

# Very Early Childhood Education: Parents' Views about their Two-Year-Olds in School and their Family Lives

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## Abstract

*This article reports findings from a small-scale case study that captured parents' views about their experiences of a targeted government funded programme of early childhood education and care for the 40% 'most disadvantaged' two-year-olds in England. The programme is funded in the context of national government policies oriented to (i) closing the educational attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers and (ii) realising full employment. Parents' responses in questionnaires and interviews illuminated ways they believed their 'disadvantaged' two-year-olds' attendance at funded ECEC in an inner-city primary school affected their children's development and their family lives. Findings provide evidence for the argument that it cannot be assumed that policy translates into practice.*

## Key words

Early childhood education

Early childhood education and care

Social policy

Family

Parents

Young children

## Introduction

This paper reports findings from a small-scale instrumental case study concerning parents' perspectives about ways funded early childhood education and care (ECEC) for their 'disadvantaged' two-year-old children (2YOs) at an inner-city primary school in England has affected their family lives. A subtle realist approach was adopted for the study in order to respect individuals' subjective views as multiple realities (Hammersley, 1992). The study findings indicate that it cannot be assumed policy translates into the actions that policymakers intend.

## Background to the Study

### *The Context for Funded 2YO Provision in England*

In a global context where early childhood development has become recognised as key to human capital (United Nations, 2015), cost and availability are well documented challenges to quality ECEC in England (Campbell-Barr and Garnham, 2010; Kalitowski, 2017). A pilot programme was initiated in England in 2006 for free ECEC for some 2YOs to 'counter the potential negative effects of living in circumstances that do not facilitate children's cognitive and social development' (Gibb, Jelcic, La Valle, Gowland, Kinsella, Jessiman, & Ormston, 2011:11). Subsequently, since 2014, 40% of the 'most disadvantaged' 2YOs in England have had an annual legal entitlement to 570 hours of fully funded ECEC (GOV.UK, 2017). This targeted policy runs contrary to findings that universal nursery provision reduces inequalities (West, 2016).

England's powerful education regulator Ofsted (2016) defines disadvantage as '...a complex issue (that) can impact negatively on every aspect of a child's life (and) can have a long-term grip on families and communities, holding them back generation after generation' (p.11). Nevertheless, it is the English government's eligibility criteria that define the 40% 'most disadvantaged' 2YOs in the country (Gov.UK, 2017). Their parents must receive at least one specified government benefit, or the 2YO must be in care, or have a diagnosed special educational need or disability requiring additional support (Gov.UK, 2017). The link has been made between early disadvantage and weak basic skills leading to disadvantage in adulthood (Parsons and Bynner 2007); English government's rationale for increasing funding for ECEC has been to close the educational attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers *and* to enable parents to work, with the ultimate aim of achieving full employment (Conservatives, 2017; Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and HM Treasury, 2015; Lewis and West, 2017; Waldegrave, 2013).

Almost all provision for children aged 0-5 years in England must comply with the *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (Department for Education (DfE), 2017), which features 'early learning goals that providers must help children work towards', 'quality and consistency in all early years' settings, so that every child makes good progress' and 'partnership working...with parents and/or carers' (p.5). Nevertheless, schools in England have been encouraged strongly by national policymakers to make provision for 2YOs (Department for Education (DfE), 2013), a development that has been contested on the premise that schools may not be the optimal environment for young children's development (Pre-School Learning Alliance (PLA), 2014).

In principle, parents whose children are eligible for ECEC funding can take it as a set number of hours each week, either throughout the year or during term-time, for example, 15 hours each week during

term time. However, in practice, the offer has been characterised by caveats which can make it difficult for parents to take it up, even creating barriers to parental employment (Parliament UK, 2015). The Families and Childcare Trust notes that hours are ‘...usually only available in inflexible morning or afternoon sessions and often do not coincide with the childcare needs of parents’ (Parliament UK, 2015). Equally, where the free ECEC offer is only available in term time, working parents may find childcare during school holidays difficult (Employers for Childcare, 2018).

Until 2017 all 3-4-year-olds (3-4YOs) in England were also entitled to 15 hours weekly of funded ECEC weekly. Then in 2017, England’s government doubled that free offer to 30 hours for 3-4YOs if both parents worked for at least 16 hours each week (Parliament UK, 2015); this eligibility criterion was criticised by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as likely to exclude the most disadvantaged 3-4YOs (Weale, 2017). Nevertheless, overall, 3-4YOs’ take-up has remained steady since 2015 at around 95% (Department for Education (DfE), 2018; Huskinson et al., 2016; Whitaker, 2015) and by January 2019, eligible 3-4YOs’ take up of the 30 hour offer had risen by 11% (Department for Education (DfE), 2019). In 2014, 13% of the 40% eligible 2YOs took up their funded ECEC, then between 2015 and 2018, the percentage rose annually (58%>68%>71%>72%), though lagging behind 3-4YOs’ take-up. However, between 2018 and 2019, 2YOs’ take-up decreased from 72% to 68%, despite a population increase of eligible 2YOs (DfE, 2019).

### ***Extant Research into Funded 2YO Provision in England***

The policy of funding ECEC for the 40% ‘most disadvantaged’ 2YOs was novel in England and has been the focus of several studies. Georgeson, Campbell-Barr, Mathers, Boag-Munroe, Parker-Rees, & Caruso (2014) and Greene, Joshi, Street, Connor, Soar, & Kurtz (2015) investigated 2YO provision, home-school learning and parental employment. Additionally, Georgeson et al. (2014) highlighted views of practitioners and other ECEC ‘experts’ concerning quality of provision, whilst Greene *et al.* (2015) included 2YOs’ parents’ views. Georgeson *et al.* (2014) found provision for disadvantaged 2YOs in England to be complex, challenging and demanding for practitioners and in their 2015 study, Phair and Davies identified that many early childhood practitioners who had begun to work with 2YOs because of the targeted 2YO funding had little understanding of the specific development needs of 2YOs and made limited – or no - adjustments to their practice in respect of partnership with parents, or adapting the environment, routine, and pedagogy. Melhuish, Gardiner, & Morris (2017) confirm that take up of funded 2YO places has remained weak. Nevertheless, Bonetti (2018) observes a significant shift from private, voluntary and independent settings (PVIs) to state funded provision and Greene *et al.* (2015) found that schools can positively influence ‘the developmental, social and emotional needs’ of disadvantaged 2YOs by making ECEC provision, by working in

partnership with other ECEC providers and parents (p.13). Phair and Davies (2015) emphasise that practitioners find working with 2YOs very different from working with older children.

### ***The Scope, Rationale and Local Context for the Present Study***

The present small-scale study investigated the perspectives of parents (defined as primary caregivers) of the 'most disadvantaged' 2YOs regarding the effects on their family lives of 15 funded hours of ECEC for their 2YOs in one inner-city school in England. The study was located in Solar Primary School, an established two-form community school for children aged 2-11 years in a highly urban area of ethnic super-diversity, which draws from Stellar Borough's most deprived neighbourhood to serve a high percentage of socio-economically disadvantaged children (Stellar Borough Council, 2016). From January 2015, the school offered 24 eligible 2YOs three hours of provision, five days a week, term-time only, with twelve places each morning and each afternoon. Three members of staff worked in the 2YO provision when data were collected: a graduate Education Support Worker with no qualifications or prior experience of working with 2YOs, an ECEC Worker with a level 3 Early Years qualification and prior experience of working with children aged 0-5 and the lead practitioner with a first degree in psychology, a Master's degree in ECEC and Early Years Professional (EYP) Status, a leadership qualification for building workforce quality within an integrated ECEC approach (Hadfield, Jopling, Needham, Waller, Coleyshaw, Emira, & Royle, 2012; Learner, 2015). Anecdotally, Solar Primary School staff had identified two issues which provided the local rationale for the study:

- Variable uptake of 15 hours of its free ECEC provision for 2YOs
- Consistently high unemployment among parents of its 2YOs.

These issues have also been identified in other English settings for 2YOs (Bonetti, 2018; Lewis and West, 2016), so the study findings have potential to be informative beyond the study setting.

### **The Research Design**

This section sets out key aspects of the research design.

#### ***Study Aim and Objectives***

The study aimed to investigate the perspectives of parents of 2YOs in an inner-city school regarding the effects on their family lives of 15 hours of free ECEC provision for their 2YOs. The study had four objectives:

- To capture parents' views about any effects of 15 hours of free ECEC on their 2YO child's behaviour
- To capture parents' views about any effects of 15 hours of free ECEC on their own behaviour

- To establish parents' views regarding any links between their own employment or study and their 2YO child's 15 free hours of ECEC
- To identify barriers and opportunities that parents say they experience in regard to accessing local services while their 2YO children are in 15 hours of free ECEC.

### ***Methodological Considerations***

#### *The Researchers' Positionalities*

One of the researchers was a 'relative insider' in the research location (Griffiths, 1998:137), having been a teacher in ECEC settings and primary schools, then more recently an ECEC academic in a university. The other researcher was an 'insider' (Griffiths, 1998: 138), having worked in several ECEC settings before becoming Lead Practitioner at Astra 2YO Setting. Both researchers were committed to contributing new knowledge to the ECEC field, but each had an additional individual rationale for conducting this study. The first researcher wanted new evidence about the translation of ECEC policy into practice to inform her university work, whilst the second researcher wanted evidence to inform further development in her own setting.

#### *A Subtle Realist Approach*

A subtle realist approach guided the study. Subtle realism presumes that an individual can only know reality from their own perspective (Hammersley, 1992; Cohen and Crabtree, 2006), so the approach values multiple subjective realities. The study drivers were informed by the researchers' positionalities, which were in turn informed by their experiences in the ECEC field, as well as discourses concerning the national 2YO funding policy and the two issues shared anecdotally by Solar Primary School staff:

- Variable uptake of 15 hours of its free ECEC provision for 2YOs
- Consistently high unemployment among parents of its 2YOs.

Therefore, the multiple subjective realities that characterise subtle realism were embedded throughout the study. Subtle realism allowed parents' authentic voices to emerge, while the carefully selected methodology and research instruments secured a systematic and rigorous research process.

#### *The Selected Methodology*

The adoption of instrumental case study as the methodology allowing new understanding to emerge through exploring cases that exemplified a specific issue (Creswell, 2013). Here, the issue was

parents' views of the effects on their family lives of 15 free hours of ECEC for their 2YOs; the cases were parents whose children attended free 2YO ECEC provision for 3 hours each day.

### *The Selected Research Instruments*

Two research instruments were used: a structured beliefs and attitudes questionnaire survey (QS), followed by semi-structured interviews (SSIs). Using the structured QS allowed for the capture of informed response from selected participants; it protected participants' identities, provided a gateway for participants to opt into interviews and was manageable to analyse (Creswell, 2008; Wilson and McLean, 1994). Following analysis of the QS, SSIs provided explanation concerning participants' beliefs, attitudes, thoughts and opinions (Creswell, 2008) about ways 15 hours of free ECEC for their 2YOs affected their family lives.

The QS featured 130 questions concerning (1) Family, Home and Setting, (2) The 2YO Child at Provision, (3) Parents and (4) Helping Parents. A final section invited parents to add open responses concerning their 2YOs' funded ECEC offer.

Each interview was conducted for 15-20 minutes when parents dropped off or collected their 2YO children from Astra Setting. The schedule was framed around four main questions:

1. Has the 2YO provision affected your child? If so, how?
2. Has the 2YO provision affected what you do? If so, how?
3. Has the 2YO provision affected your work patterns in any way?
4. What barriers and opportunities do you experience in respect of accessing local services?

Each question was also supported with probes and prompts.

### *The Selected Participants*

All Astra Setting parents (n=30) were invited to participate in the QS. 27% of parents were also invited to participate in SSIs (n=8). This provided a purposive sample, which, although too small to be statistically valid, was representative of the sampling frame (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015).

### *Ethical Considerations*

The project was guided and regulated by the first researcher's university ethics code and procedures, which included adherence to the Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2011), and relevant legislation. Additionally, all

study processes were approved by the Solar Primary School head teacher. All participants' and setting names in this article are pseudonyms.

### *Analysis*

Data were analysed thematically. The QS aligned with the study's aim and objectives so key themes emerged deductively. Opportunities for open responses in the QS and SSI data allowed for other strands to emerge inductively.

### **The Findings**

Fourteen of the 30 Astra Setting parents responded to the QS (47%) and six participated in SSIs (20%). To enable parents to respond freely, interviews were conducted in a quiet room away from Astra Setting with the first researcher who had not previously met the parents. Findings are set out below in four sections concerning parents' responses about...

1. Their families, homes and ECEC setting
2. Their 2YO children at provision
3. Themselves, their study and their work
4. Ways parents are supported

Most QS responses are presented as percentages; whilst not statistically significant, presenting the data in this way facilitated management and interpretation.

#### ***1. Parents' Responses about their Families, Homes and ECEC Setting***

The initial section of the QS findings focused on demographic information about Astra Setting families.

##### *How long had the 2YOs been at Astra Setting?*

All responding parents confirmed they had a child attending Astra Setting 2YO provision. When asked how long their 2YO had been at Astra Setting, 36% of parents did not respond, but 36% said fewer than one term, 21% fewer than two terms and 7% fewer than three terms.

##### *Which settings had Astra 2YOs' siblings attended?*

14% of parents said their 2YO had one or more older siblings who had attended settings other than Astra Setting as a 2YO. 7% of parents said their current 2YO had one or more siblings who had attended Astra Setting and 7% of parents confirmed their current 2YO had one or more siblings in other settings.

*Where did Astra Setting families live?*

78% of parents said they lived in the same borough as Astra Setting. When asked how long they had lived in their current borough, 57% of parents said more than 3 years, 21% said 1-2 years, while 21% did not respond (NR).

*What were the Astra 2YOs' home languages?*

In the QS, the 14 responding parents told us that seven languages were spoken in their homes: English, Arabic, Twi, Turkish, Latvian, Portuguese and Somali.

## **2. Parents' Responses about their 2YO Children at Provision.**

Using a 4-point scale on the QS - 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'agree', 'strongly agree' – parents responded regarding whether or not their 2YO liked attending Astra Setting, if they had noticed changes in their 2YO since starting at Astra Setting and if they were pleased or not that their child was at Astra Setting. Some parents also explained their responses.

*Did parents believe their 2YOs liked attending Astra Setting or not?*

In QS responses, 93% of parents said their 2YOs liked Astra Setting (7% NR). 100% of parents agreed or agreed strongly that their 2YO was usually happy to go to Astra Setting, that their 2YO liked the Astra Setting teachers and that their 2YO was always busy at Astra Setting. 93% agreed or agreed strongly that their 2YO had made friends at Astra Setting. Parents also commented:

*'(My 2YO) wakes up happy and repeats his teacher's name until we get there' (P7)*

*'She does not want to leave (Astra Setting)' (P12).*

Interviewed parents explained further why their children liked the 2YO provision:

*'He is with children of his own age – and he saw my older child at nursery and he wanted to do that too' (PE12)*

*'She's just always happy – even to come to school – she's happy. No problems whatsoever – I'm really happy' (PF8)*

*'Brian (my 2YO) loves them all – that's what matters' (PB162).*

*Had parents noticed changes or not in their 2YOs since joining Astra Setting?*

In QSresponses, 93% of parents said they had noticed changes in their 2YOs since joining Astra Setting (7% NR). Parents agreed or strongly agreed to possible reasons, shown in the 'heat chart' below (Table 1):

*Table 1: Since starting at Astra Setting 2YO Provision, my child...*

Is happier (93%)	Is more confident (93%)	Has improved speech and language (93%)	Has improved behaviour at home (93%)	Has more friends (85%)
Sleeps better (85%)	Eats better (85%)	Helps at home more (85%)	Considers the needs of others more (85%)	Is calmer (78%)

In SSIs, parents explained more about changes they had seen in their children since attending 2YO provision:

*'It's much more better because... he's more speaking, he's sharing toys.'* (PA5)

*'...before he came... he only said 'Mum'. He had no speech at all – he didn't say 'Dad', he didn't say 'brother' and now he knows all his colours, he knows from one to ten jumping up to 11 as well – he's talking, he's having conversations. It's helped him massively.'* (PB3)

*'In every way. Literally every way. Her vocabulary has expanded. I feel she is more sociable now...'* (PF2 – PF4)

*Were parents pleased or not that their 2YO was at Astra Setting?*

All parents said they were pleased their child was at Astra Setting. Parents agreed or strongly agreed to the following reasons (Table 2):

*Table 2: Parents agreed or strongly agreed they were pleased their 2YO was at Astra Setting because...*

I have more time to do the things I want (100%)	I feel better (93%)	The provision helps my 2YO develop and learn (93%)	I can access more help for my family (85%)	It will help my 2YO be ready for school (85%)
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I prefer my 2YO to be here (78%)	I have more time to work (78%)	I have more time to do things I need to do (78%)	I have more time to study (72%)	Other comments (14%)
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Some parents added further explanation on the QS:

*'(I am) extra happy with Astra Setting' (P7)*

*'Working part-time, this scheme benefits me' (P12)*

All interviewed parents said they were pleased their children were in the 2YO provision, for example,

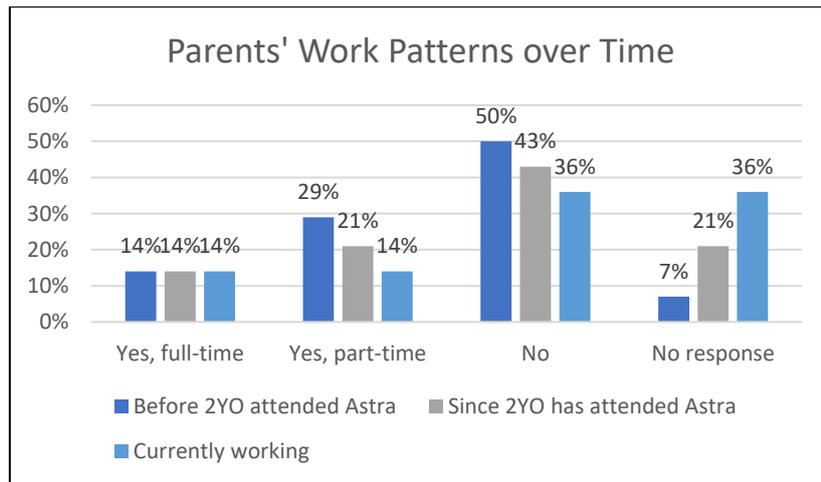
*'Oh, it is very good – even if it is just 15 hours. I see how it is affecting you – even three hours. It's really – what I see it's really good. I can say just good things about this one. I like my nursery – it's very good.'* (PA 120-122)

*'...this three hours does make a difference – you know she's (my 2YO is) interacting with other kids her age as well as other adults, which is good for her whereas just me and her sometimes and her dad - it's just - annoying after a while. Not annoying in a bad way but it is like she's not getting the areas that she needs from just me. And it's a break for her as well. I know people say a two-year-old doesn't need a break from their mother but I'm sure they do.'* (PD17-PD18)

### **3. Parents' Responses about Themselves, their Study and their Work**

Parents were asked if they had worked before their 2YO attended Astra Setting. 14% said 'Yes, full-time', 29% said 'Yes, part-time' and 50% said 'No' (7% NR). Parents were also asked 'Have you worked since your 2YO child started at Solar Primary School?' 14% said 'Yes, full-time', 21% said 'Yes, part-time' and 43% said 'No' (21% NR) (Figure 1). Additionally, parents were asked 'Are you currently working?' 14% said 'Yes, full-time', 14% said 'Yes, part-time' and 36% said 'No' (36% NR) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Parents' Work Patterns over Time

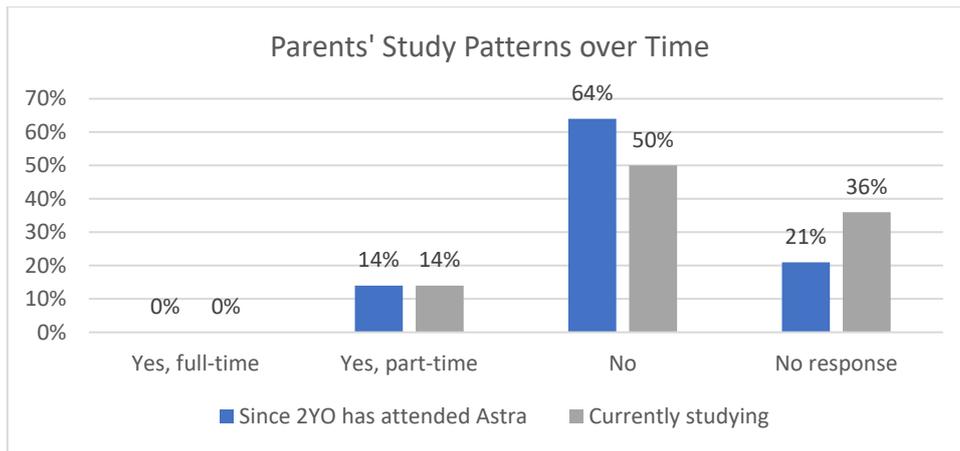


The responses shown in Figure 1 suggest parents' full-time work patterns remained unchanged by their child's attendance at Astra Setting. However, parents' part-time work seemed to reduce before and after their 2YOs joined Astra Setting: 29% of parents said they had worked part-time *before* their child joined Astra Setting, 21% of parents said they worked had worked part-time *since* their child joined Astra Setting, falling to 14% of parents who were currently working part-time.

Nevertheless, as indicated in Figure 1, the number of parents who said they were not working fell from 50% to 43% when comparing before and since their children attended Astra Setting and only 36% of parents said they were not currently working. When compared with the data on working parents, these data may seem anomalous until the 'No response' figures are accounted for: these showed parents were less keen to respond to questions about their more recent work patterns. The reasons for this finding are not clear in the data.

Two questions in the QS focused on parents' study patterns. The first asked parents: 'Have you studied since your 2YO child started at Astra Setting?', to which no parents responded 'Yes, full-time', 14% responded 'Yes, part-time' and 64% responded 'No' (21% NR). When asked 'Are you currently studying?', no parents said 'Yes, full-time' 14% said 'Yes, part-time' and 50% said 'No' (36% NR) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Parents' Study Patterns over Time



Parents were also asked: 'If you are not currently working or studying, would you like to work or study, or if you are working, would you like to increase your hours?' Whilst 50% wanted to work or study more, 36% of parents said they did not want to (Figure 3). One parent explained:

*'I am a single parent. I don't think I can cope working and caring for two children.'* (P7)

Figure 3: Would parents like to work or study more?

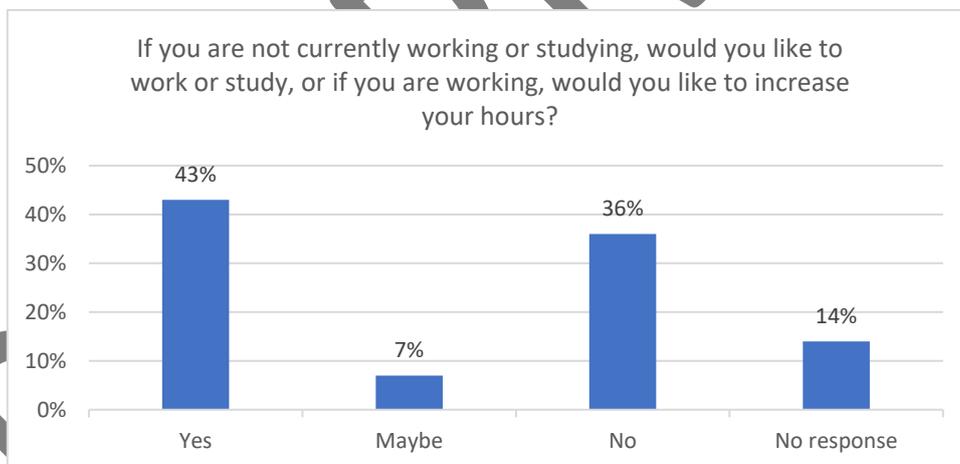


Table 3 shows parents' responses to the question 'Do any of these things prevent you from studying or working?' They suggested that neither the fifteen-hour offer, nor the three-hour sessions afforded them sufficient time to work (57%; 50%). Moreover, parents indicated that the model of fifteen hours split over five days was insufficient time even to seek work (36%). However, only 29% of parents said childcare for 2½ days each week might address this barrier. Parents said that being a parent (21%), school holidays (14%) and caring for their children (50%) were other barriers to their work or study.

Table 3: What prevents parents from studying or working?

15 hours of free 2YO childcare is not enough to study or work 57%	Caring for my children 50%	3 hours of free childcare daily is not long enough to work 50%	3 hours of free childcare daily is not long enough to <u>seek</u> work 36%	I am too busy being a parent to work 29%
The 2YO provision is not 2 ½ full days 29%	My lack of qualifications 21%	My children need at least one parent at home 21%	School holidays 14%	My housework 14%
My partner's work 7%	My partner does not want me to work 7%	My current studies 7%	Caring for my parents or older relatives 0	Fear of losing benefits 0
My older children are not in school long enough 0	My own disability 0	My child's disability 0	Another relative's disability 0	My lack of spoken English 0

When asked what might help them to work or *work more* if they were already working, parents repeated that they needed more childcare, particularly more funded childcare (71%) and more childcare every day (57%) (Table 4). Anomolously, although no parents thought any lack of spoken English was a barrier to them working (Table 3), 21% thought that English lessons would help them into work (Table 4).

Table 4: What would help parents to work?

More funded childcare (71%)	More childcare every day (57%)	Childcare in the school holidays (21%)	Qualifications (21%)
English lessons (21%)	Change in the law to allow me to work in the UK 0	Care for disabled relatives 0	Other suggestions 0

In interviews, parents explained more about their work and study and how they used the three hours of free ECEC each day. Some appreciated having time for themselves:

*'It just gives me that 3-hour break. Don't get me wrong – she's not a naughty girl but she is hard work – she's a handful'* (PD15)

*'I have more time for myself'* (PA20)

*'Yeah – I have 3 hours to myself – “me time”’ (PB46)*

During interviews, some parents said the three-hour daily break helped them to manage routine household tasks, for example,

*'I can do a lot of things – I can prepare cleaning or I can go shopping what I need I study something.'* (PA22)

*'I have time to cook, and get ready in the house for when they come back from school.'* (PB47 – PB50)

*'Yes, but if I need some paper(work) jobs do, it's easy. I can do when he's (my child is) not with me.'* (PA30)

In interviews, some parents said the funded 2YO provision had affected their well-being positively:

*'I think this is perfect right now... because... I'm not away from her for too long...It's only three hours – I really miss her when it's like three hours.'* (PF132 – PF136)

*'I've come back to life since he started (at) two years 'cos... he's got so much confidence and he knows who his mum and dad is so he won't walk away. It's just given me so much confidence and when I walk down the road I know he's going to follow me. I know it. It's eased me so much – I feel more comfortable. That's so brilliant.'* (PB140-PB142)

*'I started exercise... I used to say before I come I can't do exercise because I am diabetic. They say: "You have to lose some weight" but I think I go gym so now I got time to go gym... I go three days a week. Yeah – I got membership pack already so I go when I drop Charlie - 9.30 until 11o'clock. So I have to pick him (up) around 11.30. Yes – it is a suitable time. I feel happy – I feel more fit as well.'* (PC36 – PC42)

One parent said the 2YO provision had helped her to study:

*'I go (to college) full days on Mondays and Wednesdays so this (2YO provision) really helps a lot because her dad will bring her in, she'll have her three hours here and then he'll come pick her up it's – it's really good. Because otherwise I probably wouldn't be able to go.'* (PF34)

However, other parents focused on reasons they could not work or study:

*'Yes – and for me – I mean I can do my shopping in the morning, I can do so many things, you know from 9o'clock till quarter to 12. It's helped us a lot.'* (PB50)

*'...this one I will do from September because (my child will be) going full time (to nursery) and I want to study driving, I want to study Arabic but... three hours (per day) is not too much for me.'* (PA24)

*'...just my husband (is) working but me I can't work because I have (to) bring (the) kids (home) then I have 12 o'clock and then I have 3o'clock (pick up). ...One of us – need stay at home.'* (PA54 – PA62)

*'(While my child is at 2YO provision) I just go home, do something, and I'm coming back. It's not lot of time'* (PA26)

#### **4. Parents' Responses about Ways they are Supported**

Parents indicated ways they felt supported by the 2YO provision and other local services. They revealed how they first found out about the 2YO provision (Table 5):

*Table 5: How did parents first find out about Astra Setting?*

Advertisement 29%	Friend 21%	Other ways 21%
Astra Setting teacher 14%	Astra Setting website 14%	Another parent 7%
Relative 7%	Health visitor or doctor 0	Children's services worker at another setting 0

The 'other ways' parents indicated they learned about the 2YO provision included:

*'The Borough Council sent me a letter'* (P11)

*'Playgroup advised me when I had my (older) son in'* (P12)

Parents also identified Astra 2YO Setting parent partnership events they had attended (Table 6):

*Table 6: What parent partnership events have Astra parents attended?*

2YO Stay and Play (71%)	Fire Station visit (21%)	Every Child a Talker (ECAT) Workshop (7%)	2YO parents' evenings (7%)
2YO visit to the park 0	International afternoon 0	Willow dome making session 0	Other Astra Setting Sessions 0

They revealed they had not all attended these events but viewed them positively:

*'Recently they invited us in to cook with them and I really loved it. Yes. I proper loved it there. 'Cos I feel like I work there! (We made) cheese sticks and something else – what was it? I've forgotten what it was now... and next day she was like "Mummy are you going to stay (at nursery) and cook?" and I was like "No".'* (PF154 – PF160)

*'I've been to the park once with them. Yesterday her dad went with them to – er – I think it was like a sports day. I missed going to that one'* (PF148 – PF150)

Parents also indicated other local services they had accessed while their 2YO child was at Astra Setting (Table 7):

Table 7: What local services have parents used while their children were at Astra Setting?

Shops (36%)	Children's Centre (14%)	College or University (14%)	Astra School offer (e.g. coffee morning, family kitchen, home school support) 7%
Recruitment agency (7%)	No local services (7%)	Job Centre Plus 0	Other local services 0

Parents completed a ranking question to show the importance they attributed to staff tasks at Astra Setting (1 most important, 8 least important) (Table 8):

Table 8: What importance do parents attribute to Astra Setting Staff tasks?

1 = Helping 2YO children to develop and learn	1 = Helping 2YO children to be happy	3 Caring for 2YO children	4 Helping 2YO children to get ready for school
5 Supporting parents to look after their 2YO children	6 Directing parents to services	7 Filling in forms	8 Translation

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In the final questionnaire section, parents were asked: 'Is there anything more you would like to add about fifteen hours of Free Education and Care for your 2YO? They said:

*'To make (the provision) three full days a week and to have a swimming for the children.'*  
(P1)

*'The 15 hours of free education helps me in many different ways but first of all, it's helped my son's speech become clear. He started with few words and now knows songs and can express everything he needs to say since January.'* (P7)

*'If I wanted to work more I'd need more than 3 hours.'* (P11)

*'I am now in a position to receive the 15 hours for my daughter after being told in 2012 I was not eligible with my son as I received working tax credits. I'm overall grateful they have not now included if you receive working tax credits which makes the service fair to those in need, not just the ones claiming benefits.'* (P12)

*'I wanted my daughter to attend my childhood school which I used to love.'* (P13)

*'No. I think the school is amazing and my daughter loves being there which makes me extremely happy.'* (P14)

## **Discussion**

This section discusses parents' responses according to the study's four objectives and considers evidence from them suggesting that it cannot be assumed ECEC policy always translates into the actions that are the intended outcomes of the policy.

### ***Parents' Responses concerning Study Objective 1:***

The first objective was to capture parents' views about perceived effects of fifteen hours of free ECEC on their 2YOs' behaviour. Most parents (93%) said they had noticed positive changes in their 2YOs' social, emotional, physical and language development since starting at Astra Setting. Parents valued Astra Setting staff support for their 2YOs' toilet training as well as language and mathematical development. The nature of 2YOs' progress identified by parents aligns with data from Greene *et al.*

(2015) and was congruent with key aspects of development and learning in England's *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2017). However, parents made no explicit allusion to the EYFS, the educational attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, or its link to disadvantage into adulthood (DfE, 2017; Lewis and West, 2017; Parsons and Bynner 2007). Data indicate that parents seemed unaware of the policy rationale for funding 2YOs' ECEC in respect of the educational attainment gap or the EYFS their 2YOs experienced every day in Astra Setting.

### ***Parents' Responses concerning Objectives 2 and 3:***

The second and third study objectives focused on parents' views regarding effects of the 15 hours of free ECEC on their own behaviour, particularly their own employment or study. Objectives 2 and 3 addressed a key strand in English government's rationale for 2YO provision: to enable parents - particularly mothers - to work (Waldegrave, 2013).

Parents identified positive changes in themselves since their 2YOs had started ECEC provision. They appreciated having time to pursue their own activities, go to lunch with friends and do paperwork. Several parents appreciated time away from their children. Parents said that Astra Setting staff had built positive relationships with them and supported them in their role. Most parents said the 2YO provision had improved the quality of their own lives in different ways, including getting organised at home, for example, '*I can prepare cleaning*' (PA22), '*I have time to cook, and get ready in the house*' (PB47 – PB50). These activities may have given parents more time to interact with their 2YOs at home together at other times, a factor conducive to young children's development and learning with possibilities for narrowing the educational attainment gap (Klucznioka, Lehrla, Kugerb and Rossbach, 2013; Waldegrave, 2013).

However, parents said they were more likely to do things they wanted to do, rather than use the fifteen funded hours to work or study. 36% neither wanted to start work, nor work more if they were already working. Parents said their main barrier to working was that 15 hours of free childcare for three hours across five days, term time only, provided insufficient time to work or look for work. The number of parents studying remained unchanged once their 2YO children had started ECEC provision (14%). These findings indicate that the English government's policy for 2YO provision as leverage for parents to work did not translate into practice for the parents in this study (Waldegrave, 2013; Lewis and West, 2017).

#### ***Parents' Responses concerning Objective 4:***

The fourth study objective focused on barriers and opportunities parents experienced in accessing local services for themselves and their families while their 2YO children were in 15 hours of free ECEC each week. Most parents said they had discovered Astra 2YO provision through Astra staff advertisements on the Solar Primary School website and in the local area. However, other children's services, including health visitors and doctors, had not signposted parents to Astra 2YO provision. In respect of accessing other services while their children were at 2YO provision, just over a third of parents had used the time to go to the shops, but most parents said that while their 2YO child was at provision they did not access other local services and no parent said they had attended the government employment agency Job Centre Plus. These findings indicate that different agencies and services may not be reaching out to parents to reify government policy geared to enabling parents of young children to work and to closing the educational attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers (Waldegrave, 2013; Lewis and West, 2017).

Only some parents had attended Astra Setting 2YO parent partnership events, suggesting a further mismatch between policy and practice, since the statutory EYFS has an expectation of 'partnership working' (DfE, 2014/2017:5). However, parents said they considered it more important for Astra staff to help their 2YOs to develop, learn and be happy than it was to help parents. As indicated for the first study objective, parents believed overwhelmingly that Astra 2YO staff had helped their children to develop, learn and be happy, so that they had made 'good progress', another requirement of the statutory EYFS (DfE, 2014/2017:5). These findings suggest that whilst policy seems to have translated into practice concerning aspects of the EYFS (DfE, 2014; 2017) those aspects relate specifically to 2YOs in the setting. The parents seemed resistant to aspects of practitioner-parent partnership which could enhance children's development and learning and narrow the educational attainment gap (Kernan, 2012; Waldegrave, 2013).

In summary, data from this study indicate that it cannot be assumed policy concerning 2YO provision in England translates into the practice that is the intended outcome of the policy, including increased parental employment.

#### **Conclusion**

##### ***The Findings***

This study focused on an aspect of national policy that has underpinned a programme of funded childcare for the 40% of 'most disadvantaged' 2YOs in England (GOV.UK, 2017), with the aim of

closing the educational attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers and enabling parents to work (Waldegrave, 2013; Lewis and West, 2017). Interwoven with the policy is the statutory requirement that almost all settings which receive government funding in England must comply fully with the EYFS (DfE, 2017). In addition to the government's own data suggesting that take-up of funded 2YO is not only weaker than take-up by 3-4YOs but also decreased in 2018-19 (DfE, 2019), four strands of evidence emerged from this study to suggest the policy may not be translating fully into practice.

First, while parents believed their disadvantaged 2YOs had made progress in basic skills since starting the 2YO provision, they seemed unaware of either the English government's policy rationale for funded 2YOs' ECEC concerning the educational attainment gap or the EYFS their 2YOs experienced every day (Waldegrave, 2013; Lewis and West, 2017; DfE, 2017).

Second, most participating parents did not use the time their 2YOs were in childcare to work, to seek work or to study towards work. This finding indicates that the policy for 2YO provision as leverage for parents to return to work did not translate into practice for most parents in this study (Waldegrave, 2013; Lewis and West, 2017).

Third, parents had not been supported by agencies other than Astra Setting to access free ECEC for their 2YOs, nor had they attended Job Centre Plus while their 2YO child was at provision. This finding suggests that agencies and services did not reach out to participating parents to reify policy intended to close the educational attainment gap and enable them to work (Waldegrave, 2013; Lewis and West, 2017).

Fourth, participating parents indicated they were generally resistant to engagement in scheduled opportunities for partnership with practitioners in their children's 2YO setting. However, 'partnership working' is an expectation of the EYFS (DfE, 2017:5), with potential to close the educational attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers (Waldegrave, 2013; Lewis and West, 2017).

### ***Limitations***

This study had limitations. It was confined to the 30 parents whose children attended Astra 2YO Setting, of whom only 47% responded to the questionnaire, and only 20% participated in semi-structured interviews. Views of parents who had *not* taken up 15 hours of funded 2YO provision

were not captured, nor were the views of stakeholders other than parents. In addition, this study did not set out to examine the quality of 2YO provision *per se*, as did Georgeson *et al.* (2014) and Greene *et al.* (2015), for example.

The design of the research instruments and interpretation of data were informed by specific influences, including two issues identified anecdotally by Solar Primary School staff in respect of its funded 2YOs' offer:

- Variable uptake of 15 hours of its free ECEC provision for 2YOs
- Consistently high unemployment among parents of its 2YOs.

Other influences included the policy and rationale underpinning England's national programme of funded childcare for the 40% most disadvantaged 2YOs (GOV.UK, 2017; Waldegrave, 2013; Lewis and West, 2017) and the disparity between take-up of universal free childcare for 3-4YOs and targeted childcare for 2YOs (Whitaker, 2015; DfE, 2018; Huskinson *et al.*, 2016). Parents' responses were channelled to address these influences so that other effects on their family lives of the fifteen hours of free ECEC for their 2YOs may not have been accounted for.

Equally, the methodology and research instruments limited the parents' responses to some extent. They were selected by the researchers - who both work in demanding roles - to be ethical and manageable in a busy school environment. In this instrumental case study (Creswell, 2013), both the issue (parents' views) and the cases (47% / 20%) of parents whose children attended free 2YO ECEC were limited. The questionnaire survey and semi-structured interview schedule were designed to be congruent with the research objectives, so channelled the parents' responses. These limitations were somewhat eased by using a Likert scale in the questionnaire and opportunities for open responses in both research instruments but they meant that, whilst subtle realism was the study's guiding approach (Hammersley, 1992), the full range of parents' subjective views was capped. Nevertheless, evidence from parents' voices emerged sufficiently to challenge the realist policy presumption that 15 free hours of ECEC for 2YOs is a pathway to parental employment (Lewis and West, 2017).

### ***Implications***

This study's findings contribute new evidence that indicates ECEC policy cannot be assumed to translate into practice. The findings will be used to inform the researchers' teaching and further research, as planned. Additionally, further implications for practice, research and policy can be elicited from the findings.

In respect of practice ...

- 2YO practitioners should focus their work on 2YOs, rather than parents
- All children's services should signpost eligible parents to 2YO provision
- Job Centre Plus should have a presence in ECEC settings to help parents make the link between ECEC provision and their own employment
- Children's Centres may be better placed than school-based 2YO provision to direct parents into employment.

In respect of research...

- A larger scale study is indicated to secure enhanced representation
- Views of parents who have not taken up 15 hours of funded ECEC for their 2YOs should be captured
- Views of stakeholders other than parents should be captured, including 2YO children.

Finally, in respect of policy...

- The government in England should consider introducing universal ECEC provision for 2YOs, to improve uptake and reduce inequalities
- The policy presumption that 15 free hours of ECEC for 2YOs is a pathway to parental employment should be reviewed
- Government policymakers should continually include end users' views as evidence to inform policymaking and monitor its translation into practice
- Government departments should liaise more closely concerning policies to ensure their congruence for end users and ultimately, their effective translation into practice.

The findings indicate that policy concerning 2YO provision in England cannot be assumed to translate into the action intended by policymakers.

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