- Funding affects practitioners' pay.
- Nurseries cannot offer incentives for practitioners due to the lack of government funding.
- Funding affects practitioners' pay.
- The sector requires investment from government.
- Poor pay across the sector impacts the quality of staffing.
- Increased funding could potentially enhance feelings of appreciation for practitioners.
- Increased funding could support and enhance professional wellbeing for practitioners.
- Practitioners do not always receive the funding required to support children with SEN.

Emerging Findings

➢ **Practitioners**
- Funding provided by the government affects practitioners pay and incentives.
- Poor pay across the sector impacts the quality of staffing.
- Increased funding could potentially enhance feelings of appreciation, supporting and enhancing professional wellbeing for practitioners.
- Practitioners do not always receive the funding required to support children with SEN.

➢ **System and structure**
- Funding isn't sufficient for the sector and requires investment from government.
- The sector faces a difficult future due to underfunding.

➢ **Children and Families**
- Financial strains limit accessibility to resources, aimed at benefiting children's learning.

Emerging Themes

❖ **Theme 1:**

Practitioners believe that increased government funding and recognition could potentially enhance and sustain professional wellbeing.

Identifying themes through codes: **Morale**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries

- Practitioners feel demotivated due to parental complaints.
- Practitioners feel demotivated due to pressures and expectations.
- Pressures and expectations make it difficult to support practitioners' wellbeing.
- Practitioners are not motivated to meet expectations and standards.
- Leaders find difficulty in motivating practitioners.
- Practitioners feel demotivated.
- Leaders find difficulty in motivating practitioners personally and professionally.
- Morale is low across the nursery.
- Leaders find difficultly in coping with demands.
- Leaders find difficulty in supporting children and staff.
- Practitioners across the nursery are running on low energy.
- Practitioners are struggling.
- Low morale affects professionalism.
- Leaders find difficulty in supporting children.
- Leaders experience low wellbeing.
- Practitioners look forward to rest time.
- Practitioners do not always enjoy their work.
- Practitioners are tired and fed up.
- Practitioners personal circumstances affect their professional wellbeing.
- Practitioners cope under pressure.
- Acts of kindness support morale across the team.
- Leaders are supportive towards their team.
- Gestures are used as a motivational tool.
- Families show appreciation to practitioners' through gestures.
- Employees speak highly of their organisation.
- The children motivate practitioners.
- Leaders are supportive towards their team.
- Leaders experience low wellbeing.

Emerging Findings

➢**Practitioners**
- Pressures and expectations make it difficult to support practitioners' wellbeing.
- Practitioners are not motivated to meet expectations and standards.
- Leaders find difficulty in motivating practitioners.
- The expectations are high for practitioners.
- Practitioners have thoughts of leaving due to the pressure of Ofsted preparation.
- Leaders experience low wellbeing.

➢**System and structure**
- Statutory ratio requirements affect morale and workload.

➢**Children and Families**
- The children motivate practitioners.

Emerging Themes

❖**Theme 1:**

The statutory requirement to meet ratio standards throughout the early childhood sector negatively influences professional wellbeing for early childhood practitioners.

❖**Theme 2:**

The pressure of the inspection process, negatively affects practitioners' professional wellbeing.

Identifying themes through codes: __Morale__

- Practitioners talk about leaving their setting and the sector altogether due to stress and workload.
- The expectations are high for practitioners.
- Practitioners have thoughts of leaving due to the pressure of Ofsted preparation.

Interviews
- Leaders experience low wellbeing.
- Leaders find difficulty in supporting children.
- Leaders find difficulty in motivating practitioners.
- Practitioners have given up on their careers.
- Professional wellbeing and morale is low and difficult to uphold.
- Leaders continuously reflect on ways to support morale and professional wellbeing.
- Practitioners are not motivated to meet expectations and standards..
- The use of agency staff increases stress and workload for practitioners.
- Additional pressures to practitioners affect sickness and lateness.
- Morale is low across the nursery.
- Practitioners talk about leaving their setting and the sector altogether due to stress and workload.
- Practitioners feel demotivated due to pressures and expectations.
- Statutory ratio requirements affect morale and workload.
- Practitioners require further support for children with SEN.
- Nurseries require further support with staffing.
- Practitioners have a difficult role.

Identifying themes through codes: **Parents**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries

- Families are not always satisfied with the level of care provided and have high standards.
- Practitioners work together to ensure care and health needs of individual children are prioritised.
- Practitioners best is not always enough for families.
- Effective partnerships between families and practitioners is lost at times.
- Families hold expectations and targets of how nurseries should support children.
- Families are disconnected from the pressure nursery practitioners face.
- Practitioners are constantly under pressure.
- Families do not believe practitioners are good enough at times.
- Practitioners do not always feel valued by families.
- Families are not always happy with the level of care and education provided.
- Families are not always respectful towards practitioners.
- Relationships between families and practitioners are not always healthy.
- Practitioners ensure that a child's needs are prioritised above parental needs.
- Practitioners' wellbeing is affected by families.
- Practitioners are able to meet the needs of children.
- Families behave inappropriately towards practitioners at times.
- Effective partnerships between families and practitioners is lost at times.
- Practitioners receive abusive emails from families.
- Some families dislike, disapprove and disrespect practitioners work.
- Practitioners' workload is high to meet the demand of families.
- Families now require lots of reassurance when settling their children into nursery.

Emerging Findings

➤**Practitioners**
- Practitioners' workload is high to meet the demand of families.

➤**Children and Families**
- Families are disconnected from the pressure nursery practitioners face.
- Practitioners do not always feel valued by families.
- Relationships between families and practitioners are not always healthy.
- Families are involved with developing the nursery environment.
- Family involvement in projects has a positive impact on the nursery.
- Families appreciate the efforts practitioners make.
- Families require reassurance.

Emerging Themes

❖Theme 1:

Processes and requirements enforced by regulation throughout the early childhood sector negatively influences professional wellbeing

Identifying themes through codes: **Parents**

- Communication through technology creates reassurance for families.
- Practitioners believe transparency is the best way to go forward whilst working with families.
- Practitioners believe that transparency supports trust and the relationship between families.
- Practitioners are required to build trusting relationships between families within minutes or days.
- First impressions are important.
- People will never forget how you made them feel.
- Families are not always aware of the benefits of messy play.
- Families require reassurance.
- Practitioners are not always to complete their workload due to the time taken to reassure families.
- Families are not always comfortable with male members of staff. Nurseries do not discriminate against male practitioners.

Interviews

- Families have targeted practitioners directly, which has affected their professional wellbeing.
- Families are not always satisfied with the level of care provided.
- Practitioners doubt themselves.
- Practitioners work on projects and tools to support families at home.
- Practitioners promote a love of reading to families from an early age.
- Practitioners prepare children and families for school readiness at an early age.
- Practitioners are under pressure to complete show arounds for prospective families.
- Practitioners are not always able to complete show arounds to prospective families due to their workload.

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Identifying themes through codes: __Parents__

- Practitioners face additional pressure to meet families' expectations and what they would like to be achieved.
- Practitioners support children to settle into the nursery for the first time away from their parents.
- Families provide positive feedback to practitioners.
- Families feedback positively to practitioners who work with children with SEN.
- Practitioners work with many children with SEN.
- Practitioners mainly deal with family complaints which are easily resolvable.
- Practitioners work with families to support children settling.
- Families do not feel comfortable leaving their children before pre-school age.
- Families do not think their children have settled.
- Children have places in schools closer to home.
- Families are involved with developing the nursery environment.
- Family involvement in projects has a positive impact on the nursery.
- Families appreciate the efforts practitioners make.
- Families appreciate the efforts practitioners make.
- Families provide kind gestures and gifts to practitioners.
- Families are supportive of nursery closure dates.
- Families are provided with opportunities to network with each other.
- Families provide feedback regarding action plans across the nursery.
- Families are demanding.
- Nurseries require strong leadership to work with families.
- Families require reassurance.

Identifying themes through codes: **Passion**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries

- Practitioners are passionate about their role.
- Practitioners are passionate about moving forward.
- Leaders ensure they hand over roles effectively.
- Leaders enjoy working with practitioners to support their future development.
- Leaders enjoy working with practitioners to achieve outcomes.
- Practitioners passion and drive is enhanced when they achieve set outcomes.
- Practitioners care.
- Leaders give their everything to provide the best environment for staff and children.
- Parents appreciate and recognise the passion leaders hold.

Emerging Findings

➢**Practitioners**
- Practitioners try to uphold high standards.
- Practitioners are required to work outside of ratio to learn.
  - Practitioners are required in ratio.
- Practitioners are not always passionate and view their work as a chore.
  - Practitioners view their role as a vocation
- Pressures across the nursery affect the way practitioners view their role.

Emerging Themes

❖Theme 1:
Processes and requirements enforced by regulation throughout the early childhood sector negatively influences professional wellbeing

❖Theme 2:
The statutory requirement to meet ratio standards throughout the early childhood sector negatively influences professional wellbeing for early childhood practitioners

Identifying themes through codes: **Passion**

Interviews

- Practitioners are passionate about their career.
- Practitioners wish to further their studies.
- Practitioners work hard.
- Practitioners are willing to learn.
- Practitioners wish to continue their journey in early years.
- Practitioners consider their role as professional and personal.
- Practitioners enjoy interacting with children.
- Practitioners are passionate about children.
- Practitioners care.
- Practitioners try to uphold high standards.
- Practitioners are given responsibility.
- Practitioners work together and learn from each other.
- Practitioners use their break times to learn.
- Practitioners are required to work outside of ratio to learn.
- Practitioners are required in ratio.
- Practitioners are aware of the impact they have on children.
- Practitioners recognise the role they play towards supporting children's early development.
- Practitioners recognise the impact of early education.
- Practitioners recognise the impact of personal, social and emotional development.
- Practitioners believe their role supports children.
- Practitioners are motivated by children's progression.
- Practitioners want to ensure children have a good start in life.
- Practitioners enjoy supporting children with SEN and seeing their progress.
- Pressures across the nursery affect the way practitioners view their role.

THEME

Identifying themes through codes: __Passion__

- Practitioners enjoy following their interests and passions.
- Practitioners are not always passionate and view their work as a chore.
- Practitioners enjoy working with children.
- Practitioners view their role as a vocation.
- Practitioners love children.
- Practitioners enjoy scaffolding children's learning and watching them achieve.

Identifying themes through codes: **Pay**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries
- Nurseries require additional funding to support staff pay.
- Practitioners deserve better pay.
- Practitioners wish for better pay.
- Early years is one of the lowest paid sectors in England.

Interviews
- Nurseries lack financial incentives.
- Pay increases are not expected across nurseries.
- Pay for practitioners does not cover the cost of living.
- Practitioners do not enjoy their role at present.
- Practitioners are exploring alternative careers.
- Pay is low across nurseries.

Emerging Findings

➢**Practitioners**
- Practitioners deserve better pay.

➢**System and structure**
- Nurseries require additional funding to support staff pay
- Early years is one of the lowest paid sectors in England.
- Nurseries lack financial incentives.
- Pay for practitioners does not cover the cost of living.

Emerging Themes

❖**Theme 1:**

Additional government funding used to support staff pay and incentives might sustain early childhood practitioners' professional wellbeing in the future

Identifying themes through codes: **Personal wellbeing**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries
- Parental complaints impact practitioners' wellbeing personally and professionally.
- Professional and personal wellbeing are interconnected.
- Practitioners feel that they can no longer communicate with parents following complaints.
- Parental complaints have impacted practitioners' wellbeing, mental health and confidence in their role.
- Practitioners feel frightened professionally and personally following complaints.
- Practitioners do not want to come into work or interact with the parent following a complaint.
- Name calling by parents has affected practitioners' wellbeing.
- Requesting families to leave the nursery is hurtful personally and professionally.
- Families are asked to leave the nursery to protect the wellbeing of the team.
- Practitioners have a close relationship with children.
- It is upsetting for practitioners when children leave due to the breakdown of relationships.
- Parents do not always trust practitioners.
- Practitioners personal wellbeing affects them professionally.
- Practitioners do not want to be at work and find their role difficult when their personal wellbeing is affected.
- Supporting parents with their mental health is difficult for practitioners' when their own personal wellbeing is low.
- Practitioners find it difficult to remain professional when their personal wellbeing is affected.
- The role of the nursery manager requires strength.
- Practitioners do not want to be at work and find their role difficult when their personal wellbeing is affected.
- Practitioners take time out to support their personal wellbeing.

Emerging Findings

➤ **Practitioners**
- Professional and personal wellbeing are interconnected.
- Practitioners personal wellbeing affects them professionally.
- Practitioners do not want to be at work and find their role difficult when their personal wellbeing is affected.
- Practitioners find it difficult to remain professional when their personal wellbeing is affected.
- Practitioners take time out to support their personal wellbeing.
- Practitioners' personal wellbeing is affected as they find it hard to switch off.
- Practitioners try to manage expectations with the reality of staffing.
- Practitioners find it difficult to get enough rest.
- Practitioners feel their week has been difficult.
- Practitioners look forward to relaxing.
- Practitioners roles are emotionally and physically exhausting and demanding.
- Practitioners worry about receiving news from work whilst at home.

➤ **Children and Families**
- Supporting parents with their mental health is difficult for practitioners' when their own personal wellbeing is low.

Emerging Themes

❖ Theme 2:
Practitioners believe that their personal and professional wellbeing is interconnected.

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Identifying themes through codes: **Personal wellbeing**

- Practitioners' personal wellbeing is affected as they find it hard to switch off.
- Practitioners try to manage expectations with the reality of staffing.
- Leaders are not always aware of how practitioners' personal wellbeing can be affected or triggered by working with children.
- Vulnerable children can trigger different emotions and reactions.
- Practitioners roles are emotionally and physically exhausting and demanding.
- It takes strong people and supportive systems and environments to maintain practitioners.
- Practitioners are stressed.
- Practitioners think about work in their personal time.
- Practitioners love their role.
- Practitioners worry about receiving news from work whilst at home.
- Practitioners are tired.
- Practitioners cannot bring themselves to complete coursework at home after work.
- Practitioners feel overwhelmed.
- Practitioners want to extend their knowledge whilst looking after themselves.
- Practitioners find it difficult to get enough rest.
- Practitioners feel their week has been difficult.
- Practitioners look forward to relaxing.

THEME

Identifying themes through codes: **Personal wellbeing**

Interviews

- Practitioners try to maintain their personal wellbeing, ensuring it does not impact on their professional wellbeing.
- Professional and personal wellbeing are interconnected.
- Practitioners care about the sector.
- Practitioners think about work when they go home.
- Practitioners' work keeps them up at night, impacts their relationships and causes them to overthink.
- Practitioners are passionate.
- Practitioners work from home to research and create activities for the children.
- Practitioners identify staff development and training to support their careers from home.
- Practitioners are sick and tired of asking staff to work additional hours and come in early due to staffing.
- Practitioners personal life and wellbeing is impacted due to them long hours.
- Practitioners are not always able to spend time with family due to work requirements.
- Practitioners make efforts to support the nursery, however they are not always ready to work.
- Leaders do not agree with asking practitioners to work additional hours and disturb them during their personal time.
- Practitioners find ways to support their personal wellbeing after work through music, fresh air and walking.
- Practitioners cannot discuss their wellbeing at work with family due to confidentiality.
- Leaders cannot encourage practitioners to do training as it could affect their personal wellbeing.
- Practitioners find ways to regain space and take time to look after themselves.
- Practitioners attempt to find balance between home and family life.
- Practitioners find ways to motivate themselves to go to work.

Identifying themes through codes: **Personal wellbeing**

- Leaders identify ways to support their teams' personal wellbeing individually.
- Practitioners make efforts to come into work despite their personal issues.
- Practitioners' personal wellbeing is not always impacted by work.
- Many practitioners' personal wellbeing is affected by work.
- Leaders support practitioners to reduce the impact of work on their personal wellbeing.
- Leaders are provided with flexibility with their working hours which supports their personal wellbeing.
- Practitioners could not always have time to prepare breakfast as they wake up at the crack of dawn to arrive at work.
- Practitioners are unable to balance their home and work life.
- Practitioners do not have a work/life balance due to shifts.
- Practitioners cannot always take care of themselves and their family.
- Practitioners feel low and down.
- The mental health of practitioners is low.
- Practitioners at times feel as though they have no life.
- Practitioners come home stressed.
- Practitioners are required to wait for families after work if they arrive to the nursery late.
- Practitioners are tired from work when they arrive home.
- Practitioners are going through personal issues.
- Practitioners make efforts to come into work despite their personal issues.
- Leaders take part in positive conversations with practitioners to keep them going.
- Practitioners come to work stressed and are stressed when they arrive home.
- Practitioners are always worried about work.
- Practitioners should come to work happy and come home to their family.

Identifying themes through codes: **Personal wellbeing**

- Practitioners are mentally drained.
- Practitioners feel as if they can't do their role anymore.
- Practitioners feel they have to do their role for the children.
- Practitioners are affected by their role.
- Practitioners are required to support their children and families at home after work.
- Practitioners personal and professional wellbeing is affected by their role.
- Practitioners cannot find balance between their work and family life.
- Practitioners are already tired at the start of the day.
- Practitioners feel under pressure.
- Practitioners are not sure if they have been depressed.
- Practitioners are anxious.
- Practitioners worry about work in their personal time.
- Practitioners worry about the volume of work and status of the nursery whilst on holiday.
- Practitioners worry about work whilst they are away from their laptop.

Identifying themes through codes: **Pressure**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries

- Practitioners' face pressure at work.
- Leaders are under pressure to support practitioners.
- Practitioners are under pressure to support new children settling.
- Practitioners prioritise children's happiness.
- Practitioners are under pressure to support children's learning.
- Nursery environments are busy and challenging.
- Leaders are under pressure to support practitioner's effective understanding and implementation of the EYFS.
- Pressure affects home life.
- Practitioners do not have a balanced work/ home life. Responsibility of resources adds stress to their role. Practitioners do not recieve much support.
- Practitioners find it hard to remain tolerant due to pressure. Practitioners cannot cope with the extreme pressure and demand they are facing.
- Practitioners' are under extreme pressure, which is unbearable. Practitioners cannot cope.
- The responsibility of safeguarding adds pressure to practitioners. Difficulty in recruiting staff adds pressure.
- Increased pressure could affect staff turnover.
- Managers undergo additional pressures to support staff and families.
- Managers are responsible for the wellbeing of staff.
- Managers are constantly under pressure.
- Practitioners take work home to meet deadlines.
- Practitioners are unpaid for additional time and resources they spend to support their nursery.
- Deputy Managers undergo additional pressures to support staff, families, children and complete office duties.

Emerging Findings

➢ **Practitioners**

- Practitioners' are under extreme pressure, which is unbearable. Practitioners cannot cope.
- The responsibility of safeguarding adds pressure to practitioners.
- Managers are responsible for the wellbeing of staff.
- Managers are constantly under pressure.
- Practitioners take work home to meet deadlines.
- Managers undergo additional pressures and are not as supported as they should be.
- Managers find difficulty in coping with increased pressures and are responsible for the wellbeing of staff.
- Pressure affects professional wellbeing for the team.

➢ **System and structure**

- The reduction of paperwork would be supportive of professional wellbeing.
- Reduced pressure would be supportive of professioanl wellbeing.

❖ **Theme 1:**

Processes and requirements enforced by regulation throughout the early childhood sector negatively influences professional wellbeing

❖ **Theme 2:**

The reduction of paperwork and pressure would be supportive of professional wellbeing

❖ **Theme 3:**

Practitioners within leadership roles are responsible for enhancing and sustaining the professional wellbeing of their team and stakeholders, which leaves them unable to support their own professional wellbeing

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Identifying themes through codes: **Pressure**

Interviews

- Qualified staff are under further pressure to support unqualified.
- Managers undergo additional pressures and are not as supported as they should be.
- Pressure continues to increase for Managers.
- Managers find difficulty in coping with increased pressures and are responsible for the wellbeing of staff.
- Practitioners are under pressure at work which has caused staff to leave the sector
- Pressure could affect turnover.
- Pressure is experienced over extended periods.
- Practitioners endure illnesses/ conditions due to stress at work.
- Practitioners endure sickness due to pressure at work.
- Pressure at work affects practitioners' health.
- Practitioners do not receive the support they require.
- Increased pressure has caused staff to leave their workplace.
- Practitioners' face pressure at work.
- Leaders pressurise staff due to their responsibilities.
- Pressure affects enthusiasm across the nursery.
- Leaders step down from their roles to alleviate pressure.
- Practitioners reduce their working days to alleviate pressure.
- Practitioners are happier at work with less responsibility and working days.
- Pressure affects professional wellbeing for the team.
- The reduction of paperwork would be supportive of professional wellbeing.
- Reduced pressure would be supportive of professional wellbeing.

Identifying themes through codes: **Professional wellbeing**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries

- Practitioners wellbeing is affected following parent complaints.
- Practitioners are required to report themselves when families raise concerns.
- Practitioners do not want to communicate with families following complaints.
- Practitioners wellbeing is affected following parent complaints.
- Leaders do not receive checks from higher management regarding their wellbeing.
- Leaders receive reminders from higher management to meet deadlines.
- Leaders receive reminders from higher management informing them what they shouldn't be doing.
- Leaders are required to oversee practitioner's mental health and safety.
- Leaders do not receive support for their professional wellbeing.
- Leaders' professional wellbeing is getting worse and worse.
- Practitioners receive training to support their wellbeing.
- Practitioners benefit from wellbeing training.
- Practitioners think about work at home.
- Practitioners do not always sleep properly due to their workload.
- Practitioners reflect on their sleep and the effect it can have on their brain.
- Leaders seek supporting roles within the organisation to support practitioners' wellbeing.
- There is a need to support wellbeing across the organisation.
- Practitioner appreciation supports wellbeing across the nursery.
- Leaders treat practitioners throughout the week.
- Leaders provide practitioners with additional breaks to support their wellbeing.
- Leaders' wellbeing is enhanced through recognition and opportunities to further their career.

Emerging Findings

➤**Practitioners**

- Leaders provide practitioners with additional breaks to support their wellbeing.
- Leaders place a high emphasis on practitioners' wellbeing.
- Practitioner appreciation supports wellbeing across the nursery.
- Practitioners' physical and mental wellbeing should be cared for through appropriate rest space and breaks.
- Practitioners struggle to look after their own and their teams' wellbeing.
- The whole teams' professional wellbeing has been affected by the inspection process.
- Practitioners have suffered stress following their Ofsted inspection.
- Practitioners do not believe that their professional wellbeing has been met following Ofsted inspections.
- Mental health issues across the sector have been highlighted following regulation, which is worrying.
- Professional wellbeing is individual.
- Practitioners require a better understanding of what wellbeing is and where they sit within in.
- Discussing wellbeing more is an achievable goal towards supporting and sustaining professional wellbeing.
- There is no clear definition of wellbeing.

➤**System and structure**

- There is a need to support wellbeing across the organisation.

Emerging Themes

❖**Theme 1:**

Practitioners held the perception that they were not valued by the regulator and that their wellbeing was not considered throughout regulatory processes

❖**Theme 2:**

Practitioners struggle to take care of their own professional wellbeing and each hold their own idea of what professional wellbeing means to them

Identifying themes through codes: **Professional wellbeing**

- Leaders place a high emphasis on practitioners' wellbeing.
- Practitioners support leaders with treats.
- Leaders are reminded by practitioners to slow down and take a moment.
- Leaders are passionate about wellbeing.
- Leaders develop training programmes to support wellbeing.
- Leaders create safe spaces for practitioners with supportive information surrounding finance and hygiene.
- Leaders work alongside colleagues to share practice.
- Spaces are created in the office to encourage practitioners to spend time with the management team.
- Leaders' wellbeing is supported and they are reminded to take a rest.
- The organisation are focused and hands on with wellbeing.
- Leaders believe that the wellbeing of staff is paramount.
- Leaders fight for the wellbeing of practitioners.
- Leaders prioritise wellbeing at the forefront of their settings.
- Practitioners' physical and mental wellbeing should be cared for through appropriate rest space and breaks.
- Practitioners' who send their children to the nursery should receive the same experience as all families.
- Leaders believe that practitioners should be nurtured alongside parents.
- Practitioners do not always allow themselves to be nurtured by leaders.
- Practitioners do not always wish to engage in the team building exercises and receive the treats leaders have arranged for them.
- Leaders do not always feel appreciated by their team.

Identifying themes through codes: **Professional wellbeing**

- Practitioners are emotionally affected by incidents that affect children.
- Practitioners lose focus when they become emotionally affected by children who are unwell.
- Practitioners are required to report incidents to area managers and complete paperwork.
- Practitioners are tired and struggling because of the heat.
- Practitioners do not always receive the support they require from the local authority to support children with SEN.
- Practitioners are strained both mentally and emotionally.
- Families are affected by the lack of support.
- Families, children and practitioners are affected by the lack of support for children with SEN.
- Practitioners worry about the nursery whilst away.
- Practitioners have a lot to prepare for.
- Practitioners enjoy training, however worry about the classroom whilst away.
- Leaders constantly check in on their team whilst they are away on training.
- Male practitioners are discriminated against by families.
- Male practitioners' do not always feel welcomed by families, which affects their confidence.
- Leaders support male practitioners across the nursery.
- Leaders work with families to support their understanding of male practitioners.
- Practitioners' workload is high.
- Practitioners struggle to keep up to date with their workload and training.
- Practitioners struggle to look after their own and their teams' wellbeing.
- Practitioners focus on supporting children's emotional literacy and wellbeing.
- Practitioners enjoy activities alongside children to support wellbeing.
- Practitioners and children enjoy and benefit from activities to support wellbeing across the nursery.

Identifying themes through codes: **Professional wellbeing**

Interviews

- Leaders are supportive towards their team.
- Leaders check on the team to see how they are.
- Leaders give praise to their team.
- Leaders try to support practitioners' professional wellbeing across the nursery.
- Practitioners are not always able to have a full lunch break.
- Practitioners do not believe that their professional wellbeing has been met following Ofsted inspections.
- Practitioners do not feel that they have been supported following Ofsted inspections.
- Practitioners do not feel they have been able to talk to anyone about their experience with Ofsted.
- Practitioners have suffered stress following their Ofsted inspection.
- Practitioners reflect on whether they want to continue in their role following their Ofsted inspection.
- The whole teams' professional wellbeing has been affected by the inspection process.
- Practitioners' do not manage their own professional wellbeing.
- Practitioners do not think about their own professional wellbeing.
- Practitioners carry on every day regardless of their professional wellbeing because they have to.
- Leaders have a good bond with their team.
- Leaders have a nurturing management style.
- Practitioners feel comfortable to approach and talk to leaders.
- Practitioners approach leaders when they feel stressed or need support.
- Professional wellbeing could be supported and sustained in the future by introducing an organisation practitioners' can talk to for support.
- Without professional wellbeing practitioners believe that they would be no good to the workforce.
- Wellbeing is broad and covers your mental and physical health and wellbeing.

THEME

Identifying themes through codes: **Professional wellbeing**

- Wellbeing is broad.
- Manager's professional wellbeing isn't looked at as much.
- More emphasis is placed on practitioners' wellbeing.
- Practitioners' paperwork has been reduced and leaders are expected to check in to support their wellbeing.
- Mental health issues across the sector have been highlighted following regulation, which is worrying.
- Mental health issues across the sector have been highlighted following regulation, which is worrying.
- Poor wellbeing can cause an effect on the setting, the workforce and running of the nursery.
- Leaders work with and support practitioners when they have concerns.
- Some practitioners are not right for the role.
- Children do not always come first due to employment laws which protect staff.
- Leaders try to manage their time to support their professional wellbeing.
- Leaders carry many people within their role.
- Leaders deal with concerns surrounding staff and families.
- Leaders do not always have someone to go to.
- If you're not strong enough, the Manager's role could break you.
- Practitioners rely on family and spend time with family to support their wellbeing.
- There aren't enough breaks and annual leave entitlements across the sector.
- Practitioners do not always have time to wind down.
- Practitioners work four long days, instead of a full week to support their professional wellbeing.
- Professional wellbeing is promoted through training and staff meetings.
- Practitioners can speak to leaders at any time.
- Managers' support their team.
- Manager's know their team well and are aware when something is wrong.

Identifying themes through codes: **Professional wellbeing**

- Manager's arrange awards and treats for practitioners.
- Manager's do a lot to support practitioners' professional wellbeing.
- It is important for leaders to know their team well through discussions and regularly keeping in touch.
- Local authority advisory teachers check in with managers to see how they are.
- Managers do not usually get asked how they are.
- Local authority advisory teachers send training tools and help with meetings to support managers.
- Music and signing supports wellbeing across the nursery.
- Leaders work with practitioners to build their confidence.
- Professional wellbeing is about taking care of your staff, your team and yourself.
- Leaders find their role stressful.
- Leaders are required to look after the team, children and families.
- Leaders reassure families.
- It is important for leaders to take care of themselves and their team as it is a role they wish to stay in.
- Leaders support their professional wellbeing by taking days off/ holidays during the week.
- Leaders have other priorities such as families and friends in addition to work.
- Organisation supports leaders' professional wellbeing.
- Professional wellbeing is the balance between home and work life.
- Practitioners should not prioritise between home and work life.
- Leaders take on wellbeing champion roles across the organisation following their efforts across the nursery.
- Leaders make efforts to ensure practitioners have time to achieve their workload.

Identifying themes through codes: **Professional wellbeing**

- Leaders make time to say thank you and give time to practitioners.
- Action plans and conversations across the organisation focus on professional wellbeing.
- Practitioners leave organisations when their wellbeing is not supported.
- Practitioners work long hours.
- Practitioners reflect on their own wellbeing and make changes to improve.
- Practitioners' wellbeing is supported by their upper management.
- Practitioners set expectations and ask for help when they need it.
- Leaders ensure their time is managed effectively.
- Leaders are the happiest when they are with the children and team.
- Leaders work alongside each other to share ideas.
- Leaders support each other.
- Leaders feel the same stresses and pressures.
- Spaces, occasions and regular, supportive supervisions should be conducted to support practitioners' wellbeing.
- Providing practitioners with champion roles linked to their skills would support their wellbeing.
- Acts of kindness, appreciation and praise supports practitioners' wellbeing across the nursery.
- Seeking to identify what professional wellbeing means to individuals throughout the team can support wellbeing across the nursery.
- Effective wellbeing and role model training for leaders can support wellbeing across the nursery.
- There is no clear definition of wellbeing.
- There are not enough discussions surrounding wellbeing.
- Discussing wellbeing more is an achievable goal towards supporting and sustaining professional wellbeing.

THEME

Identifying themes through codes: **Professional wellbeing**

- Organisations can research availability locally and provide training to support practitioners sustain professional wellbeing.
- Some local authorities have a wealth of information surrounding wellbeing.
- Practitioners require a better understanding of what wellbeing is and where they sit within in.
- If practitioners' well being is poor, they cannot be expected to support other people.
- Professional wellbeing is holistic across early years.
- Professional wellbeing is individual.
- Professional wellbeing relates to the impact individuals may have on the team.
- There is a high expectation for practitioners to perform, maintain standards and be productive.
- Nursery Managers and Area Managers are in charge of their own wellbeing.
- Nursery Managers and Area Managers focus on the wellbeing of the team, rather than their own wellbeing.
- Leaders take time to reflect on themselves and take on new challenges.
- Leaders throw themselves into different activities to support their professional development and perspective.
- Leaders are required to have a high level of emotional intelligence.
- Leaders are required to be robust in terms of their own professional wellbeing.
- Leading a nursery team is emotionally challenging.
- Practitioners' have to hold the capacity required to lead in this field of work, especially if you want to progress.
- Leaders focus on the wellbeing and the safety of everyone, which is paramount.
- Pressure and working hours affect practitioners' professional wellbeing.
- Professional wellbeing means that practitioners feel happy, supported and are completing their job to the best of their ability, professionally.

Identifying themes through codes: **Professional wellbeing**

- Practitioners complete calming activities to support their wellbeing.
- It is hard and takes time for practitioners to learn how to support their own professional wellbeing.
- Leaders focus on being positive with their team.
- Leaders try to make their team happy.
- If staff are happy, then children are happy.
- Practitioners believe that the children matter.
- Practitioners believe that professional wellbeing needs to be changed but are unsure of how to go about it.
- Professional wellbeing means being happy and being supported at work.
- Practitioners reduce their working days and responsibility to support their health and professional wellbeing.
- Professional wellbeing is supported by practitioners' communicating and helping each other across the nursery.

THEME

Identifying themes through codes: **Qualifications**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries

- The nursery does not have enough qualified staff members who hold awareness of their roles and responsibilities.
- Qualified staff members support unqualified staff.
- Qualified staff members are under pressure to run the room smoothly and ensure high standards.
- Maths and English requirements have had a detrimental effect on team members and nurseries across the country.
- It has been a struggle for practitioners to obtain the maths and English requirements.
- The maths and English requirements did not support nurseries.
- Qualified staff members do not always hold the practicalities required.
- Some qualified staff members require support and training.
- Practitioners take part in interviews to support recruitment.
- Qualification compliance for GCSE's negatively impacts the workforce and recruitment.
- Practitioners do not always require maths and English qualifications to be good practitioners.
- Practitioners take it personally when they are questioned regarding their qualification.
- Some organisations do not check qualifications thoroughly.
- The organisation follows a thorough safer recruitment process.
- Practitioners struggle with recruitment processes.
- Nurseries have lost fantastic early years practitioners due to the GCSE requirements.
- Practitioners prefer drive and passion over qualifications.
- Skills required for practitioners can be taught and edited.
- Practitioners hope that new leadership of the country will have a more positive impact on the sector.

Emerging Findings

➢**Practitioners**
- There is a lack of qualified staff across the workforce due to confusion surrounding qualifications.
- Practitioners have now become unqualified due to the changes in qualifications.
- Effective skills required to work with children and preferred over qualifications.

➢**System and structure**
- Qualification compliance for GCSE's negatively impacts the workforce and recruitment.
- Nurseries have lost fantastic early years practitioners due to the GCSE requirements.

Emerging Themes

❖**Theme 1:**
Processes and requirements enforced by regulation throughout the early childhood sector negatively influences professional wellbeing
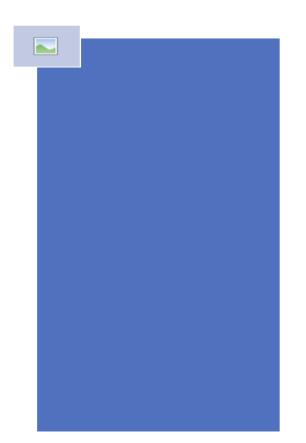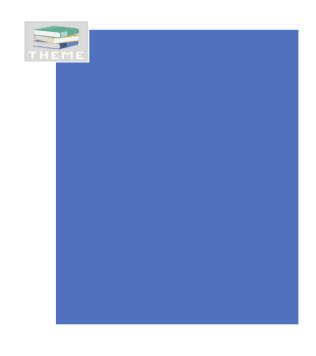
❖**Theme 2:**
Statutory ratio and qualification requirements are difficult to meet which consequently affect the professional wellbeing of early childhood practitioners'

Identifying themes through codes: __Qualifications__

- Practitioners hope that the GCSE maths and English will be scrapped for those wanted to complete their qualifications in early years.

Interviews

- There is a lack of qualified staff across the workforce due to confusion surrounding qualifications.
- Practitioners have now become unqualified due to the changes in qualifications.
- Effective skills required to work with children and preferred over qualifications.

Identifying themes through codes: **Recognition**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries

- Practitioners' hard work is not recognised by parents.
- Practitioners are too complacent and believe things will not change for the better.
- Practitioners share acts of kindness to show appreciation.
- Practitioners' roles are misunderstood.
- Society does not give recognition to the sector.
- Practitioners should focus and persist on making changes to provide more recognition to the sector.

Emerging Findings

➢**Practitioners**
- Practitioners should focus and persist on making changes to provide more recognition to the sector

➢**System and structure**
- Society does not give recognition to the sector.

➢**Children and Families**
- Practitioners' hard work is not recognised by parents, which affects thier professional wellbeing.

Emerging Themes

❖**Theme 1:**
Practitioners believe that greater recognition would support professional wellbeing across the sector.

Identifying themes through codes: **Recognition**

Interviews

- Practitioners' roles are misunderstood.
- Practitioners' hard work is not recognised.
- The public do not give recognition to the sector.
- Nurseries are not publicised in a positive way.
- Practitioners do not receive the recognition they deserve.
- The lack of recognition for practitioners impacts everything.
- Better recognition would attract potential practitioners into the sector.
- Practitioners' roles are misunderstood.
- The early years sector is suffering.
- The government holds the ability to support recognition across the early years sector.
- Nurseries are not publicised in a positive way.
- The benefits of quality early years environments are not publicised.
- Nurseries have a need to work more closely with schools.
- Nurseries positively impact children's later education.
- Further research is needed to highlight challenges across the early years sector.
- The government would make changes if early years were to strike.
- Salary increases have supported recognition across the nursery.
- Practitioners have different appreciation styles.
- Practitioners' individuality is reflected on and valued whilst supporting appreciation.
- Leaders take time to reflect on implementing recognition across the nursery.
- Practitioners should focus and persist on making changes to provide more recognition to the sector.
- The government hold the ability to support recognition across the early years sector.
- Research shows that the years a child attends nursery are the most crucial in a humans' life.
- The sector does not receive the credit it is due.

Identifying themes through codes: **Recognition**

- Practitioners need to be held at a higher value.
- Practitioners need to be held at a higher value.
- Society does not give recognition to the sector.
- Other cultures value the early years.
- Society does not give recognition to the sector.
- Practitioners have a crucial role which is not recognised.
- Practitioners need to be held at a higher value.
- Practitioners are passionate about making changes to support the sector.

Identifying themes through codes: **Recruitment**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries

- It is difficult to recruit qualified or experienced staff.
- Nurseries receive many applications for apprentices.
- Practitioners are unable to focus on the running of the nursery due to the lack of staff.
- Practitioners are unable to focus on the policies and procedures/ ethos of the nursery due to the lack of staff.
- Nurseries are struggling to recruit qualified staff.
- Practitioners are involved in recruitment and interviews.
- Practitioners find difficulty in recruiting suitable staff.
- The quality of the workforce is poor.
- Some local authorities have supported nurseries due to the staffing crisis.
- Recruitment is under a lot of pressure.
- There is a need for qualified staff.
- The recruitment crisis is dire.
- Nurseries offer reduced childcare for staff.
- Leaders take time to train and support their practitioners.
- Practitioners are not always trained and guided effectively.
- There is a recruitment crisis.
- Leaders are involved in recruitment and interviews.

Emerging Findings

➢**Practitioners**
- The difficulty recruiting staff has increased workload for practitioners, which affects professional wellbeing.

➢**System and structure**
- The recruitment crisis impacts the ability to fulfil statutory ratio and qualification requirements.
- Ofsted requirements related to the quality of teaching cannot be fulfilled.

Emerging Themes

❖Theme 1:

Processes and requirements enforced by regulation throughout the early childhood sector negatively influences professional wellbeing

Identifying themes through codes: **Recruitment**

Interviews

- Nurseries are struggling to recruit qualified staff.
- There is a recruitment crisis.
- Nurseries are negatively publicised, which affects recruitment.
- The recruitment crisis impacts the ability to fulfil statutory ratio and qualification requirements.
- Everyone is impacted by recruitment difficulties.
- It is difficult to recruit and retain staff.
- Practitioners find difficulty in recruiting suitable staff.
- Practitioners are not always trained and guided effectively.
- Leaders take time to train and support their practitioners.
- Leaders are required to work from home in thier own time as they are busy supporting their team.
- Leaders complete a substantial amount of work from home in thier own time.
- The quality of the workforce is poor.
- The quality of the qualified workforce is poor.
- Ofsted requirements related to the quality of teaching cannot be fulfilled.
- Training requirements should be adapted to support practitioners' practical skills.
- Practitioners require further support understanding the depth and requirements of their role.
- Practitioners are frightened to allow students into their settings due to potential safeguarding concerns.
- Practitioners require flexibility and part time hours which cannot always be met.
- Nurseries require full time staff.
- Practitioners need more money for their role.
- Other professionals are on strike, however the early years sector do not take action.
- The training for practitioners needs to be reviewed.
- The difficulty recruiting staff has increased workload for practitioners.

Identifying themes through codes: **Recruitment**

- Leaders support practitioners' workload.
- Leaders reflect on how effective their recruitment team are.
- Leaders reflect on how effective their inductions are.
- Recruitment affects nursery budgets.
- Practitioners are leaving the sector.
- Support is required for recruitment and inductions to maintain and gain staff.
- Nurseries need more staff.

Identifying themes through codes: **Regulation**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries
- Power is exercised through the regulator.
- Pressure is exercised through the regulator.
- Pressure and power are both exercised through the regulator.
- Regulation affects workload.
- The pressure of regulation affects health and wellbeing.
- Regulation limits resources required for recruitment and staffing requirements.
- Regulation is subjective.
- Regulation is inconsistent.
- LA regulatory visits are supportive.
- Regulatory inspectors are not representative of the diverse communities they inspect.
- Regulation creates feelings of fear and worry.

Interviews
- Power is exercised through the regulator.
- The pressure of regulation affects workload, wellbeing and confidence.
- The regulator determines and defines quality.
- Regulation is subjective.
- Regulatory outcomes label nurseries positively/ negatively.
- Leaders' wellbeing is not considered by the regulator with added pressure.
- LA regulatory visits/ check ins are supportive.
- Regulation affects staff turnover and motivation.
- Practitioners prioritize inspections.
- Regulatory inspectors are not representative of the diverse communities they inspect.
- Regulatory changes with regards to paperwork are supportive.
- Regulation limits resources required for recruitment and staffing requirements.
- Regulation creates feelings of worry and fear.
- Regulation is not a supportive or comfortable process.

Emerging Findings

➢**Practitioners**
- ➢Regulatory bodies exercise both power and pressure over practitioners, influencing professional wellbeing.
- ➢Regulatory processes affect practitioners' workload and confidence.
- ➢The pressure of regulation affects practitioners' health and wellbeing.
- ➢Practitioners' believe that regulation is subjective and inconsistent.
- ➢Regulatory requirements affect the resources required to meet staffing.
- ➢Regulatory inspections create feelings of fear and worry for practitioners.
- ➢Leaders' wellbeing is not considered by the regulator.
- ➢Regulation affects staff turnover and morale.
- ➢Regulation is not a supportive or comfortable process for practitioners.
- ➢Practitioners do not feel valued or understood by regulators.

➢**System and structure**
- ➢Regulatory inspectors are not representative of the diverse communities they inspect.
- ➢The regulator determines and defines quality.
- ➢Regulatory outcomes label nurseries positively/ negatively.
- ➢The inspection process is prioritized.

Emerging Themes

Theme 1:

Practitioners held the perception that they were not valued by the regulator and that their wellbeing was not considered throughout regulatory processes

❖**Theme 2:**

Processes and requirements enforced by regulation throughout the early childhood sector negatively influences professional wellbeing
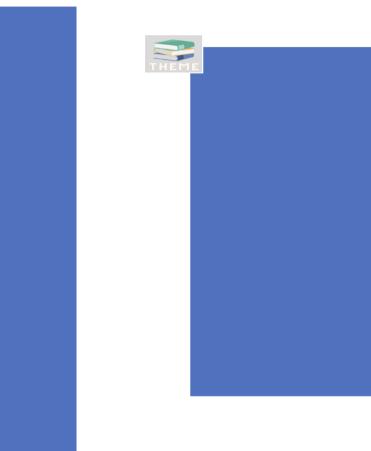
❖**Theme 3:**

Practitioners believe that the regulator subjectively and inconsistently determines and defines 'quality' within their setting, which impacts their professional wellbeing

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Identifying themes through codes: **Regulation**

- Practitioners do not feel valued by regulators.
- Practitioners do not feel valued by society.
- The early years sector is not appreciated nor recognised.
- Practitioners have high expectations of the nursery.

Identifying themes through codes: **Retention**

Stage one of coding

Interviews
- Staff changes affect the dynamics of the nursery team.
- Staff changes are difficult and stressful for the team.
- Parents require a consistent staff team for their children.
- It takes time for new teams to bond.

Emerging Findings

➤**Practitioners**
- Staff changes are difficult and stressful for the team.

Emerging Themes

No themes identified

Identifying themes through codes: **Sickness**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries
- Sickness is high across the nursery.
- Staff are sick.
- Staff sickness is common.
- Plans are changed due to staff sickness.
- Sickness is high across nurseries and schools.
- Policies are enforced to avoid sickness levels increasing.
- Plans are changed due to staff sickness.
- Leaders support their team during sickness absences.
- Leaders focus on the professional wellbeing of their team.
- Practitioners work together and power through when they are not feeling well to avoid absences.
- Practitioners wear themselves out whilst working to avoid absences.
- Nursery environments are very busy.
- Staff sicknesses cause stress and impacts wellbeing.
- There are no staff to replace those who are absent due to sickness.
- Nurseries use agency staff to replace staff who are off sick.

Interviews
- Sickness is high across the nursery.
- Staff sickness impacts wellbeing.
- Staff sicknesses cause stress.
- Staff are required to work longer hours due to staff sickness.
- It is difficult to meet statutory ratio requirements due to staff sickness.
- Everybody is affected by staff sickness.
- Plans are changed due to staff sickness.
- Staff are required to work longer hours due to staff sickness.
- Staff sickness is common across nurseries.
- Staff sickness increases during the winter season.
- Sickness spreads through children.

Emerging Findings

➤**Practitioners**
- Leaders focus on the professional wellbeing of their team.
- Practitioners wear themselves out whilst working to avoid absences.
- Sickness is high across the nursery
- Staff sicknesses cause stress and impacts wellbeing.
- It is difficult to meet statutory ratio requirements due to staff sickness.
- Staff are required to work longer hours due to staff sickness.

Emerging Themes

❖Theme 1:
Processes and requirements enforced by regulation throughout the early childhood sector negatively influences professional wellbeing

❖Theme 2:
Practitioners within leadership roles are responsible for enhancing and sustaining the professional wellbeing of their team and stakeholders, which leaves them unable to support their own professional wellbeing

Identifying themes through codes: **Staffing**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries

- Nurseries require further support with staffing.
- Practitioners are under pressure due to staff shortages.
- Practitioners are affected by staff shortages.
- Staff shortages have affected practitioners rest and break times.
- The quality of care and education provided to children has been affected due to staff shortages.
- Practitioners have been unable to fulfil their roles as they would like to due to staff shortages.
- Leaders are unable to support staff's wellbeing due to staff shortages.
- Practitioners are finding it hard to cope due to staff shortages, reaching 'breaking point'.
- Staff shortages have lead practitioners to feeling run down, exhausted and stressed.
- Early years is a stressful and high-pressured sector to work in.
- The quality of care and education provided to children has been affected due to staff shortages.
- Practitioners view their role as valuable and impacts children's early education.
- Staff absences are high.
- Practitioners are tired following continued staff absences.
- Practitioners are unable to complete assessments on time due to staff shortages.
- Practitioners are required to work overtime in order to complete assessments due to staff shortages and meet quality standards.
- Practitioners are required to work overtime in order to meet ratio/ regulatory requirements.
- Staff shortages have affected practitioners annual leave requirements.
- Practitioners show high levels of commitment towards the nursery.
- Staff shortages have affected practitioners' health and wellbeing.
- Staff shortages affect practitioners' morale/ motivation.
- Practitioners feel guilty for taking sick leave.

Emerging Findings

➤**Practitioners**
- Staff shortages have affected practitioners rest and break times.
- Leaders are unable to support staff's wellbeing due to staff shortages.
- Staff shortages have lead practitioners to feeling run down, exhausted and stressed.
- Practitioners are required to work overtime in order to complete assessments due to staff shortages and meet quality standards and ratio/ regulatory requirements.
- Staff shortages have affected practitioners' health and wellbeing.
- Practitioners have no work/life balance due to staffing. They try to make family time.
- Statutory ratio requirements are difficult to fulfil due to staffing- practitioners are tired constantly trying to fufil them.
- Practitioners' workload is affected due to ratio requirements.
- Overtime and staff absences create feelings of stress and exhaustion.

➤**System and structure**
- Regulators are not understanding of apprenticeship learning programmes.

➤**Children and Families**
- The quality of care and education provided to children has been affected due to staff shortages.

Emerging Themes

❖**Theme 1:**

Practitioners held the perception that they were not valued by the regulator and that their wellbeing was not considered throughout regulatory processes
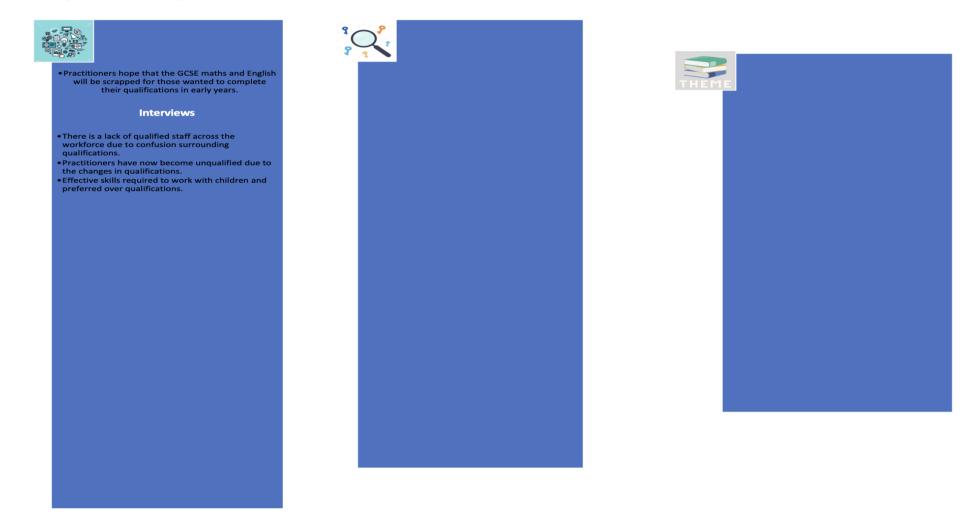
❖**Theme 2:**

Processes and requirements enforced by regulation throughout the early childhood sector negatively influences professional wellbeing

Identifying themes through codes: **Staffing**

- There is difficulty gaining permanent staff.
- Practitioners have no work/life balance due to staffing. They try to make family time.
- Statutory ratio requirements are difficult to fulfil due to staffing.
- Practitioners feel as if they cannot continue working due to staffing. Practitioners want to leave.
- Practitioners complete additional duties such as cooking.
- Overtime and staff absences create feelings of stress and exhaustion.
- Leaders are supportive towards their team.
- Leaders oversee their staff team.
- Practitioners support other settings due to staffing issues.
- Practitioners are required to complete admin duties.
- Managers work alongside practitioners at other settings to support staffing.
- Managers support each other across different settings.
- Managers are unable to fully focus on their own setting due to supporting others.
- Agency and cover staff support staffing issues.
- Staffing issues affect children's routines.
- Statutory ratio requirements are difficult to fulfil due to staffing- practitioners workload is affected.
- Practitioners are affected by the physical and emotional strain of their role.
- Practitioners leave their roles due to pressure.
- Leaders and practitioners are leaving.
- Qualified staff members are under further pressure to support new staff, unqualified and non-permanent staff members and lead.
- Practitioners want to leave their roles.
- Practitioners are unable to consistently spend quality time with children due to staff shortages
- Nurseries require a consistent staff team.
- Practitioners work long hours due to staffing.
- Practitioners are responsible for resources.
- Additional responsibilities affect workload.

Identifying themes through codes: __Staffing__

Interviews

- Practitioners are under pressure due to staff shortages and leave thier roles.
- Workload is increased for qualified staff.
- Qualified staff are required to support apprentices.
- Practitioners work/life balance and wellbeing is affected due to staffing.
- Nurseries require further support with staffing.
- Statutory ratio requirements are difficult to fulfil due to staffing- practitioners are tired constantly trying to fufil them.
- Standards are affected by staff shortages.
- Regulators are not understanding of induction processes.
- Managers are unable to fully focus on their own setting due to supporting others.
- Overtime leaves practitioners feeling stressed.
- Practitioners are required to work overtime in order to meet ratio requirements.
- Leaders attempt to balance ratio requirements with practitioners' requests.
- Nurseries require a consistent staff team.
- Overtime affects practitioners' happiness.
- Practitioners complete additional duties such as cooking.
- Regulators are not understanding of apprenticeship learning programmes.
- Practitioners' workload is affected due to ratio requirements.
- There is difficulty gaining permanent staff.
- The staffing crisis has continued for a number of years.
- Staffing has a detrimental effect on nurseries. Vacancies are high.
- Wellbeing is a needed topic to support practitioners throughout staff shortages.
- Practitioners deserve the rest they require.
- Practitioners are passionate, caring and hard working.
- Deputy Managers cover a variety of roles and are required to stay late to support families/ staff.

THEME

Identifying themes through codes: **Staffing**

- Practitioners are affected by staff shortages.
- Practitioners do not enjoy coming into work due to staffing.
- Ratio requirements should be changed to support staff.
- Deputy Managers are unable to complete their roles due to additional workload.
- Practitioners are not motivated to work.
- Leaders are pressured to work regardless of the circumstances.
- Leaders are supportive towards their team.
- Practitioners are affected by the pressure at work.
- Practitioners are leaving their full time roles.
- Practitioners seek less responsibility and hours.
- Staff shortages have affected practitioners rest and break times.
- Staff shortages have affected practitioners' health and wellbeing.
- Practitioners are not caring for themselves properly due to staff shortages.
- More staffing would support and sustain professional wellbeing.

Identifying themes through codes: **Support**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries

- Local authorities are supportive towards nurseries.
- Leaders are supportive towards their teams.
- Leaders spend time with their team.
- Leaders provide adequate time to practitioners to complete paperwork.
- Leaders provide support to new practitioners.
- Nurseries require strong leadership.
- Leaders support their team to complete paperwork.
- School teachers have supported nurseries with transitions.
- Leaders are required to train new practitioners.
- New practitioners are not experienced.
- There is a high number of children with SEN who require support.
- Nurseries are in areas of high deprivation with social issues.
- Staff require support with paperwork.
- Some staff lack confidence when completing paperwork.
- Practitioners support other nurseries across their organisation.
- Local authorities support nurseries with training.
- Training provided by the local authority has a positive impact on the team.
- Nursery Managers are not always supported.
- Nursery Managers support each other across the organisation.
- Some Nursery Managers cannot cope with the size of the nurseries they manage.
- Some Nursery Managers suffer with low wellbeing.
- New Nursery Managers require further support.
- Nursery Managers take on the practitioner role to support the organisation.
- New Managers are stressed.
- New Managers do not receive enough support from higher Management.
- New Managers are inexperienced and learning.

Emerging Findings

➢ **Practitioners**
- Some Nursery Managers suffer with low wellbeing.
- Some Nursery Managers suffer with low wellbeing.
- Practitioners are guided through Ofsted inspections.
- Leaders are supportive towards their teams.
- Mangers are not always able to put their own wellbeing first.
- Managers are not always supported.
- Nursery Managers support teams who are due Ofsted inspections.
- Managers are supported with Ofsted inspections.
- Nursery teams require support to calm nerves throughout inspections.
- Managers identify what well-being means to individuals throughout their team.
- Managers take part in mental health first aid training to support their teams.
- Leaders support the personal and professional wellbeing of their team.

➢ **System and structure**
- The government is not supportive towards nurseries which affects wellbeing.
- Wellbeing is difficult to uphold.
- Nurseries are struggling to uphold ratios and statutory staffing requirements.

Emerging Themes

❖ **Theme 1:**
Arrangements are made to support the professional wellbeing of practitioners throughout and in preparation for regulatory inspection processes.

❖ **Theme 2:**
Practitioners within leadership roles are responsible for enhancing and sustaining the professional wellbeing of their team, which leaves them unable to support their own professional wellbeing.

❖ **Theme 3:**
The statutory requirement to meet ratio standards throughout the early childhood sector negatively influences professional wellbeing for early childhood practitioners.

Identifying themes through codes: **Support**

- Experienced Managers are supportive of new Managers.
- Some Managers do not have their Deputy for support.
- New Managers are finding their roles difficult.
- Practitioners require support from their leaders.
- Leaders are required to multitask.
- Leaders spend time with their team.
- Leaders provide support and training to practitioners.
- Managers enjoy the opportunities provided for progression.
- Leaders prepare treats for their team to show appreciation.
- Leaders are involved in the growth and development of training.
- Nursery Managers have a strong support network.
- Practitioners take part in training events.
- Practitioners have coaches to support them.
- Practitioners are guided through Ofsted inspections.
- Children with SEN are not always supported.
- Support for children with SEN is difficult to obtain from the local authority.
- Professionals do not always work together to support children with SEN.

THEME

Identifying themes through codes: **Support**

Interviews

- The government is not supportive towards nurseries which affects wellbeing.
- Wellbeing is difficult to uphold.
- Nurseries are struggling to uphold ratios and statutory staffing requirements.
- Funding for children with SEN is difficult to obtain from the local authority.
- The organisation is supportive of nurseries.
- Nurseries push for support from the local authority.
- Local authorities are supportive towards nurseries.
- Leaders are required to train practitioners.
- Leaders are supportive towards their teams.
- Early intervention is taken to support children with SEN.
- Practitioners work alongside families to support children with SEN.
- Children with SEN are not always supported due to long waiting lists.
- Outside agencies support nurseries.
- Practitioners support parents.
- Practitioners are not always supported, which leads to poor practice.
- Leaders are required to support practitioners with their practice.
- Practice is not consistent across nurseries outside of the organisation.
- Managers are not always able to put their own wellbeing first.
- Managers are not always supported.
- Local authority advisory teachers are supportive towards Managers.
- Nursery Managers support each other across the organisation.
- Managers do not always receive enough support from higher Management.
- A lot of Managers leave due to not receiving enough support from higher Management.
- Leaders have an open-door policy to support their team.

Identifying themes through codes: **Support**

- Leaders prepare treats for their team to show appreciation.
- Leaders provide time for their team to take toil and rest.
- Nursery Managers have a strong support network.
- Nursery Managers are required to wear many hats.
- Nursery Managers support teams who are due Ofsted inspections.
- Managers are supported with Ofsted inspections.
- Nursery teams require support to calm nerves throughout inspections.
- Inspections do not always go as planned.
- Managers identify what well-being means to individuals throughout their team.
- Managers take part in mental health first aid training to support their teams.
- Leaders spend time with their team.
- Leaders listen to their team and ensure there is a two-way collaboration.
- Leaders support the personal and professional wellbeing of their team.
- Poor leadership impacts practitioners' practice.
- Practitioners require support from their leaders.

Identifying themes through codes: **Tiredness**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries

- Practitioners feel tired and unwell.
- Practitioners catch colds and illnesses from children.
- It is difficult keeping children comfortable when they are not feeling well.
- Practitioners feel they have a low immune system.
- Practitioners feel physically and mentally unwell.
- Practitioners feel deflated.
- Practitioners feel drained.
- Practitioners feel mentally and physically drained.
- Practitioners are stressed.
- Practitioners do not eat properly as they do not have the energy to cook.
- Practitioners cannot sleep through the night as they have so much on their mind about the nursery.
- Workload has not been completed and is overdue.
- Parents question practitioners over children's baseline assessments which are due.
- Practitioners are tired and exhausted.
- Practitioners want to cry.
- Practitioners are not well.
- Practitioners are not physically or mentally ready to return to work.
- Practitioners push themselves to return to work.
- Practitioners are busy and tired.
- Managers have been trying to get out of their role for some time.
- Managers do not know how they are going to last within the role.
- Managers do not enjoy their role.
- Managers do their role because it pays bills.
- Managers are unsure of that they would do aside from early years and believe it is too late to try something else.
- Managers try to support their own wellbeing.
- Practitioners are exhausted and look forward to having a rest.
- Practitioners feel tired from travelling to other nurseries.

Emerging Findings

➢ **Practitioners**

- Practitioners find their roles physically and mentally exhausting.
- Practitioners are passionate and work for the outcomes of the children.

Emerging Themes

❖ **Theme 1:**

Processes and requirements enforced by regulation throughout the early childhood sector negatively influences professional wellbeing

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Identifying themes through codes: **Tiredness**

- Practitioners arrive home late and take time to look after their own children.
- Practitioners feel shattered.
- Practitioners find their leadership roles intense, physical and exhausting.
- Practitioners find their roles physically and mentally exhausting.
- Practitioners are passionate and work for the outcomes of the children.
- Practitioners do not benefit financially from their roles.
- Practitioners are tired and struggle to make time for themselves.
- Practitioners highlight the pressure on themselves and their teams.
- Practitioners spend their free time resting and completing coursework required to further their qualifications.

Identifying themes through codes: **Tiredness**

Interviews

- Practitioners try to avoid burnout by not overworking themselves.
- Practitioners have experienced burnout, which lead to time off sick.
- Practitioners are not welcomed when they returned to work after sickness.
- Practitioners leave companies when they are not treated well.
- Practitioners do not believe their feedback will be taken on board.
- Practitioners believe that they will burnout after time.
- Practitioners are tired.
- Practitioners do not have the energy.
- Practitioners prefer to do four longer days over five days and have a day off.
- Practitioners consider going into retail.

THEME

Identifying themes through codes: **Value**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries

- Leaders support practitioners' understanding of values across the nursery.
- Leaders support practitioners' understanding of the role they play towards supporting children's understanding of values.
- Leaders arrange treats and events to support staff appreciation and team building across the nursery.
- Practitioners are not always provided with the time required for their workload.
- Managers do not always feel valued.
- The value of Managers is not recognised as Managers focus on their team.
- The organisation takes feedback on board.
- The organisation wants to make positive changes.
- Managers use meetings as an opportunity to get concerns off of their chest.
- Ideas are welcomed openly by the organisation.
- The early years sector is not valued.
- The early years sector is not well paid.
- It takes time for new teams to gel.
- Value led organisations provide practitioners with more drive and direction.

Emerging Findings

➢ **Practitioners**

- Practitioners are not always provided with the time required for their workload.
- Managers do not always feel valued.
- The value of Managers is not recognised as Managers focus on their team.
- Managers use meetings as an opportunity to get concerns off of their chest.
- Leaders make efforts to reward and recognise practitioners.
- anagers focus on lifting up the team.
- Managers' professional wellbeing is not monitored.
- Managers' morale is low.
- Managers' look forward to leaving the sector.
- Managers do not enjoy their role at present.
- Managers continuously support the wellbeing of the staff, children and parents.
- Managers recognise the need to support the wellbeing of all stakeholders, however find it hard to deal with.
- The recognition and promotion of practitioners supports their professional wellbeing.

➢ **System and structure**

- The organisation wants to make positive changes.
- The early years sector is not valued.
- The early years sector is not well paid.
- Value led organisations hold the ability to integrate wellbeing across the organisation.

Emerging Themes

❖ **Theme 1:**

Practitioners within leadership roles are responsible for enhancing and sustaining the professional wellbeing of their team and stakeholders, which leaves them unable to support their own professional wellbeing.

❖ **Theme 3:**

Practitioners believe that greater recognition would support professional wellbeing across the sector.

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Identifying themes through codes: <u>Value</u>

Interviews

- Leaders make efforts to reward and recognise practitioners.
- Managers do not always feel valued.
- The value of Managers is not recognised as Managers focus on their team.
- Managers focus on lifting up the team.
- Managers' professional wellbeing is not monitored.
- Managers' morale is low.
- Managers' look forward to leaving the sector.
- Managers do not enjoy their role at present.
- Managers continuously support the wellbeing of the staff, children and parents.
- Managers recognise the need to support the wellbeing of all stakeholders, however find it hard to deal with.
- Practitioners are recognised and promoted accordingly.
- Practitioners do not always get opportunities to progress due to staffing requirements.
- The recognition and promotion of practitioners supports their professional wellbeing.
- Value led organisations hold the ability to integrate wellbeing across the organisation.

Identifying themes through codes: **Workload**

Stage one of coding

Journal Entries
- Practitioners are busy settling in new children who are upset.
- Existing children who are transitioning into new rooms cannot be supported as much.
- Practitioners are busy settling in and comforting new children.
- Practitioners are unable to focus on the routine and environment.
- Paperwork has been reduced for staff but not for management.
- Practitioners are required to support school readiness and transitions.
- Practitioners complete reports and assessments for families.
- Leaders are involved in office-based duties.
- Leaders do not believe their role should be office based.
- Leaders feel as though they are mainly in the office working on administrative tasks.
- Leaders support their staff with training.
- Leaders support their team with understanding the EYFS curriculum and teaching and learning through training.
- Leaders are required to support inexperienced practitioners.
- Managers have many deadlines to meet.
- Managers deal with finances and payments from parents.
- Managers support new families and children to settle into the nursery.
- Managers are involved in maintaining resources across the nursery.
- Managers are preparing for their Ofsted inspection, which is due any time now.
- Managers are aware that the Ofsted inspection may be difficult que to the standard of staffing
- Managers are aiming for a 'good' outcome due to the quality of staffing.
- Practitioners are not always able to write and speak in English effectively.

Emerging Findings

➢**Practitioners**
- Leaders are required to cover rooms to support staff and meet ratios requirements.
- Leaders prepare prompts across the nursery to support them during Ofsted inspections.
- Reducing paperwork will reduce pressure and make practitioners happier.
- Practitioners do not always have a positive work/ life balance.

Emerging Themes

❖**Theme 1:**
Processes and requirements enforced by regulation throughout the early childhood sector negatively influences professional wellbeing

❖**Theme 2:**
The reduction of paperwork and pressure would be supportive of professional wellbeing

❖**Theme 3:**
The statutory requirement to meet ratio standards throughout the early childhood sector negatively influences professional wellbeing for early childhood practitioners

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Identifying themes through codes: <u>**Workload**</u>

- Managers are required to read through assessments before they are sent to parents.
- Some practitioners do not want to read or enhance their own skills.
- Managers/ Leaders are required to support and train their staff team.
- Managers are required to fit a lot of information into one session.
- Managers to-do lists are growing. Managers do not always get to complete all tasks. Managers are trying to catch up with tasks.
- Leaders find additional projects stressful.
- Leaders have many deadlines and tasks to complete and receive help.
- Leaders remind and chase practitioners to complete work, which is stressful.
- Leaders come home with a headache.
- Leaders are involved in office-based duties, which cannot be shared. Leaders find it challenging to complete office based duties.
- Leaders do not always get to complete all tasks. Leaders find it stressful when they cannot complete all tasks on their to-do list.
- Leaders do not always get to leave work on time.
- Practitioners find it difficult to catch up with information following time off.
- Leaders feel stressed when they are unable to complete tasks. Leaders worry that they may have forgotten something.
- Leaders catch up on what they've missed.
- Practitioners complete additional paperwork in preparation of hot weather conditions to support them.
- Practitioners support preparations for the nursery on Sundays.
- Practitioners work late on Fridays to support groups.
- Practitioners enjoy catching up with other professionals across the sector.
- Practitioners spend time settling in new children.
- Practitioners prepare the nursery for the new term and children leaving.

THEME

Identifying themes through codes: **Workload**

- Practitioners arrange cleaning of the nursery.
- Practitioners comment on the productivity and positivity of their week.
- Quieter times across the nursery enable leaders to audit paperwork and gives the nursery team a positive push.
- Leaders work on Saturdays to create spaces for practitioners and organise the nursery, which in turn boosts the team.
- Practitioners feel positive about changes the leadership team have made to support the environment.
- Leaders ensure the environment is well presented.
- Practitioners do not always have a basic understanding of the framework.
- Practitioners require practical training.
- Leaders are required to support practitioners within their role.
- Leaders are facing a tricky time as they support practitioners.
- Leaders are aware of what quality should look like and support practitioners with how to get there.
- Leaders are required to deal with funding issues and meet deadlines required by the local authority.
- Practitioners are required to build meaningful relationships within a matter of days, weeks and months. Practitioners focus on building trusting relationships with parents.
- Nursery Managers wear multiple hats. Nursery Managers have a diverse and multiskilled role.
- Practitioners do not always have confidence and self-belief, which is important.
- Nursery Managers are like parents towards staff who, teach, praise, correct and push.
- Nursery Managers push practitioners to become the best version of themselves.
- Occupancy is important; therefore a high number of children settle into the nursery at once.
- Nursery Managers have a high level of staff members to induct at one time.

Identifying themes through codes: **Workload**

- Children are prioritised by Nursery Managers.
- Nursery Managers are fulfilled by their accomplishments within the nursery.
- Leaders spend time training and developing their qualified staff team.
- Leaders are stressed by having to look after their team, in addition to the children across the nursery.
- Nursery days and environments are busy.
- Children should be prioritised above paperwork.
- Practitioners find paperwork stressful. They are behind.
- Children are settling, transitioning and leaving, which increases workload.
- Leaders take on additional projects alongside the local authority.
- The nursery has many children with additional needs.
- Additional help is required to support children with speech and language communication.
- Leaders also take on additional roles to support with oral health across the nursery.
- Leaders work alongside the local authority to take part in further programmes and gain support.
- Practitioners are not always comfortable with the changes made to the curriculum- they are trying to understand them.
- Practitioners workload is increased due to preparation of the children's graduation party.
- Leaders support practitioners to complete paperwork.
- Practitioners take part in research across the nursery.
- Leaders support practitioners across the rooms in addition to completing administrative tasks.
- Leaders are also key persons and room leaders across several rooms.
- Leaders are involved in a variety of roles across the nursery and complete many tasks at once.
- Leaders take work home and complete paperwork over the weekend.

Identifying themes through codes: **Workload**

Emerging Themes

- Leaders are required to complete many tasks at once and cover for Managers.
- Leaders are required/ expected to run the nursery and support all stakeholders of the nursery.
- Leaders are required to complete a lot of paperwork.
- The expectations of leaders is too high.
- additional courses to support their knowledge of SEN.
- Leaders work over the weekend. Also to complete the assignments required for courses and open days.
- Leaders find their workload is too high.
- Leaders are stressed.
- The workload is less for practitioners when children are on holiday.
- Practitioners are happier and positive when their workload is reduced.
- Practitioners prepare paperwork for children starting in September when the nursery is quiet.
- Practitioners work alongside the local authority to support children who may need to be referred.
- Practitioners take on additional projects and classes across the nursery.
- Leaders are required to cover rooms to support staff and meet ratios requirements.
- Agency and bank staff support the nursery.
- Leaders are required to run the kitchen at times.
- Leaders are in charge of nursery finances, including debt and chase parents for fees.
- Practitioners support children to settle in addition to supporting existing children.
- Practitioners are required to complete additional paperwork due to the lack of staff.
- Leaders' workload is high. Leaders find their role hard.
- Leaders are unable to complete their paperwork during working hours.

THEME

Identifying themes through codes: **Workload**
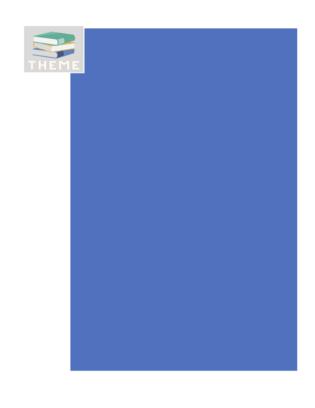
- Leaders are required to support practitioners with their stress levels.
- Nursery life is stressful at times, however practitioners are required to be calm at all times.
- Leaders intervene when practitioners become stressed.
- Leaders help their team when the environment becomes stressful.
- Leaders reinforce nurture and respect across the nursery.
- Leaders intervene when practitioners become too harsh with children.
- Leaders feel as though they pick up a lot of the work within their room.
- Leaders support and oversee their team.
- Leaders manage their team and ensure practitioners are working effectively.
- Some practitioners need motivation to engage and some work harder than others.
- Practitioners are not always confident to speak up, delegate and ask for help.
- Leaders intervene to ensure workloads are spread evenly amongst the team.
- Practitioners sometimes get offended when leaders speak up and ask them to participate more across the nursery.
- Workload is increased during hot weather as practitioners work to ensure children's needs are met.
- Children transitioning across the nursery have settled well into their new rooms.

Identifying themes through codes: **Workload**

- Leaders find it difficult to catch up with their workload, therefore they take work home.
- Leaders find their work stressful and challenging due to paperwork.
- Leaders are required to cover different rooms across the week.
- The deputy manager is often the room leader at the same time and based to work with the team.
- Practitioners work long days and are exhausted.
- Practitioners try to catch up with tasks.
- Practitioners are stressed supporting children to settle in.
- Occupancy needs to be sustained to ensure the nursery can survive as a business.
- Staggered settling in sessions would have been more supportive for families, practitioners and children.
- Settling in has been difficult for new children who have never been to nursery before.
- Some nurseries complete a higher level of paperwork- one observation daily and are not given any time out. Some have 17 key children.
- Some practitioners across other nurseries take work home to complete observations to ensure the children are being supervised effectively.
- Practitioners believe that they are in a fortunate position compared to the paperwork required within other nurseries, however still find their existing level of paperwork difficult.
- Some practitioners are required to complete the SENCo role in addition to their workload.
- Practitioners find it difficult to complete their role in addition to covering the nursery chef.

Identifying themes through codes: **Workload**

Interviews

- Practitioners' wellbeing is not their main focus.
- Leaders are not always supportive towards staff due to their workload.
- Practitioners find it difficult to manage their workload.
- Practitioners face many job roles that are not listed on their job description.
- Leaders take part in the opening and health and safety checks of the nursery.
- Leaders ensure the environment is safe for the children.
- Leaders ensure the environment is well presented.
- Leaders ensure stakeholders are greeted into a welcoming environment.
- Leaders ensure they follow safeguarding regulations.
- Leaders communicate and hand over to practitioners.
- Leaders are active in supporting and welcoming children.
- Leaders are involved in a variety of roles across the nursery.
- Practitioners do not always hold the basic communication methods required to teach children. Some practitioners do not have the knowledge required for their role.
- Leaders take time to support practitioners' teaching methods in addition to their workload.
- Leaders set the expectation for parents and the nursery.
- Leaders evaluate the staff dynamics to support team members equally.
- Managers spend a lot of time completing administrative tasks.
- Managers are unable to focus on administrative tasks due to their responsibilities towards the nursery.
- Managers require administrative support to reduce their workload and assist them in completing their role.

Identifying themes through codes: **Workload**
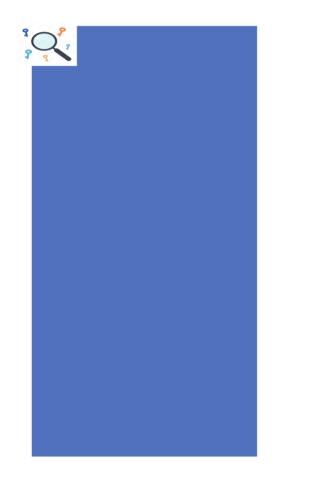
- Nurseries are situated within high levels of deprivation.
- Practitioners deal with a high workload level.
- Practitioners are under stress.
- Practitioners work with families with social issues.
- Practitioners deal with issues such as domestic violence, child protection, mental health and financial issues.
- Practitioners work with families and signpost them for support.
- Practitioners work closely with safeguarding teams and early help to support families.
- The local authority resources support practitioners to signpost families.
- Practitioners focus on early intervention.
- Practitioners get to know families well in order to support them and identify/action any concerns.
- Managers have learnt to prioritise important tasks. Managers are not always able to complete the tasks on their list.
- Managers are required to complete tasks required of the operational manager. Managers question why they are completing operational roles.
- Managers are happy to support others.
- Managers are supportive towards their staff team.
- Managers are required to document lots of information to safeguard themselves.
- Supporting staff is time consuming.
- The level of paperwork required for observations of children has reduced significantly.
- Leaders support their staff with writing observations.
- Leaders believe that practitioners should be writing more observations to improve their writing skills and learn more about the children.
- In some nurseries leadership teams are required to complete all observations.
- Ofsted requirements have changed to enable practitioners to complete less paperwork.
- Professional wellbeing could be supported through less overtime and less changes throughout the nursery.

Identifying themes through codes: **Workload**

- Staying overtime can be a lot for practitioners.
- Professional wellbeing could be improved and sustained through regular interviews with practitioners, which is impossible at the moment.
- Leaders are involved in a variety of roles across the nursery.
- Leaders are required to plan well to complete the variety of roles they are responsible for.
- Leaders prepare prompts across the nursery to support them during Ofsted inspections.
- Leaders prepare prompts to reflect on areas of improvement.
- Prompts across the nursery relate to wellbeing.
- The variety of roles required for nursery managers has impacted some of the management team.
- Leaders choices to work additional hours after work does not impact them negatively.
- Leaders take toil when working additional hours, which has a positive impact with a supportive leadership team.
- Leaders are able to focus more on completing tasks during the weekends when the nursery is not running, which positively impacts thier wellbeing.
- Leaders complete tasks over the weekend in order to feel more prepared the following week.
- Leaders would be impacted if they were forced into working weekends frequently without choice.
- Working extra hours and weekends is part of the job, which isn't positive.
- Practitioners are expected to attend open days and meetings, which are beneficial, however add to the expectations required.
- Leaders provide practitioners with food and refreshments during meetings and try to ensure that they are fun and engaging.
- Leaders are working on how they deliver staff meetings.
- Practitioners feel overworked.
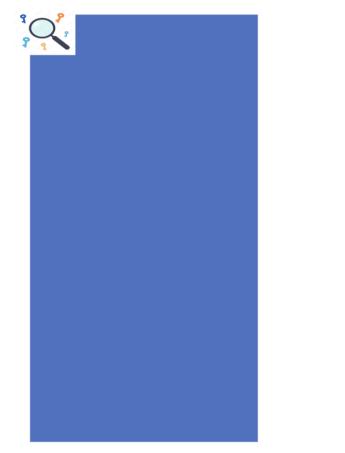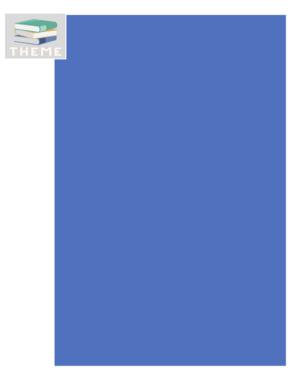- Paperwork should be reduced to support professional wellbeing.

Identifying themes through codes: **Workload**

- Reducing paperwork will reduce pressure and make practitioners happier.
- Paperwork seems reduced, but it is not.
- Assessments and parent evenings could be reduced to support professional wellbeing.
- Pedagogical conversations are sufficient enough to replace assessments and parent evenings.
- Practitioners are scared about the level of paperwork required.
- Reducing paperwork will reduce pressure and enable practitioners to feel more relaxed.
- More practitioners are wanting to become bank staff to avoid completing paperwork.
- Practitioners find playing and interacting with children rewarding.
- Practitioners find the paperwork surrounding children's learning hard.
- Some paperwork requirements, such as medication and accident forms should be in place and cannot be reduced.
- Practitioners reduce their working days in order to reduce stress.
- Practitioners do not always have a positive work/life balance.
- Practitioners receive calls from work in their personal time.
- Practitioners step down from their leadership responsibilities to avoid stress.

Appendix V: Summary of themes

Phase 5 of thematic analysis

Research questions

1. **How do early childhood practitioners understand the concept of professional wellbeing?**
2. **How, in their view, is professional wellbeing affected by the current regulatory processes in England?**
3. **How might early childhood practitioners' wellbeing be sustained in the future?**

Refining, defining and naming themes

Sources of data	Emergent Codes	Main themes	Expanded themes
Reflective journals	Related to the system Regulation Funding Pay Recruitment Retention Qualifications Related to the experience of practitioner	Professional wellbeing is a complex-phenomena	Understandings of professional wellbeing are subjective and individual Professional and personal wellbeing is interconnected Covid 19 significantly affected practitioners' professional wellbeing Practitioners struggle to care for their own professional wellbeing Practitioners with leadership roles sustain the professional wellbeing of their team
Interviews	Covid19 Pressure Staffing Morale Value	The regulatory framework for early years has a negative influence on professional wellbeing	Statutory requirements related to sustaining ratios and qualifications are problematic The requirements of preparing for inspection and anticipation of the process is challenging
	Agency Recognition Diversity Sickness Support Passion Parents Workload	The experience of regulation is problematic	Practitioners held the perception that they were not valued by Ofsted inspectors and wellbeing was not considered Practitioners believe that the regulator subjectively and inconsistently determines quality of provision Early childhood settings mitigate the impact of regulation/inspection by putting in place specific

	Personal wellbeing		arrangements for professional wellbeing
	Professional wellbeing Tiredness Facilities	Recognition of ECPs and the need for ECE policy and regulatory reform	Practitioners believe that greater recognition for their work would support professional wellbeing Public funding could be reformed to increase staff pay and improve working conditions The bureaucratic burden linked to policy implementation and regulation could be reduced Participants indicated how the practice of inspection could change

Appendix VI: Ethics approval

Dear Leonie,

Application ID: ETH2021-0137

Project title: Early childhood practitioners' experiences of regulatory processes and their perceptions of how this affects their wellbeing in day nurseries: a small-scale exploratory study.

Lead researcher: Miss Leonie Butler

Your application to Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee (EISC) was considered on the 9th May 2022.

The decision is: **Approved**

The Committee's response is based on the protocol described in the application form and supporting documentation.

Your project has received ethical approval for 4 years from the approval date.

If you have any questions regarding this application please contact your supervisor or the administrator for the Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee.

Approval has been given for the submitted application only and the research must be conducted accordingly.

Should you wish to make any changes in connection with this research/consultancy project you must complete 'An application for approval of an amendment to an existing application'.

The approval of the proposed research/consultancy project applies to the following site.

Project site: **My data collection will consist of semi structured interviews with twelve participants under one institution. In order to allow my participants to articulate themselves in depth and provide them with comfort and flexibility, individuals will be provided with a choice if they wish to conduct the interview online, via telephone or in person (depending on government restrictions following the pandemic which currently restricts face to face contact). Participants will also be given the choice to conduct journals through audio voice notes, written emails or video recordings, all of which will be stored on a password protected storage platform, which does not involve face to face contact.**

Principal Investigator / Local Collaborator: Miss Leonie Butler

Approval is given on the understanding that the UEL Code of Practice for Research and the Code of Practice for Research Ethics is adhered to.

Any adverse events or reactions that occur in connection with this research/consultancy project should be reported using the University's form for Reporting an Adverse/Serious Adverse Event/Reaction.

The University will periodically audit a random sample of approved applications for ethical approval, to ensure that the projects are conducted in compliance with the consent given by the Ethics and Integrity Sub-Committee and to the highest standards of rigour and integrity.

Please note, it is your responsibility to retain this letter for your records.

With the Committee's best wishes for the success of the project.

Yours sincerely,

Fernanda Pereira Da Silva

Administrative Officer for Research Governance

Ethics ETH2021-0137: Miss Leonie Butler (High risk)

Appendix VII: Participant information and consent form

University of
East London

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<u>Participant Information Sheet</u>

Research Integrity
The University adheres to its responsibility to promote and support the highest standard of rigour and integrity in all aspects of research; observing the appropriate ethical, legal and professional frameworks.

The University is committed to preserving your dignity, rights, safety and wellbeing and as such it is a mandatory requirement of the University that formal ethical approval, from the appropriate Research Ethics Committee, is granted before research with human participants, human data human material, personal and/or sensitive data, or non-human animal commences.

The purpose of this Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with the information that you need to consider in deciding whether to participate in this research project.

The Principal Investigator/Director of Studies
Dr Jennifer Robson
j.robson@uel.ac.uk

Student researcher
Leonie Butler
U0605314@uel.ac.uk

Consent to Participate in a Research Study
The purpose of this letter is to provide you with the information that you need to consider whether to participate in this study.

Project Title
EdD Professional Doctorate in Education

Early childhood practitioners' experiences of regulatory processes and their perceptions of how this affects their wellbeing in day nurseries: a small-scale exploratory study.

Project Description

My research aims to gather your views and experiences of regulatory processes within nurseries and how this affects your wellbeing. It is hoped that the findings will contribute to my thesis.

This is an independent research project overseen by my tutors at UEL, and not an evaluation on behalf of OFSTED. Anything that is shared with me will be used purely for the research purposes stated above.

My data collection will consist of semi structured interviews with twelve participants across four early years nurseries under one institution. For each nursery there will be two early childhood practitioners and one practitioner with management responsibilities, all of who have had over two years' experience in their role as well as experienced a recent inspection of a nursery (within two years). In addition, I will be inviting you to keep a short, weekly reflective journal over a period of six months. With regard to data analysis, I will be using thematic analysis to identify emerging themes from my transcribed interviews and thematic codes to interpret my research.

This invitation has been sent to you because you meet the above criteria.

I hope to speak to twelve participants in order to conduct twelve individual semi-structured interviews. In order to offer you comfort and flexibility, you will be provided with a choice on how you wish the interview to be conducted. Interviews can take place either face to face (restrictions permitting) at a public place (such as a café) or online via teams or telephone.

The interview is expected to take up to one hour.

I will also be inviting you to keep a short, weekly reflective journal over a period of six months. The journal will be used to further allow you to highlight your individual experiences and used as a discussion tool throughout the interview.

You will be provided with a choice on the preferred mode you wish to use, journals can be conducted through audio voice notes or written emails, all of which will be stored on a password protected platform. You will be provided with a short guide before you start the journal, which will emphasise my research questions which focus on your own concept of professional wellbeing and how this may be affected by current regulatory processes, as well as suggestions for how your wellbeing may be sustained in the future.

I understand professionals have busy schedules, and the interview and journal entries will obviously be taking up a significant amount of your time, for which I am grateful. I hope that you will find it worthwhile to share your own experiences with me. By taking part in this study you will be supporting me in meeting the needs of my thesis and contributing to new research within the field of early childhood practitioners' and wellbeing.

Confidentiality of the Data

In any report on the results of this research your identity will remain anonymous and you will be identified as a 'code'. This will be done by disguising any details of your interview which may reveal your identity or the identity of the people you speak about.

Signed consent forms, original audio recordings and transcripts of your interview/ journal entries will be retained securely until this study is completed and marked by examiners (approx. until September 2023) it will then be destroyed. Data generated throughout the course of my research will be held in line with UEL's data protection policy.

Under freedom of information legalisation, you are entitled to access the information you have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above. Transcriptions will be transcribed

by hand/via word document and sent securely to you via my university email for confirmation. If you are satisfied with the transcripts I will ask you to confirm this in writing.

Location
The University of East London
Stratford Campus
Water Lane
London
E15 4LZ

Remuneration
N/A- participants will not benefit directly from this research

Disclaimer
Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw at any time during the research. Should you choose to withdraw from the programme you may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without an obligation to give a reason. Please note that your data can be withdrawn up to the point of data analysis – after this point it may not be possible if your data is anonymised.

Ethical Approval for the research project has been granted by University Research Ethics Sub-Committee (URES).

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of the research in which you are being asked to participate, please contact:

Catherine Hitchens, Ethics, Integrity and Compliance Manager, Office for Postgraduates, Research and Engagement, University of East London, Docklands Campus, London, E16 2RD. Telephone: 020 8223 6683. Email: researchethics@uel.ac.uk

For general enquiries about the research please contact the Principal Investigator on the contact details at the top of this sheet.

UNIVERSITY OF EAST LONDON

Consent to Participate in a Programme Involving the Use of Human Participants.

EdD Professional Doctorate in Education
Leonie Butler

Please tick as appropriate:

	YES	NO
I have read the information leaflet relating to the above research project in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep. The nature and purposes of the research project have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved have been explained to me.		
I understand that participation involves a semi-structured interview, which will last around one hour and weekly journal entries over a six-month period.		
I confirm consent to use my audio recordings/ being audio recorded for the purpose of interviews and journals.		
I understand that my involvement in the research project, and particular data from this research, will remain strictly confidential as far as possible. Only the researchers involved in the research project will have access to the data. *(Please see below)*		
I understand that maintaining strict confidentiality is subject to the following limitations: Where possible, participants' confidentiality will be maintained unless a disclosure is made that indicates that the participant or someone else is at serious risk of harm. Such disclosures may be reported to the relevant authority.		
Anonymised quotes will be used in publications		
Participants will not have the option to be named in publications as names will be removed and disguised as a code.		
Transcriptions will be transcribed via word document by myself as the researcher. Transcripts of individual interviews and journals will be sent securely via university email for confirmation.		
If you are satisfied with the transcripts/ journals you will be encouraged to confirm and put this in writing electronically. Transcripts and journals will then be stored in a password protected one drive through university email.		
This study is a part of a project for a EdD Professional Doctorate in Education, therefore the study and findings will be analysed and published in a thesis.		

A summary of findings will be sent to participants who request them		
I understand that the data collected for the research project will be anonymized before it is published.		
I understand that the published results of the research project will be accessible in the public domain and may be deposited in an open access data repository.		
I understand that the published results of the research project will be accessible in the public domain and may be re-used, republished or re-analyzed by others in future research.		
I give my permission for the research team to use the data that I have provided in future research projects which may be made publicly available.		
I give my permission for the research team to retain my personal contact details and contact me regarding participation in future research projects.		
It has been explained to me what will happen once the research project has been completed.		
I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and I am free to withdraw at any time during the research without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason. I understand that my data can be withdrawn up to the point of data analysis, and that after this point it may not be possible if the data is anonymised.		
I hereby freely and fully consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me and for the information obtained to be used in relevant research publications.		

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

……………………………………………………………………

Participant's Signature ……………………………………………………………………………………

Investigator's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

……………………………………………………………………

Investigator's Signature

……………………………………………………………………………………

Date: …………………………

Appendix VIII: Sources of independent support services

Independent support services

I recognise that your involvement in this research process may relive some difficult experiences.

You are able to withdraw from the study at any time if you feel uncomfortable or experience any emotional discomfort.

If you feel that you have been adversely affected by taking part in this study, and would like to speak to an independent support service you will be advised to seek help from:

The Samaritans Telephone: 08457 90 90 90

Samaritans are available to lend a listening ear 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. If participants do not want to talk, they can email jo@samaritans.org and a trained Samaritan will respond within 24 hours.

Additionally, if you make your emotional difficulties known to me, I will put you in touch with the mental health support team at the University of East London. **wellbeing@uel.ac.uk**

Government guidelines and the institution's policies regarding covid will be adhered to at all times.

Debrief Sheet

Title of research: Early childhood practitioners' experiences of regulatory processes and their perceptions of how this affects their wellbeing in day nurseries: a small-scale exploratory study

Name of researcher: Leonie Butler

Thank you for taking part in this study. This debrief form will provide you with full details of the research in which you have participated.

The purpose of this research was to examine early childhood practitioners' experiences of regulatory processes and their perceptions of how this affects their wellbeing in day nurseries. You took part in a semi-structured, informal interview, in addition to submitting several weekly journal entries over a six-month period. Your journal entries and interview will be analysed and results, including anonymised quotes will be written up and used for the purpose of my doctoral thesis.

If you feel that there is anything you would like to discuss in relation to this research, please feel free to do so by contacting me on the email below. If you feel that any issues raised throughout your interview or journal entries have caused you any distress and you would like to discuss matters further with a trained professional, please do indicate this to me and I will put you in touch with the mental health support team at the University of East London.

Alternatively, you can contact:
The Samaritans Telephone: 08457 90 90 90
Samaritans are available to lend a listening ear 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. If you do not want to talk you can email jo@samaritans.org and a trained Samaritan will respond within 24 hours.
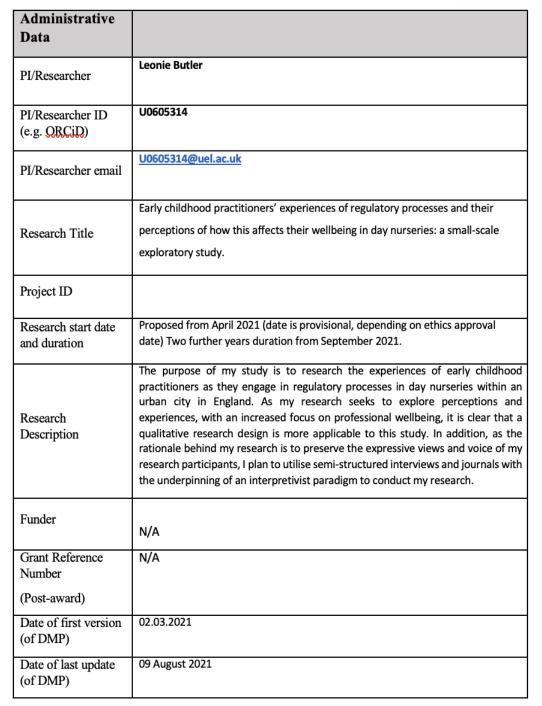
If you would like me to withdraw your data, please do make me aware immediately or contact me by 01.12.2022. The data can be destroyed if you make your intentions clear.

Yours faithfully,
Leonie Butler
Email:U0605314@uel.ac.uk

Appendix IX: Data management plan

University of
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Completed plans **must** be sent to researchdata@uel.ac.uk for review

Administrative Data	
PI/Researcher	**Leonie Butler**
PI/Researcher ID (e.g. ORCiD)	**U0605314**
PI/Researcher email	**U0605314@uel.ac.uk**
Research Title	Early childhood practitioners' experiences of regulatory processes and their perceptions of how this affects their wellbeing in day nurseries: a small-scale exploratory study.
Project ID	
Research start date and duration	Proposed from April 2021 (date is provisional, depending on ethics approval date) Two further years duration from September 2021.
Research Description	The purpose of my study is to research the experiences of early childhood practitioners as they engage in regulatory processes in day nurseries within an urban city in England. As my research seeks to explore perceptions and experiences, with an increased focus on professional wellbeing, it is clear that a qualitative research design is more applicable to this study. In addition, as the rationale behind my research is to preserve the expressive views and voice of my research participants, I plan to utilise semi-structured interviews and journals with the underpinning of an interpretivist paradigm to conduct my research.
Funder	N/A
Grant Reference Number (Post-award)	N/A
Date of first version (of DMP)	02.03.2021
Date of last update (of DMP)	09 August 2021

Related Policies	[Research Data Management Policy](#)
Does this research follow on from previous research? If so, provide details	No
Data Collection	
What data will you collect or create?	Semi-structured interviews: .mp4 format Reflective journals: in Word or in .mp4 formats Transcripts: Word format The semi-structured interviews and journals will produce twelve transcripts for interviews and twelve journals, amounting to twenty-four transcripts in total with journals and interview transcripts combined.
How will the data be collected or created?	My data collection will consist of semi structured interviews with twelve individual participants across four early years nurseries. For each establishment, there will be two early childhood practitioners and one practitioner with management responsibilities, all of who have had over two years' experience in their role as well as experienced a recent inspection of a nursery (within two years). In order to allow my participants to articulate themselves in depth and provide them with comfort and flexibility, individuals will be provided with a choice if they wish to conduct the interview online, via telephone or in person (depending on government restrictions following the pandemic, which currently restricts face to face contact). In addition, I will be inviting each participant to keep a short, weekly pseudonymised reflective journal over a period of six months before the interviews take place. Participants will have the choice of recording their journal reflections in an email to me or record audio journals. I will invite each participant to record through teams audio and create a one drive file that only they have access to. Participants can then upload the audio file direct to the one drive.

	Interview/ journal recordings will be audio only and video will be disabled.

Data from the interview will be audio recorded in teams, in person or via telephone through an encrypted voice recorder (all with the participant's consent). Pseudonymised data will be transcribed by myself as the researcher by hand/ or electronically on word document and transferred to the OneDrive. No software will be used for analysing or processing the data. Participants will be provided with a comprehensive consent letter and asked to rename themselves as a number before recording starts. Audio data will be transcribed and stored on a secure password protected device. The transcriptions will be transcribed via word document by myself as the researcher.

I will be using the thematic analysis approach in order to identify emerging themes from my transcribed interviews and journals. I will identify themes which emerge through the journals and interviews, which I will then code. |
| **Documentation and Metadata** | |
| What documentation and metadata will accompany the data? | The following documentation will be linked to data from each participant.

Participant consent letter- one for both participation in the interview and the participant journal.

Debrief form

Meta data- In the process of analysis I will create tables of coded data. The meta data will only be collected for the purposes of the study. Details of the data collection methods and analysis procedures will be included in the methodology section of my thesis. |
| **Ethics and Intellectual Property** | |
| Identify any ethical issues and how these will be managed | All recording and transcribing will be completed without the inclusion of real names. Participants will be pseudonymised through codes. No sensitive information about the participant or location of home or workplace will be included.

One files will be stored within the university email and password protected. |
| Identify any copyright and Intellectual Property Rights issues and how these will be managed | N/A |

Storage and Backup	
How will the data be stored and backed up during the research?	All files and audio files, including consent forms will be stored within the OneDrive for Business and password protected. Audio data will be recorded using a password protected device and deleted once transcripts have been completed, confirmed and acknowledged by the participant. Any hand-written transcripts or electronic transcripts will be shredded and deleted once confirmed by participants. Attachments will also be saved to OneDrive for Business. Identifiable data, including codes which could re-identify participants will be stored in a separate folder away from the pseudonymised data, also encrypted and password protected within the OneDrive.
How will you manage access and security?	OneDrive file drives will be password protected and are encrypted. Data will always be secured using a password. No personal accounts will be used to store data. Myself (the researcher) will only access data. Except participants who will be provided with a copy of their own data and asked to confirm transcripts electronically. This will be password protected and shared via UEL's OneDrive for Business.
Data Sharing	
How will you share the data?	Participants will be provided with a consent and de-brief form to confirm how the data will be shared. For example- the pseudonymised data will be analysed to generate findings. Quotations from participants will be included in the thesis and in subsequent presentations. Data will not be retained after the completion of the research study and the degree has been confirmed by the Award Board. I will be sharing the data set and findings with my participants. If they are satisfied with the data and findings they will be encouraged to confirm and put this in writing electronically. This will be password protected and shared via UEL's OneDrive for Business.
Are any restrictions on data sharing required?	N/A

Selection and Preservation	
Which data are of long-term value and should be retained, shared, and/or preserved?	None. Long term data will not be required to be preserved once my thesis has been marked, completed and confirmed by the awarding body.
What is the long-term preservation plan for the data?	The original data is not of long-term value, subsequently there will be no access beyond the research project and date. The data will not be kept beyond the research date.
Responsibilities and Resources	
Who will be responsible for data management?	I will be responsible as the researcher.
What resources will you require to deliver your plan?	TEAMS to conduct online interviews Audio recording device UEL one drive student account University online training
Review	
	If there are any amendments to your plan please send your updated plan to researchdata@uel.ac.uk
Date: 12/08/2021	Reviewer name: Penny Jackson Research Data Management Officer