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Balancing Numbers or Addressing Needs? Child to Adult Ratios, Practitioner Well-being, and Quality of Provision in Early Years Settings in England

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David Meechan and Aaron Bradbury

Abstract

There is limited research exploring child-to-adult ratios in nursery settings in England since changes were made to the EYFS (DFE 2023) by the Conservative government. This article explores the findings of an online survey using qualitative analysis to provide insight to the lived experiences and perceptions of participants regarding the changes to child-to-adult ratio in England. This study involved 154 Early Years' Practitioners and explored statutory ratio guidance, adherence to it, and the impact ratios have on practitioner well-being and the quality of early childhood education.

In practice, participants found that an increase in the number of children cared for by practitioners has resulted in dangerous, unsafe practices with detrimental effects on children's developmental needs. The changes to child to adult ratio for two year olds in England demonstrates a disregard for young children's rights, entitlement and needs at the national policy level- and is something that many nurseries have chosen to resist at the local practice level. This paper contributes to the debate of appropriate child-to-adult ratios in early years settings, highlighting the need for policymakers to consider the practical implications, and potentially adverse outcomes, associated with increasing ratios within Early Childhood Education.

Keywords

Adult-to-Child ratios, practitioner well-being, quality of childcare provision, early childhood education, staffing policy.

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The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Introduction

Change is inevitable. It may be positive, but that is not always the case. Change is prominent across the shifting landscapes of early childhood so young children experience it as a matter of course.

(Murray 2023, pg.6)

The Early Years sector in England has long been accustomed to change driven through new and revised frameworks. The introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage in 2008 (DCSF 2008) was initially teased as the amalgamation of two previous documents: Birth to Three Matters (BTTM) (DfES 2002) and the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA 2000). Langston (2012) writes that ‘in their haste to reach the objective of creating a single early years framework, policy makers underestimated the usefulness of the BTTM Framework’. Essentially, the genuine consultation, research and funding that informed the development, roll out and implementation of BTTMs now reads as an alternative universe to early years practitioners who do not remember it first-hand in England.

Outside of England’s Early Years policy and guidance, change can also be seen in relation to the increasing attention given to the importance of ‘Equal Access to Quality Pre-Primary Education’ in the form of the United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 (United Nations, N.D.). SDG 4 as a whole is concerned with access to quality education across a person’s lifespan. This starts with early childhood and signifies a change in international rhetoric regarding its importance. Furthermore, it firmly positions, not only access to, but the

provision of, quality early childhood services as a fundamental right of children within international policy and frameworks. Such a fundamental right is central to the conceptual framework of this paper, positioning children at the centre as rights holders, and the government as a duty bearer (Meechan 2023). The intermediaries within such a context however are early years practitioners. Early Years practitioners act as the duty bearer in terms of delivering quality early years provision but are also rights holders themselves. Early years practitioners need resources, training and support if they are to successfully deliver high quality provision. A starting point for this is what is termed as structural quality and this will be discussed further in the literature review section. This is by no means the endpoint, however, as we know that quality, no matter its ambiguousness (Dahlberg and Moss 2006) is concerned with both the micro, meso and macro environments that a child exists within.

Turning our focus to childcare ratios, in lexical terms, these are often presented as the adult first and the minimum number of children they can care for second, for example, 1:4. For the purpose of this article, and keeping in line with a children's rights based approach, where appropriate, childcare ratios are presented with the children first and foremost as the rights holder, with the adult secondary as the duty bearer. The authors believe that failure to place the child consistently as first and overtly as a priority throughout policy and legislation can lead to children's rights being thought of as secondary. For the purpose of this paper, childcare ratios in England are the focus, as the data considered is in response to the following research questions:

- (1) Are nurseries working to minimum childcare ratios?
- (2) What are the reasons behind nurseries working to preferred/minimum childcare ratios?
- (3) What impact does working to preferred/minimum childcare ratios have on practitioner well-being?

(4) How do childcare ratios affect the quality of provision?

Literature Review

Childcare Ratios in England

In an early childhood setting and within policy, the childcare ratio refers to the number of qualified staff needed for each child. According to the Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework (paragraphs 3.28 to 3.44, DfE 2023), the ratios in England differ depending on a child's age. In order to "improve the cost, choice, and availability of childcare", the Department for Education completed a consultation on changes to the statutory child to adult ratios in September 2022 (DFE 2022). The proposed changes in the consultation were largely rejected by the Early Years Sector in England (Harle 2022). Regardless of this opposition, the following revised statutory ratio requirements were introduced on September 4th 2023:

- There is now a statutory minimum staff-to-child ratio of 1:5 for two-year-olds in England
- The childminder may care for more than three young children (the maximum) if they are the siblings of the children he or she already cares for or the childminder's own child.
- When children are eating, "adequate supervision" means that they must be within sight and hearing of an adult

(EYFS 2023)

The above changes aligned England's statutory guidance with Scotland's, modifying the adult to child ratios for 2-year-olds from 1:4 to 1:5. A reason for concern around these changes is that children's developmental trajectory is shaped significantly during the early years of their lives (Shonkoff and Garner 2012). Child development is enhanced by access to and

attendance at high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings (Siefert 2006). Furthermore, attending high quality settings has significant positive effects on both short- and long-term child developmental outcomes. Little quantitative evidence, however, is available regarding the impact of increased childcare ratios in the UK. Due to this, we were unable to make decisions about the most appropriate childcare ratios based on quantitative evidence. Instead, we must consider alternative and valid sources of evidence.

Quality of provision

Child to adult ratios are a measure of 'structural' care quality, which are easily quantifiable and theoretically easy to regulate and check on. Both staff qualification levels and group size are additional indicators of structural quality. Pianta et al. (2006) found that children are more likely to experience higher 'process' quality of care when structural factors are present in a setting, such as their interactions with professionals. There is a paucity of research which looks at the impact of raising child to staff ratios and how this may affect the development of a child. It is challenging to assess the impact of changes to statutory ratios on children's outcomes as a sole variable because other variables often accompany such changes. For example, alongside the changes to increased childcare ratios for two-year olds in England in 2023, there is also an expansion of funding to enable more babies and infants access to early years education by September 2025. Although the concept of early childhood is international, localised conceptions of early childhood differ in terms of what is and is not prioritised especially when considering quality (Love et al. 2003).

International Evidence

A fragmented evidence base exists regarding the impact of childcare ratios. Dalgaard et al. (2022) argue that it is concerning to not look at the relationship between childcare ratios and children's outcomes and concluded that:

“surprisingly few quantitative studies have examined how changes in adult/child ratios and group sizes in early childhood education and care affect process quality and child outcomes.”

(Dalgaard et al. 2022, p.2)

According to Dalgaard et al. (2022), the quality of the included studies was low in their systematic review. It is also unclear whether this evidence is derived from countries other than the United Kingdom and therefore its applicability in an English context is questionable. However, evidence for the effectiveness of different ratios in schools and childcare settings can be found in a number of smaller experimental studies. According to a US study, reducing class size from 20 to 15 children between the ages of 3 and 4 per teacher had a positive effect on children's literacy skills by the age of 5 (Francis and Barnett 2019). In another study, long-term outcomes for children are examined, including whether attendance, quality, and savings play a part (Chetty et al. 2011). It is worth highlighting that childcare ratios are typically only varied for short periods of time in these experimental studies. For example, de Schipper et al. (2006) examined 10-minute play sessions in Dutch settings with a staff-to-child ratio of 1:3 and 1:5. It found that caregiver to child interactions, children's wellbeing and cooperation were of high quality during sessions with a lower staff-to-child ratio of 1:3 than in sessions with a higher staff-to-child ratio of 1:5.

Increasing childcare ratios as a cost-saving measure

In England, a desire to reduce childcare costs was outlined by Frontier, an economics think tank (Frontier 2022), as one of the main drivers for the consultation on increasing childcare ratios. It remains unclear whether the reforms, which now form part of the statutory requirements in group and school settings (DFE 2023), have reduced childcare expenses as intended. The higher ratios for two-year-olds had been predicted to reduce childcare costs by

up to £40 for a family paying £265 per week (DFE 2022). The Early Years Alliance, described the cost-saving plans as "ludicrous, pointless, and potentially dangerous" (Lawler 2022) as families with two-year-olds tend to pay considerably more for formal childcare (Farquharson and Olorenshaw, 2022), and fewer providers (22%) operated at ratios below the current statutory limits of 1:4 (SCEYP 2021). Furthermore, a number of early year's providers are reluctant to reduce childcare staffing levels to the statutory requirement of 1:5 for two year olds as they fear it will negatively affect both care quality and employee morale (Haux et al. 2022). Markowitz (2019) argues that increasing childcare ratios will result in an increase of staff turnover and ultimately have a negative impact on children's outcomes.

Evidence-based practice versus practice-based evidence

As already acknowledged, quantitative-based research on childcare ratios is limited by a low-quality evidence base and more so by a lack of UK-based evidence applicable to this study. This makes it difficult to draw robust conclusions about the likely implications of changes made to childcare ratios in England from such perspectives. At the time of writing, the changes to childcare ratios in England were less than 12 months old meaning that the impact of such changes, along with other sector changes (such as increased funding and access to early childhood provision in England) are still in the early days of implementation and therefore the impact is not overtly clear. The authors identified limited international literature that specifically explored the impact of changes to childcare ratio in terms of provision, but again, this was fragmented and lacked quality. Regardless, the UK government should consider how it implements policies that impact on the lives of children, parents, and early years providers. When considering structural changes to childcare provision, such as childcare ratios, a phased rollout of the policy would be more appropriate. This would allow

for more targeted and specific research to contribute to evidence-based practice moving forward and extend beyond a ‘cost saving’ measure.

The continuing challenges faced by the early years sector in England have been well documented (Early Years Workforce Commission 2021; Early Years Alliance 2021; Early Education and Childcare Coalition 2023). Whilst it has been shown that changing the minimum childcare ratios for 2-year-olds may not adversely affect children's developmental outcomes in the short term, there is yet to be evidence that the intended cost reductions of such revisions have been achieved. Furthermore, the continued lack of recognition of the early years sector's response to such proposed ratio changes will only contribute to the wider sector challenges such as recruitment and retention. Whilst it is clear that the UK government took an unknown risk with implementing this policy (Crawford and Outhwaite 2023), leaders and practitioners in the early years sector have to shoulder the practical burden of negotiating this latest change that they rejected. The early years sector continues to negotiate such changes on practice based evidence, whilst families face growing childcare shortages and costs rise with the most disadvantaged children missing out (CORAM 2024).

Methodology

Research Design and Sample

This is a qualitative study based on the Scale, Rank, and Insight (SRI) approach which utilises online survey design to explore, capture and provide an indication of the lived experiences and perceptions of participants. There were 154 participants in this study who have direct experience of working with children under 5 in England. The SRI approach facilitates a nuanced exploration of statutory ratio guidance, adherence to it and the impact ratios can have on practitioner well-being and the quality of early years provision offered. The study used a purposive, national sample of nursery practitioners from different settings

across 91 Local Authorities in England (Emmel 2013). This strategy was inclusive of who had current experience of working in the Early Years and meant representation across a range of types and sizes of settings in England.

Table 1: Participant Information

Participant Role	N=	%
Educational Roles	79	51
Management and Leadership	70	45
Specialised and Support Roles	4	3
Administrative Roles	1	1
Participant Experience	N=	%
Less than 10 years	39	25
Between 10-20 years	65	42
21 years or more	49	33
Participant Qualifications	N=	%
Levels 2-4	54	38
Levels 5-6	63	41
Levels 7-8	37	24
Type of setting	N=	%
Private (nursery with single site)	54	35
Private (nursery with multiple sites)	52	34
Other	48	31
Size of setting	N=	%
Up to 50 places	64	42
Between 51 to 100 places	66	44
More than 100 places	21	14

Ethical Considerations

This study was designed, planned and conducted with adherence to the ethical standards outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA 2018) and approved by the ethics board of the University of Northampton. Participants were provided detailed information about the study's purpose and use of data at the beginning of the survey to ensure understanding and voluntary participation. Consent procedures were designed to be clear and jargon-free. A participants' right to withdraw was emphasised as they were asked to supply a unique word, number or a combination which could be cited at a later date should they wish to withdraw. Participants were advised against sharing identifiable information, aligning with the researcher's commitment to safeguarding sensitivity and privacy. No financial incentives were offered, maintaining the voluntariness of participation. These measures meant that the research was conducted as ethical, respectful, and compliant with established guidelines, ensuring the integrity and welfare of all participants was upheld.

Survey Design

After informed consent was established, the survey began with demographic-based questions such as location and qualifications. It was then structured to align with the study's research questions in four sections. Each section consisted of a mix of Scale and Rank and Insight (SRI) style questions. This involved a Likert-type item (Bishop and Herron 2015) or, for the purpose of this survey, a scale and rank type question to measure responses. Proceeding the SR questions, participants were asked to provide 'Insight' in the form of an open response, relating to their previous scale and rank responses. This design allowed for participants to provide clarifying and contextual information. Prior to distribution of the final survey, a draft version was piloted among a select group of practitioners (Tarrant et al. 2014). This was to ensure question clarity and enable the refinement of the survey instrument based on

participant feedback. This preliminary step was important as it aided in validating the survey approach and fine-tuning the language of the survey prior to broader distribution.

Survey Distribution and Analysis

Social media, professional networks, forums, and early years education groups were leveraged for survey dissemination. An introductory page detailed the study’s aims, the anonymous participation framework, and confidentiality commitments. Analysis was threefold (see Table 2). Initially, descriptive statistical analysis was undertaken in relation to the individual Scale and Rank responses. This involved calculating response frequencies and percentages and informed an initial feeling for the data and responses. Once all of the scale and rank responses had been analysed, a thematic analysis was undertaken of the Insight responses. This involved the coding of over 1035 responses across the seven Insight style questions, averaging to 147 responses per insight question. After responses were coded, themes were identified in alignment with the relevant Research Question. Following this, all initial themes were further reviewed to explore repeating and congruent narratives across the data set. These overarching themes were then correlated with the findings of the Scale and Rank analysis to draw further insights related to the research questions and overall focus of the study.

Table 2: Survey Analysis

Stage	Type of Data	Type of Analysis	Level of analysis
1	Scale and Rank	Descriptive Statistics	Individual Survey Responses to Scale and Rank type questions
2	Insight	Thematic Analysis	Survey Responses were coded and collated in relation to each Insight Style Survey Question. This created themes aligned with each Research Question.
3	All themes generated at Stage 2	Review of Stage 2 Themes across Insight data set on congruence and frequency	Themes from Stage 2 were grouped together in terms of similarity.

Findings

This section will be presented in relation to the four overarching themes identified from the data. These themes consist of sub-themes that have been grouped together in congruence with one another and their combined frequency in relation to the overall sample highlighted. This provides an indication of which themes were the most to least prominent. Direct quotations from the participants are provided as a window into their experience.

Theme 1: Quality of Provision in Early Years Settings

This was the most commonly represented theme with 32% of coded responses relating to this. This theme contained eight sub themes which can be found in Table 3. These themes related to concerns that higher child-to-adult ratios impact a practitioner's capacity to meet the individual needs of all children, provide quality educational experiences and ensure adequate safety and supervision.

Table 3: Sub-themes of Theme 1

Frequency	Sub-Theme	Supporting Quotes
7.5%	Quality of Child Care and Education	‘On days when we have no choice but to work to ratios it feels more like crowd control. Staff are involved with meeting basic physical needs and ensuring no one is hurt which leaves little time for anything else. Staff are more obviously stressed which impacts the way they interact with the children. Children are less happy and less engaged in play.’ <i>(Managing Director with 20 years' experience)</i> ‘With staff shortages we get cover from the agency but the children seem to rely on the familiar staff they know and I feel the work load is harder and the pressure is higher. I'm currently on sick myself due to stress related problems.’ <i>(Nursery practitioner with 22 years' experience)</i>
7.0%	Staffing Challenges and Well-being	
3.8%	Supervision Concerns	
3.8%	Unable to meet individual needs	
3.8%	Safety, Quality, and Well-being	
2.5%	Missed Learning Opportunities	
2.3%	Quality of Care and Educational Excellence	
1.5%	SEND and Individual Needs	

Theme 2: Staff Well-being and Health of Setting as a whole

This was the second most common theme with 27% of coded responses. It includes four sub-themes (See Table 4) and relates to the impact of staffing ratios on practitioner workload,

stress, and well-being. Sub-themes cover the continued challenge of recruitment, retention, and both the physical and emotional toll on practitioners.

Table 4: Sub-themes of Theme 2

Frequency	Sub-Theme	Supporting Quotes
8.3%	Staff Stress and Workload	‘Higher children to staff ratio’s mean staff under more pressure. Meaning staff taking time off due to stress, illness, being run down. Meaning children to not get basic needs met.’ (<i>Nursery Practitioner with 4 years’ experience</i>)
7.3%	Staff Well-being and Morale	
6.8%	Operational Pressures and Professional Well-being	‘The biggest impact to well-being is the worry of being judged by one day of inspection. Parents also influence stress as many struggle to pay and often complain about care when we request payment for the service we have provided.’ (<i>Head of Childcare with 33 years’ experience</i>)
4.5%	Coping Strategies and Work-Life Balance	

Theme 3: Strategic and Financial Management

This is the third most common theme representing 24% of coded responses with six sub-themes (see Table 5). Operational difficulties and financial constraints are prominently mentioned across these sub-themes.

Table 5: Sub-themes of Theme 3

Frequency	Sub-Theme	Supporting Quotes
6.3%	Operational Efficiency and Challenges	‘The rise in minimum wage is impacting the differentials between the pay scales for more experienced staff compacting these, meaning that the difference in pay between junior/unqualified staff and senior/qualified staff is reducing impacting our ability to retain our experienced staff.’ (<i>Manager with 20 years’ experience</i>)
6.0%	Financial Management and Sustainability	
3.8%	Operational Challenges	‘I feel, for much of the day, that I am simply firefighting. There is absolutely no slack in the system; if someone is absent, we combine classes. Practitioners come to work when unwell because they know what the impact will be without them.’ (<i>Teacher with 16 years’ experience</i>)
3.0%	Financial and Resource Constraints	
2.5%	Community and Operational Challenges	‘We have sometimes had to do the 1-5 this was something we didn’t want to implement... The government has given us no

2.5%	Staffing Strategy: Recruitment, Adaptability, and Retention	choice. With the new minimum wage and not sure how we are going to survive. They do not pay enough funding money.’ <i>(Director with 23 years’ experience)</i>
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Theme 4: Policy, Advocacy, and Sector Development

This theme was the least represented and contained five sub-themes (See Table 6) that highlight the broader challenges faced across the Early Years sector in England. These relate to compliance with statutory requirements, advocacy for better support and policies across and within the sector, and the need for specialised support for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Table 6: Sub-themes of Theme 4

Frequency	Sub-Theme	Supporting Quotes
10.3%	Workforce Recognition and Development	‘The lack of early help universal services like our children’s centre has had a huge impact on family life and we see families that need intensive support with parenting, understanding child development, food and nutrition, health- we do our best but we cannot provide to the level of support families had under labour - also sure start centres really helped us recruit.’ <i>(Room Leader with 23 years’ experience)</i> ‘The increase in ratios is just a poorly thought out decision to ‘try help childcare’ when the real issues are lack of funding, wage increases, and business rates preventing settings from providing better quality care.’ <i>(Director with 10 years’ experience)</i>
3.0%	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Support	
3.0%	Policy and Sector-wide Concerns	
0.5%	Statutory Compliance and Industry Standards	
0.5%	Advocacy and Industry Insights	

Resistance, professionalism, flexibility and support

Whilst the four main themes discussed read as more negative, there were aspects and sentiments of resistance, professionalism, flexibility and support across both the Scale and Rank and Insight responses. These provide further evidence of how practitioners and local settings are dealing with policy decisions on early years provision.

Resistance: This can be deduced from the initial scale and rank question that asked the participants if they had experience working to minimum statutory ratios, with 33% (N=51)

responding 'Yes', 34% (N=52) responding 'Sometimes' and 34% (N=52) responding 'No'.

This shows that the majority of settings are trying to avoid working to minimum ratios either all of the time or sometimes if they can.

Professionalism: An overwhelming majority of participants 'Agree' (N=138, 90%) that high retention and low practitioner turnover, as well as the leadership and management of a setting (N=136, 89%) impact positively on the quality of provision offered. There was also a positive correlation between the number of years' experience (N=99, 64% 'Agree') and the qualification levels of practitioners (N=96, 62% 'Agree') having an impact on the quality of provision offered.

Flexibility and Support: The responses demonstrated snippets of support and flexibility within the open responses to Insight based questions. Whilst these were not as prominent as the four themes previously detailed, they are worth sharing for consideration moving forwards. Some settings have been proactive in *maintaining staff ratios above the statutory recommendation*. Where this was reported, practitioners felt supported in their role and provided a stable environment. Some settings have adapted to the challenges presented by ratios by *introducing mixed age groups* which have enabled additional staff to be utilised. This approach, where successful, was reported to address the immediate concerns of more children and fewer practitioners by increasing flexibility in staffing. In several instances, *managers and deputy managers have stepped in* to assist with maintaining ratios, ensuring that the setting operates smoothly and efficiently. This level of management support underscores the importance of leadership in supporting practitioners to provide high standards of provision. By sharing roles, especially during critical times such as sleep times or when children are upset and need comforting, practitioners can ensure safety. This collaborative effort reinforces a setting's ability to adapt to challenges. Many of the approaches identified here contribute to practitioners feeling supported and demonstrate *the*

importance of staff well-being and retention. Such a focus helps create a supportive and stable work environment in light of the ongoing challenges that are presented across the early years sector in England.

Discussion

A correlation between quality of education and care and children's development relating to the impact of child-to-staff ratios has not been empirically validated in the past. This study, however, provides an insight into the paucity of such research and investigates whether nurseries were working to minimum ratios; why nurseries work to preferred or minimum ratios; what impact does work to preferred or minimum ratios have on practitioner well-being; and how staffing ratios affect the quality of care. Based on the results of the data, four themes were identified. These themes demonstrate the perceived alignment of childcare ratios with quality provision within the early settings (see Theme 1). The themes also link to the trajectory of children's development and how it can (or cannot) be supported during a child's earliest years linking to research on the need to provide good quality education (Shankoff and Garner 2012).

The impact of increased childcare ratios

According to this study, variations in child-adult ratios for 2 year old children are rarely correlated with concurrent or subsequent child outcomes within the range of child to adult ratios found in the literature. The data did not show children's actual developmental outcomes, but it did highlight concerns from professionals regarding the ratio changes having an impact on such outcomes. It is important to note that only ratios that met national regulations laid out on the DfE (2023) were included in this review. Four concurrent themes have given precedence from the analysis of the data:

1. Quality of Provision in Early Years Settings;
2. Staff well-being and the health of the setting as a whole;
3. Strategic and Financial Management;
4. Policy, advocacy and sector development.

Each of these research themes have provided an insight into how nurseries are meeting minimum childcare ratios, what are the preferred childcare ratios, how childcare ratios affect early years practitioners' well-being, and how childcare ratios affect the quality of early years provision. This research indicates that professionals are experiencing a time of change. Conversely, there will always be change, whether it is positive or negative (Murray 2023). This research demonstrates that professionals in the sector care deeply about the quality of childcare and education (Theme 1). According to Siefert (2006) ECEC settings that are of high quality demonstrate a correlation with enhanced children's development. It was also argued by Sylva et al. (2004) that high quality early childhood settings positively impact children's outcomes. Despite the statutory childcare ratios for two year olds being changed from 1:4 to 1:5, data suggests that there is reluctance to change or adhere to the 1:5. Further concern, is that when the ratio of 1:5 is used, Nursery leaders are observing stress among colleagues and a growing lack of interaction with children, detracting from quality and contributing to the increased absence and attrition of practitioners.

Changing role of early years practitioners and increasing concerns

The data has demonstrated that adopting increased childcare ratios has led nursery leaders and practitioners to witness more of a role in crowd control than education and early child development. Again, this impacts on the quality of early education offered to children. According to the data, nursery settings who have adopted the childcare ratio of 1:5 saw a major impact on practitioners' feelings of struggle. This is a stark contrast to Francis &

Barnett's research (2019) where they advocate for reducing the ratio rather than increasing it. Based on this finding, it is logical that the age and stage of development of children has a significant impact on the care and attention that they need. The biological immaturity of a two-year-old is obvious when compared to a neurotypical 4-5 year old. As researchers, we accept the developmental difference between a child who is 2 and a child who is 4. This difference is outlined in the Non-Statutory guidance's for the EYFS Birth to Five Matters (Early Years Coalition 2021) and Development Matters (DfE 2021). Participants insights demonstrate that practitioners want to do their utmost best for the children and the families they work with. Participants in the study, however, are struggling to make it work both for the children and financially for the parents. On the one hand, there is the need to manage expectations laid out by policy and government changes. On the other hand, participants provide anecdotal evidence that such changes are reducing the quality of early childhood education and child safety (Haux et al. 2022). The most damning finding is the dangers we are putting our children and professionals under. The data suggests that the frequency of accidents, children being upset and children feeling stressed are increasing when higher childcare ratios are used.

Removed policy versus practice in reality

The impact of ratios on the quality of care and education has shown to be of concern to early years professionals in this study. The increase in statutory childcare ratios and participants' concerns regarding quality directly contradict what the EYFS is seeking to provide: Quality and consistency; A secure Foundation; Partnership working and Equality of opportunity (DfE 2023, paragraph 4.). Such policy and guidance are clearly removed from the reality of those enacting it on a daily basis in England, meaning that policy and practice are not in harmony. Children are not receiving focused support for their developmental needs, such as speech and

language development, as outlined by professionals in the data but also previously identified by Francis and Barnett (2019). Regardless, this research leads to a better understanding of how practitioners are experiencing the changes to childcare ratios and anecdotal information regarding its impact on 2 year old children. If maximum ratios are to be adopted, then it is clear from the data that it should be done so with caution (Dalgaard et al. 2022). Carneiro and Heckman (2003) famously modelled the highest rates of return on capital investment was during the pre-school years. But this is more than an economic argument, it is a universal children's rights-based argument which is set in law in several countries (OPBP 2023; OPBP 2024) and can further be situated with the United Nation's SDG 4.

Practitioners well-being

A focus of this research is also placed on the well-being of employees. The study considered how it could impact practitioners' well-being and mental health. Statistics taken from the data in this research demonstrated that staff feel overwhelmed when they have made the 1:5 ratio change. Such changes made it particularly difficult to meet children's holistic needs, for example, toilet training and emotional development. Additionally, the participants explained that leaving employment after 4-5 months was not uncommon. A high absence rate also placed additional pressure on other members of the team. There was evidence that managers would have to leave their management roles to go into the setting and be counted into the ratio. Those surveyed, also reported an overwhelming feeling of pressure from the early years inspectorate agency (OfSTED).

This study has captured the perception of increases to the childcare ratio for two year olds in England as simply not working where it has been implemented. This highlights the need to analyse and examine the impact of policy changes on our youngest children, their families and the early years workforce in England. There is an urgent need for action to address the

negative effects of such ratio changes around the pressing concerns for children's safety, a lack of effective provision, and the pressures placed on early childhood professionals in terms of mental health and well-being as captured in the data. The curriculum emphasises the importance of nurturing children and giving them the best start in life (DFE 2023; Shankoff and Garner 2012), but this research study has suggested an alternative where children's development and quality of provision is an afterthought, not a prerequisite to early years provision.

Conclusion

This research explores the link between childcare ratios and the quality of provision in England based on the experiences of participants who work directly in the early years sector. Despite the statutory changes made to childcare ratios in 2023, aimed at improving efficiency and reducing costs, this study has found significant concerns that higher child-to-adult ratios negatively impact the quality of care and education. Furthermore, there is evidence of increased stress and workload for practitioners and potential compromise in terms of the safety and individual attention that each child receives. The data indicates that these findings are consistent with previous research (Francis and Barnett 2019; Siefert 2006) which suggests that lower ratios facilitate better developmental outcomes and more effective caregiver-child interactions.

This article has also highlighted a broader issue of disconnect between early years policy and practice. While policymakers may aim to address economic and strategic pressures, the implementation of these policies often does not align with the realities faced by practitioners. The concerns raised by practitioners about increased ratios resonate with their professional commitment to providing high-quality care, indicating a need for more nuanced and context-sensitive policy. Evidence points to a lack of comprehensive research or genuine consultation with the early years sector before changes in childcare ratios were implemented. Practitioners'

well-being is a critical area, also explored in this article. Higher childcare ratios are linked to higher levels of stress, job dissatisfaction, and turnover among practitioners. This not only affects the quality of provision but also undermines the stability and continuity of care, which are essential for positive child outcomes (Markowitz 2019).

As Murray (2023 pg.6) was quoted at the beginning of this article stating, 'change is inevitable'. Such change, however, must be managed thoughtfully and inclusively, with consideration and awareness of its impact on all stakeholders. The sector requires policies that position children and their rights as central to them. Furthermore, such policies should enable, not disable the early years practitioners who are responsible for the daily provision of early years education. This study contributes to the ongoing dialogue about childcare ratios and underscores the need for further evidence-based, practitioner-informed policy-making to support sustainable development and the well-being of children, families and practitioners in the early years in England. Within an international context, this will also provide a firm commitment to not only meet, but exceed Sustainable Development Goal 4.2, by 2030, to ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education.

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