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Improving Quality in the Early Years:

A Comparison of Perspectives and Measures

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Chapter 1: Introduction

A shorter version of this report is provided by the Research Brief (Mathers, S., Singler, R. and Karemaker, A., 2012b)

1.1 Background context

The quality of early education and care matters, not only because it affects the everyday experiences of children but because the benefits are only realised if the provision used is high quality (Peisner-Feinberg and Burchinal, 1997; NICHD, 2000; Sylva et al, 2008). Research suggests that settings can vary widely in the impact they have on children's outcomes, with some more effective than others in promoting positive cognitive, social and behavioural outcomes (e.g. Sylva et al, 2004). High quality provision is particularly important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, helping to lessen the effects of social disadvantage (Sylva et al, 2004). If we are to effectively break cycles of disadvantage, it is vital that public funding is concentrated on provision which can have this positive effect on young children's outcomes. To achieve this, tools are needed to help stakeholders identify high quality provision, and support them in improving it.

A number of measures exist for assessing quality, many of them validated by research as capturing those elements of quality which are 'predictive' of child outcomes (e.g. Sylva et al, 2004; Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2005; Pianta, La Paro and Hamre, 2007). That is, children who attend settings which achieve higher scores on these measures are more likely to achieve positive outcomes. However, measures vary in the extent to which they are accessible to all stakeholders to help them make decisions around quality, and in the extent to which they reflect stakeholder perceptions of quality. The fact that a measure 'captures' quality effectively does not guarantee that it will be a practical and useable tool for quality improvement, or indeed that its use will lead to improved child outcomes. Likewise, tools which are accessible and easy to use may not necessarily have been validated by research.

This study sets out to consider some of these issues, exploring three of the most common and easily accessible measures used in England for identifying the quality of centre-based early years settings:

- The inspection reports of the regulatory body Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills);
- The Environment Rating Scales (ECERS-R, ECERS-E and ITERS-R); and
- Quality assurance schemes used by local authorities and early years providers for the purpose of quality improvement.

1.2 Stakeholders in improving quality

Different stakeholders have different roles to play in the promotion of high quality in early years settings. It is important to define these roles clearly from the outset, in order to establish what each stakeholder group needs from a quality measure (or measures) in order to fulfil their role:

- Parents play a key role in improving quality, as the primary users and purchasers of early years services on behalf of their children. If market mechanisms are to be used to drive up quality, then parents need to be able to choose high quality provision (e.g. in their choice of provider for the free entitlement[1]). This requires them to be informed about what constitutes high quality, and to be able to access information about the quality provided by different settings.
- Local authorities play a key role in improving quality in early years settings as a commissioner of services (e.g. deciding which settings receive funding to provide the free entitlement), in their legal duty to ensure sufficient childcare is available for those who need it, and in their role providing information to parents to support childcare choice. Additionally, local authorities play a role in encouraging settings to improve the quality of their provision, and in supporting them to do so (e.g. by providing training and access to quality improvement tools and schemes).
- Early years providers need effective tools to identify their own strengths and possible areas for development so that quality can be enhanced.
- Central government is responsible for legislation, regulation and guidance relating to early years education and care. It needs information about the quality and effectiveness of public services in order to make informed policy and funding decisions. Measures which provide information about the quality of early years provision are of particular importance at the present time, with financial constraints on spending and a large-scale national drive to provide high quality early education for disadvantaged two year olds. The government needs to be able to guide local authorities on how to fund provision which will offer the best outcomes for their investment.

This study largely focuses on the first three stakeholder groups (parents, providers and local authorities) and reflects their views. However, it is also intended to inform and guide policy-makers at national level.

Stakeholder perceptions of quality are likely to depend on their different roles and motivations. Harrist et al (2007, page 306) illustrates this point:

> **"Among the perspectives that can be used to define quality are the following (Farquhar, 1989):**
>
> - **that of experts in the field of child development (who ask, e.g., "What facilitates optimal child development?")**
> - **that of a parent ("What is best for my child?," "What best fits my needs as a worker and parent?"),**
> - **that of child care staff ("What allows me to succeed in my role as a provider?"), that of social policy and funding ("What is the role of child care in this society?," "Who pays for child care if it is to be successful?"), and**
> - **that of government/regulatory and social service agencies ("What kind of child care system works best for the needs of the state or country?," "How can community and family needs be met by child care?")."**

A set of tools are therefore required which enable all stakeholders to fulfil their role to improve quality, and help to ensure that provision supports children in reaching positive outcomes. Developing a consistent conception of what high quality looks like, and having a shared language for describing it, are also important in order to make the case for ongoing investment in early years services.

1. Every three- and four-year-old in England is eligible for a part-time early education place of at least 15 hours per week. The places are provided through registered childcare providers that are approved by the local authority to provide early years education. The Government intends that by 2013, 20 per cent of the most disadvantaged two-year-olds will also receive 15 hours of free early education a week. The offer will be extended to around 40 per cent of two-year-olds by 2014 (the eligibility criteria has yet to be confirmed by Government).

1.3 Research focus and questions

In order to explore the characteristics of the tools currently available to identify quality, we must first clarify the attributes which we hold to be important. Given the issues explored above, we might consider that quality measures need to:

- Capture elements of early years care and education which are predictive of positive outcomes for children (as validated by research);
- Capture a definition of quality which is recognised by all stakeholders; and
- Be useable by, and accessible to, all stakeholders, so that all can understand the findings and use them to support their role in improving quality.

The following research questions are considered, using a mixed methods design:

1. How do the different stakeholders (parents, providers and local authorities) perceive quality in early years education and care?
2. To what extent do the concepts of quality embodied in the measures considered here align with stakeholder perceptions of quality?
3. What are the statistical associations between the grades awarded by Ofsted, scores on the ECERS and ITERS, and participation in quality assurance schemes?
4. How effectively do the three approaches considered here support stakeholders in identifying and improving quality?

The quantitative element of the research focuses on centre-based settings within the private and voluntary sectors, while the literature review and qualitative focus groups also include the maintained sector.

1.4 Structure of this report

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2** provides a brief summary of some different ways of thinking about quality, and about quality measures. It also introduces the measures considered as part of this research and their different characteristics.
- **Chapter 3** outlines the methodology and sample characteristics for both the qualitative and quantitative elements of the study.
- **Chapter 4** presents the findings of the focus groups with parents, providers and local authority staff, to answer research questions 1, 2 and 4, and sets these in the context of relevant literature.
- **Chapter 5** presents the findings of the quantitative element of the study, which uses data from a large sample of settings in the private and voluntary sectors to answer research question 3.
- **Chapter 6** provides an overview and discussion of the findings, pulling together both the qualitative and quantitative elements of the research.
- **Chapter 7** presents the conclusions.
- **Chapter 8** provides recommendations for central and local government, providers and Ofsted.

Chapter 2: Approaches to Measuring Quality

Rosanna Singler (Daycare Trust)

There are many different ways of defining quality in the early years, and much debate over the question of 'what quality is'. This study does not claim to provide a full overview of the quality debate. However, a short summary of some of the ways in which quality can be defined is provided, in order to set the research in context.

Section 2.1 provides a brief overview of some possible ways of thinking about quality, and about quality measures. Section 2.2 sets out the measures considered as part of this research and their different characteristics, as well as briefly considering other available tools.

2.1 Conceptions of quality and approaches to measurement

This section considers a number of different ways of conceptualising quality measures including: purpose (regulation, research and quality improvement); objectivist and relativist approaches; global and specific approaches; and qualitative and quantitative methods.

2.1.1 Purpose – regulation, research and quality improvement

One way of categorising quality measures is to consider the purpose they are designed to serve. There are three broad purposes for which quality can be evaluated: for regulation, for research, and to improve practices (Scarr et al, 1994 cited in Siraj-Blatchford and Wong, 1999).

Regulation of quality in early childhood is generally the responsibility of central and local government. Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003, page 116) describe regulations as:

- Rules or standards which symbolise government interest and involvement in children's services;
- Stipulating appropriate guidelines by dictating what are acceptable practices;
- A pre-requisite to obtaining government funding; and
- Usually being formulated as statutory document, not easily changed and legislatively binding.

As Siraj-Blatchford and Wong (1999) point out, if the purpose of evaluation is to regulate settings then a measure would need to have an, 'exhaustive list of quality aspects to assess whether the setting meets stipulated criteria' (page 9). Most countries have some form of regulation which evaluates early years settings, in order to ensure national standards are being met. In England, Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) fulfils this role, as discussed later in this chapter.

The second purpose of evaluating quality is for research, for example, to identify which elements of quality affect children's outcomes, and to inform policy development. As Siraj-Blatchford and Wong (1999, page 9) state:

> **"In this context, quality is defined in terms of relevant and measurable features and interactions that affect children's outcomes. Standardised or modified versions of rating scales/tests supplemented with more detailed interviews of staff and observational methods are frequently used to examine aspects of quality in pre-school care and education."**

Measures which capture those elements of quality which are predictive of positive outcomes for children can also be used to directly evaluate government programmes and policies, thus helping to ensure that investment is being used effectively to support desired outcomes. For example, the Environment Rating Scales ECERS-R, ECERS-E and ITERS-R (Harms et al, 2003; 2005; Sylva et al, 2003) have been in used in government-funded evaluations such as the Evaluation of the Early Education Pilot for Two Year Old Children (Smith et al, 2009), which used the ITERS-R to assess the impact of providing free part-time early education places to disadvantaged two year olds on children's language and behavioural outcomes.

The third purpose of quality measurement is to improve practice. In this context, an evaluation is carried out with the intention of enabling those with a vested interest (providers and those supporting quality improvement) to identify where practices might need developing or improving. For example, quality assurance schemes aim to 'to raise standards by encouraging providers to assess the quality of their provision, compare it with descriptions of best practice, and so identify areas for potential improvement' (Munton et al, 2001, page 3). Such measures should enable all these groups to play their role to improve the quality of provision (Elfer and Wedge, 1996 cited in Siraj-Blatchford and Wong, 1999).

Our research aims to cover measures used in England for all three purposes (i.e. regulation, research and quality improvement), with a focus on their use for identifying the quality of individual providers.

2.1.2 Relative vs objectivist

Another key debate is whether it is possible to define quality at all. The objectivist approach holds that many aspects of quality can be agreed upon by all stakeholders and do not constantly change - they can be identified and used to inform research and practice (Siraj-Blatchford and Wong, 1999). Here, quality is defined as a "collection of measurable characteristics in the childcare environment that affect children's social and cognitive development" (Siraj-Blatchford and Wong, 1999, page 10). This approach underpins measures developed through academic research, which identify the link between elements of provision and children's outcomes. However, this objectivist approach has been criticised for failing to incorporate the views of different stakeholders, since such measures tend to be based on conceptions of quality created by one group rather than incorporating multiple perspectives (they are often, although not always, developed by researchers). Critics also argue that tools which are created in one social and cultural context, for example by researchers in the US, may not be suitable for use in another country, where desired outcomes for young children may be different. Dahlberg & Moss, (2008, p22) propose a "redefinition of quality as a subjective, value-based, relative and dynamic concept". According to the relativist approach quality should be defined locally, varying according to the social and cultural context and reflecting the multiple perspectives of stakeholders (parents, children, practitioners and policy-makers). The relativist approach also has its critics, who argue that if quality is only defined on a local level so that it is relevant to individual social and cultural contexts, then nationally defined standards cannot be set, and no universal links to outcomes established.

2.1.3 Structural vs process vs outcomes

Quality measures which assess the early years environment can generally be divided into two broad groups dependent on whether they assess structural or process quality. Process quality refers to the direct experiences of children in settings; it is essentially qualitative in nature and requires in-depth observation to measure (Peisner-Feinburg and Yazejian, 2010). Process quality includes, for example, the ways in which educational activities are implemented, the characteristics of interactions between teachers and children or among the children themselves, and the ways in which routine care needs such as meal times are handled (Peisner and Yazejian, 2010). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (Sylva et al, 2010) identified various elements of process quality as being related to better outcomes. For example, when looking at the quality of adult-child verbal interactions, the authors found that more 'sustained shared thinking' was observed in settings where children made the most progress.

Structural aspects of provision include 'the more stable aspects of the environment in which care are produced' (Munton et al, 1995, page 14), for example ratios or qualifications. Some structural aspects of quality, including adult-to-child ratios, group sizes, caregiver qualifications, and low staff turnover have been associated with better process quality (e.g. sensitive, positive caregiving) and with improved child outcomes (Leach et al, 2008 citing Phillips, 1987; Clarke-Stewart et al, 1994; Vandell & Wolfe, 2000; NICHD, 2005; CQO Study Team, 1995). Peisner-Feinberg and Yazejian (2010) note that structural measures are popular with policy makers as they are easily adopted and are commonly included in government childcare licensing regulations. They are also easily adaptable for use in research as they can be clearly defined and consistently measured across various types of early education settings. However they can be limited in their ability to capture elements of provision which best promoted children's outcomes, and thus to define which settings are likely to lead to such outcomes. Therefore, many measures of quality assess both process and structural elements.

Outcome measures provide a third way of considering quality. These most commonly include child outcome measures, for example cognitive, social and behavioural outcomes, either assessed by researchers or by practitioners. Other outcome measures might include, for example, the extent of parental involvement or health outcomes.

2.1.4 Global vs specific

Approaches to measuring quality can also be divided into those which examine it as a global construct, providing an overall score from a summary of various features, and those which examine a specific element in more detail (Peisner and Yazejian, 2010). As these authors point out, considering quality as a global construct is useful when measuring quality for the purpose of regulation, to ensure provision meets a minimum score for certain designated standards. However, it may be less useful for those who want to understand the relationship of specific elements of provision to quality. It may also be less useful for those working to improve quality, who need to identify where specific practices might need developing or improving.

2.1.5 Qualitative vs quantitative

The final way in which we will consider quality measures is to view them as either qualitative or quantitative. A qualitative measure is descriptive in nature, and considers data which can be observed but not measured. In contrast, quantitative measures involve (or result in) a numeric value, and consider data which can be measured. In the context of early childhood, quantitative measures might include data on children's outcomes in national tests, or grades awarded within a regulatory or quality assurance framework. Qualitative measures might involve descriptive observations of children's engagement in certain tasks.

2.2 Quality tools

This section describes some of the main tools used to evaluate early years settings in England, summarising their key features and setting them in the context of the different approaches to measuring quality. The focus of this study is on three of the most commonly used and easily accessible approaches to identifying quality in England[2]:

- the inspection regime of the regulatory body Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills);
- the Environment Rating Scales (ECERS-R, ECERS-E and ITERS-R); and
- quality assurance schemes used by local authorities and providers for the purpose of quality improvement.

2.2.1 Ofsted

Ofsted is the only official regulatory body in England to which settings must comply with by law in relation to the provision of early education and care. All settings providing early education and care to children up until August following their fifth birthday must register with Ofsted on the Early Years Register and be subject to inspection at least once every 47 months[3]. If the inspection identifies that a setting is not meeting minimum requirements, Ofsted has the power to enforce compliance. Although providers must pay to register with Ofsted and for continued registration, there is no specific charge for undergoing inspections.

2. Although outcomes measures (e.g. Foundation Stage Profile scores) are also commonly used as an indicator of effectiveness, they are not included as part of this research because outcome data was not available for the settings in the study sample.

3. Some providers are exempt from registration, such as schools or those offering short-term care

Separate legislative frameworks exist for group settings in the private and voluntary sectors, known as 'childcare on non-domestic premises', for schools (including their provision for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage), and for independent providers. More recently, Children's Centres have also been inspected under a separate framework. The focus of this study is primarily 'childcare on non-domestic premises', although maintained providers are included in the qualitative sample.

One of the purposes of regulation is to assess whether a setting is meeting nationally defined standards set by government. Since September 2008, these standards have been set out in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework. The EYFS was introduced with the intention of providing a comprehensive framework that sets the standards all settings must meet for the learning, development and care needs of children from birth to five. A major component of Ofsted inspections is to assess how well providers meet the standards set out in the EYFS. For example, welfare requirements all settings are expected to meet by law include ensuring necessary steps are taken to safeguard the welfare of children; ensure adults looking after children have appropriate qualifications and training; and also ensure staffing ratios meet legal requirements. Inspections of group (i.e. centre-based) provision registered on the Early Years Register usually involve a visit from one inspector, lasting between half a day and a day depending on the size of the setting and the length of time it is open. Information is gathered through observation, reviews of policies and paperwork, and discussions with management, parents/carers, staff and children (where they are old enough for this to be appropriate). Ofsted therefore incorporates multiple perspectives on 'quality'.

Ofsted inspections are intended to be broad, assessing a wide range of factors and carried out at the whole-setting level. The scope includes observation of practice, an assessment of policy and procedures (e.g. how effectively settings meet nationally set standards), and an assessment of aspects of leadership and management. Inspectors also consider how well children achieve the key outcomes as set out in the EYFS:

> **"the extent to which children achieve and enjoy their learning, feel safe, adopt healthy lifestyles, make a positive contribution and develop skills for the future."**
>
> (Ofsted, 2009).

Following inspection, a grade is awarded for 'overall effectiveness', as well as a number of sub-grades assessing specific dimensions of provision, such as leadership and management, quality of provision in the EYFS and outcomes for children (see Section 3.2). Grades are awarded on a four-point scale ranging from outstanding (1) to inadequate (4). Written reports are also produced and publicly available on the internet, as are the inspection frameworks setting out the criteria which inspectors use. Of the measures currently used in England, Ofsted reports are the most publically available. In particular, they are often the only measure available to help parents make decisions around quality.

Ofsted fulfils a broad regulatory function, and inspection is not intended to provide a fine-grained assessment of provision. However, it does provide a measure of quality. The current Ofsted website[4] states that, 'we inspect early years settings to judge the quality and standards for the welfare, learning and development of children which are set out in the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage'. Ofsted incorporates both structural elements of quality such as staff-child ratios (as defined by law in England) and the observation of process elements such as interactions between staff and children. It is a global measure, providing an overall judgement of quality comprising many different individual dimensions. Ofsted reports provide an element of quantitative information (via the grades) as well as qualitative information (via the text of the reports).

The evidence on a relationship between Ofsted grades and child outcomes is mixed. While Ofsted ratings for schools have been found to predict children's progress (Sammons et al, 2008), a study by Hopkin, Stokes and Wilkinson (2010) found that Ofsted grades for early years settings did not predict children's Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) scores, completed at the end of their final foundation stage year.

4. http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/early-years-and-childcare/for-early-years-and-childcare-providers/inspecting-early-years-and-childcare

2.2.2 The Environment Rating Scales

The Environment Rating Scales (ERS) are standardised quality assessment tools, used in many countries around the world for research, regulation and quality improvement. There are five in all:

- The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ECERS-R) (Harms et al, 2005), designed to assess provision for children from 30 months to 5 years;
- The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Extension (ECERS-E) (Sylva et al, 2003), designed to assess curricular provision for children aged three to five years;
- The Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ITERS-R) (Harms et al, 2003), designed to assess provision for children from birth to 30 months;
- The Family Childcare Rating Scale- Revised Edition (FCCERS-R) (Harms et al, 2007) designed to assess home-based care for children aged from birth to 12 years of age;
- The School Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS) (Harms et al, 1996), designed to assesses out-of-school provision for children aged from 5 to 12 years.

This study focuses on the first three measures, which are designed to assess the quality of centre-based early years provision. The ECERS-R and ITERS-R consider the quality of the learning environment in its broadest sense (i.e. the context needed for learning to take place). They describe both the characteristics of the physical environment and the pedagogical, social and 'emotional' environment. Each scale comprises a number of different items, which assess: the basic welfare requirements such as health, safety and appropriate supervision; the extent to which children have independent access to stimulating resources and experiences; the quality of social interactions and support for learning; and the extent to which adults meet individual needs. The majority of items assess provision for children, although one 'subscale' considers relationships with parents, and provision (e.g. facilities and support) for staff members. The extension to the ECERS-R (the ECERS-E) assesses a number of the more 'curricular' aspects of provision, including resourcing and the extent of staff support for learning and development. ECERS and ITERS therefore include assessments of both process and structural elements of quality. They do not focus on outcomes; rather they assess the aspects of the environment identified by research as contributing to children's outcomes. See Chapter 3 (Methodology) for more detail on the structure and scoring of the ECERS-R, ECERS-E and ITERS-R, and Appendix A for an overview of items.

Assessments are completed through observation, usually of half a day unless the ECERS-E is being completed alongside the ECERS-R. Observers complete items and assign scores by rating specific statements or 'indicators' of quality. To score a 3 (minimal) on the 'Interactions among children' item for example, observers must see evidence that staff 'stop negative and hurtful peer interactions' and that 'some positive peer interaction occurs'. This provides a measurable 'profile' of quality in early years settings across a number of different dimensions of quality. When used robustly (e.g. for research or audit) a rigorous moderation process exists to ensure consistency.

Unlike an Ofsted inspection, the vast majority of time is spent observing; ECERS and ITERS therefore provide an in-depth assessment of the quality of practice. Individual observations are carried out for each room or group of children, using whichever scale is most appropriate, so that each age group is evaluated separately. The ECERS and ITERS scales are not designed to assess the broader aspects of provision considered by Ofsted, such as the effectiveness of leadership and management, or of self-evaluation.

The ECERS and ITERS sit strongly within the objectivist tradition, in that they aim to assess 'universal' aspects important for children's development. Noting the relativist view, Douglas (2004) comments that 'rating scales such as ECERS are generally validated by reference to the values of one particular group in one country … in the case of ECERS, most of the experts were drawn from the field of child development in North America'[5]. The ECERS and ITERS strongly reflect the scope and content of the English Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)[6]. However, given that they are designed as universal tools rather than reflecting the specific requirements of any one country, they do not directly evaluate how settings are meeting the requirements of EYFS.

The ECERS and ITERS are used worldwide as research tools, and have been shown in many studies, both in the UK and elsewhere, to be reliable, valid and related to children's developmental outcomes (eg. Burchinal et al, 1996; Peisner-Feinberg and Burchinal, 1997; Peisner-Feinberg et al, 1999; Burchinal et al, 2002; Sylva et al, 2004; Sylva et al, 2006; Hopkins et al 2010). In general, a larger number of studies have used and validated the ECERS-R and ECERS-E than have used the Infant Toddler scale (ITERS-R).

In the UK, the ECERS and ITERS scales have been used in many research studies and government-funded evaluations, including the EPPE research (Sylva et al, 2010), the National Evaluation of SureStart (Melhuish et al, 2010), and evaluations of the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative, the Early Education Pilot for Two Year Old Children and the Graduate Leader Fund (Mathers & Sylva, 2007; Smith et al, 2009; Mathers et al, 2011). They are also widely used by local authorities, for example as audit tools to assess whether providers are meeting high quality standards and to help identify areas where they need to improve. Increasingly, they are also being used as the basis for decisions around funding, and to provide measurable evidence of quality improvement and impact. The UK Local Authority Network comprises over one hundred members from 45 local authorities.

The two examples below are presented to illustrate how two local authorities have used ECERS R and E in their quality improvement work and as an audit tool:

Use of the ECERS-R and ECERS-E in Surrey

Between 2008 and 2011 each local authority in England received a government grant to drive up quality, specifically in the private, voluntary and independent sector. As part of its efforts to improve the quality of the learning environment in early years settings through this Quality and Access Capital Fund, Surrey County Council commissioned an audit of its settings in the PVI sector using ECERS R and E. The primary aim of the audit was to inform the spending of the grant, using the information generated by the ECERS-R and E to identify aspects of the physical environment and resourcing which needed improving. Funding was provided for each setting to improve the indoor and outdoor environment, based on the audit scores.

The audit results were also used to identify next steps for action planning, using data to shape the model of support for individual providers, identify training needs for groups of providers and to identify which settings needed more targeted or intensive support. Local authority staff, all of whom had received training on the ECERS, provided full feedback from the assessment to the settings and provided support in creating an 'ECERS Action Plan' to support providers in making improvements. In addition, settings were encouraged to use ECERS as a self-assessment tool. The audit also provided a baseline for the local authority against which future progress can be measured. Local authority advisers revisited individual items with setting managers to measure improvements and share with staff, and a full 're-audit' was carried out in 40 per cent of settings to assess the impact of the funding. Surrey settings are now being encouraged to use the scales themselves to inform their practice, reflect on their learning environments and support children's development.

5. The ECERS-R, ITERS-R, FCCERS-R and SACERS are American in origin. However the ECERS-E was developed in England, as part of the EPPE research, and reflected the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (DfEE/QCA, 2000)

6. A 'mapping' of ECERS-R and ECERS-E to the EYFS can be found here: http://www.ecersuk.org/11.html

Use of the ECERS-R and ECERS-E in Derby City

In 2011, Derby City Council decided to conduct an audit of all their early years settings using ECERS after deciding that its current method for determining quality to guide funding and support (a combination of Ofsted grades and the professional opinion of the early years team) did not provide a robust evidence base. The ECERS was chosen because the Early Years Quality Improvement Support Programme (EYQISP)[7] document had identified it as a recognised recommended audit tool, and it was promoted by National Strategies (the strategy for improving quality in the early years created by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families). The ECERS-R and E scales were used to create a baseline audit of all early years settings in the locality. The local authority felt that the ECERS audit provided them with data and statistics showing clearly which settings needed the most support, and which areas required improvement. For example, before Derby City Council had used ECERS, local authority staff tended to rely on what providers told them needed improving, whereas ECERS provided them with a more robust evidence base. Local authority staff still worked closely with managers and relied on their own observations but the results of the ECERS informed the focus of their work. According to local authority staff, this was particularly helpful where resources are tight because they could concentrate efforts where it was needed most. Local authority staff also felt that the ECERS audit enabled them to identify a setting's strengths which encouraged them in their work.

ECERS and ITERS are also used widely by practitioners as self-evaluation tools, to audit their own quality and identify areas for improvement, often with the support of their local authorities. The scales provide a detailed explanation of what settings must do to achieve every level within each of the items.

It is important to note that, while providers and local authorities use these tools widely, parents are generally not able to access the results of ECERS and ITERS assessments.

2.2.3 Quality assurance (QA schemes)

The purpose of quality assurance schemes is 'to raise standards by encouraging providers to assess the quality of their provision, compare it with descriptions of best practice, and so identify areas for potential improvement' (Munton et al, 2001, page 3). Schemes tend to involve a large degree of self-evaluation, with providers gathering evidence that they meet the different requirements and often completing a portfolio. What distinguishes them from quality improvement (which also typically involves self-evaluation) is that quality assurance schemes tend to be accredited. Providers are usually externally assessed, and are required to demonstrate that they meet the relevant standards before being awarded their status. Providers are often able to work towards different levels (e.g. bronze, silver, gold) within a given scheme. Many local authorities, including both of those in which focus groups were conducted for this study (see Chapter 3, Methodology), operate their own schemes. Others are operated by national organisations, for example the National Day Nurseries Association's 'Quality Counts' or various schemes operated by the Pre-school Learning Alliance (PLA). Schemes vary in their areas of focus, but a brief review shows that the scope tends to be broad, covering aspects of practice, leadership, management, and setting-level processes and procedures.

7. EYQISP provides local authority early years consultants and leaders of early years settings with tools to support continuous quality improvement in line with the principles of the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework. They also draw on the Ofsted self evaluation form and the National Quality Improvement Network's principles.

2.2.4 Other tools

A wide variety of other tools are available, both for the purposes of evaluating quality in order to improve it and for research. While not possible to summarise all measures, this section provides examples of a number of other quality improvement tools used by local authorities and providers in England, and other international research measures available to evaluate quality.

Other quality improvement tools used within England

In addition to the three approaches considered as part of this study (Ofsted inspections, ECERS/ITERS and quality assurance schemes), a number of other tools and programmes exist in England. These include programmes of supported self-evaluation such as Effective Early Learning (EEL) and Baby Effective Early Learning (BEEL), and tools developed by quality networks and support groups. The National Quality Improvement Network has published 12 Quality Improvement Principles to support local authorities in driving up quality (2007). Tools produced by central government include the Early Years Quality Improvement Support (EYQISP) materials and support programmes such as Every Child a Talker (ECAT). Many local authorities also use their own internal tools, alongside quality assurance schemes and other external measures used.

In its survey of providers, the NAO found that although Ofsted data were used by all local authorities to identify settings where provision was poor quality, they found other information more useful to inform their quality assessments of providers. Tools included: the local authority's own quality measures; EYQISP-based categorisation; ECERS; provider self-evaluation; Ofsted and Effective Early Learning Scales (NAO, 2012).

Other research tools

The Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS, Arnett, 1989) provides an example of a measure which focuses on one 'specific' element of quality (in this case, interactions between staff and children) as opposed to providing a global assessment. It provides an alternative to the global approach by providing a score for individual caregivers across four dimensions (positive relationships, punitiveness, permissiveness and detachment), thus allowing differences between caregivers to be identified. Observers are asked to rate the extent to which statements (e.g. 'speaks warmly to the children') are characteristic of the childcare provider whom they are observing, across 26 different items. The CIS is based on Baumrind's theoretical model of socialisation which suggested that the level of caregiver warmth, of punitiveness and restriction will all have important implications for children's development (Maccoby and Martin, 1983).

The Observational Record of the Caregiving Environment (ORCE, see NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1996) is designed to 'to assess minute-to-minute evidence of caregiving and quality' using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. It is designed to overcome the limitations of human observers, who inevitably bring their own subjective interpretations to the observations which they make (NICHD Study of Early Child Care Phase I Instrument Document, 2004, page. 128, cited in Child Trends, 2007).

Similarly the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2007) is based on observed interactions among teachers and students in classrooms. Ten dimensions of classroom quality are identified across three domains of interaction – Emotional Support, Classroom Organisation, and Instructional Support. The instrument may be used as a research tool, a professional development tool, and/or as a programme development and evaluation tool (Halle and Vick, 2007).

In response to criticisms of objectivist measures such as ECERS (i.e. created in one social and cultural context) Pierrehumbert et al (1996) created a new instrument, the Observation du Lieu de Vie de l'Enfant (OLiVE). It was intended by its creators to be suitable for observing infant care, either in the home or in a centre, and to focus on one specific child's experience. The aim was to develop an instrument that was based closely on theory, and that was multi-dimensional and relevant to children from a range of social backgrounds. In addition the authors wanted an instrument that described "characteristics" of childcare, a less judgemental concept than "quality", arguing that different stakeholder groups may hold different value systems and expect different characteristics (Barnes, 2001). This research team is not aware of studies linking the OLiVE to children's outcomes.

Chapter 3: Methodology

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This chapter outlines the methodology and sample characteristics for both the qualitative and quantitative elements of the study:

- Section 3.1 outlines the focus groups carried out by Daycare Trust with stakeholder groups (parents, providers and local authorities).
- Section 3.2 outlines the quantitative analysis carried out by the University of Oxford and A+ Education Ltd, looking at the associations between Ofsted grades, scores on the ECERS/ITERS scales and participation in quality assurance schemes.
- Section 3.3 sets out the characteristics of the quantitative sample.

3.1 Qualitative analysis: methods

Daycare Trust conducted a short literature review and primary qualitative work with key stakeholders (parents, local authority staff and providers) to answer the following research questions:

- How do the different stakeholders (parents, providers and local authorities) perceive quality in early years education and care?
- To what extent do the concepts of quality embodied in the measures considered here align with stakeholder perceptions of quality?
- How effectively do the three approaches considered here support stakeholders in identifying and improving quality?

3.1.1 Literature review

A brief literature review was conducted using a number of different search engines[8]. Reports were also chosen following suggestions from academic partners on our advisory board. Each report was then written up in a summary template of the findings which recorded the key aims of the research in question, its methodology and how it answered the research questions as set out above.

The review was not intended to be systematic and so does not claim to fully capture current research in this area. The first stage was conducted to support the development of the focus group discussion guides. The second stage explored the literature on how quality is defined in early years education and care (focusing on the perception of the stakeholder groups in question), in order to set the findings from the focus groups into context. Additionally, literature on how parents make choices about early years provision was reviewed, with a particular focus on what they look for when they visit a setting.

3.1.2 Focus groups

Focus groups were conducted with parents, providers and local authority staff. We worked with two local authorities, Derby City and Surrey County Councils, to support recruitment for the provider and parent focus groups. These two local authorities were chosen because they used ECERS and/or ITERS as well as operating their own quality assurance schemes, and because they enabled a range of parents and providers to be selected for the focus groups (e.g. from urban and rural settings, and from disadvantaged and wealthier areas). It was not possible within the limits of this study to ensure participants were representative of all local authorities but we endeavoured to get a broad spread, to ensure a range of views were captured.

All focus groups took around one hour to complete and were conducted by a trained researcher. They were conducted using a topic guide which included set research questions agreed by the research team and approved by the advisory board. The topic guide is included in the Technical Report (Karemaker, Mathers, Singler, 2012). Transcripts of all the focus groups

8. These included google scholar, Science Direct, ERIC and OxLIP (Oxford Libraries Information Platform). Key words such as early years education, childcare, quality, quality assurance tools, environment rating scales were used to search for relevant reports.

were produced and analysed to identify broad themes reflective of each stakeholder group. Although our sampling strategy aimed to ensure a range of parents and providers, it was not our intention to carry out separate analysis for parents or providers of different types. Rather, the aim was to draw out key themes and perceptions which were consistent across all groups, but which reflected a range of views.

3.1.3 Focus groups with parents

Eight focus groups were conducted with parents in six different settings. Four were rated as good by Ofsted, one was outstanding and one was satisfactory, broadly reflecting the current national average (74 per cent of settings were rated good or outstanding in 2010/11, Ofsted Annual Report 2010/11). We recruited parents from a range of backgrounds as research has shown that parents from different backgrounds – particularly in relation to ethnicity and social class – view and choose childcare differently (see Vincent & Ball 2006; Aston et al, 2007; Rutter & Hyder, 2007; Vincent, 2007). Half of the focus groups were conducted in Derby and half in Surrey, which did limit the geographical spread of the parents who took part in our focus groups. However, despite the clustering of our sample to two particular regions, our focus group participants consisted of parents from a mixture of ethnic backgrounds (using 'main language spoken at home' as a proxy), urban and rural contexts, and areas with different levels of deprivation. To achieve this, we liaised with local authorities to select providers from a range of different area types. We also liaised with providers to assist in asking parents to complete a questionnaire prior to taking part. Parents were asked about their highest qualification, job role and the main language spoken in their home (see Technical Report for questionnaire (Karemaker et al, 2012)). Each focus group was then selected to comprise parents from similar social and economic backgrounds, based on the information provided in the questionnaires and using qualification level as a proxy (separating parents with a qualification above level three from those whose highest qualification was no higher than level 2). This was done to ensure parents felt comfortable in discussing their experiences. Where parents were from different backgrounds, they were split into two different focus groups. The characteristics of the 32 parents who took part in the focus groups are set out in the table below.

Of the six settings in which the focus groups took place, three were in areas of deprivation, five were in urban areas (of which two were inner city) and one was in a rural area. Of the eight focus groups, four were in private settings, two were from the maintained sector and two were in voluntarily run playgroups.

In the focus groups parents were asked to describe:

- What they felt constituted high quality care;
- How they made their choice of childcare; and
- Which tools they used to inform their choice.

Table 3.1 Characteristics of parents in focus groups

	Number	%
Higher skilled (highest qualification level 3 and above)	24	75%
Lower skilled (highest qualification level 2 and below)	8	25%
Fathers	4	13%
Mothers	28	88%
Main language spoken not English	5	16%
Parents who had a disabled child*	5	16%

* This was not one of the selection criteria but the sample characteristic data is provided here because a number of the later findings relate to comments made specifically by parents of disabled children.

Parents were then asked to read and review an example Ofsted report in order to probe more deeply how well Ofsted captured the elements of quality which were important to them. A report was chosen which had received a range of sub-judgements (ranging from satisfactory to outstanding) to give examples of a range of practices. In addition parents were asked to consider how useful they felt the report would have been to help them decide which setting to choose for their child. Only a very brief explanation of the role of Ofsted was provided, as for the purposes of this study it was important to gather 'actual' views and perceptions of Ofsted and the reports it provides. Parents were not asked to comment on ECERS or ITERS as parents are not generally able to access data from these assessments. Finally, a short summary of the main themes of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) was shown to parents and the key themes were explained in order to garner parents' views of how well it reflected their view of quality. As the Ofsted evaluation schedule is based on the EYFS, this was to help us understand how well Ofsted measures aspects of quality important to parents.

Participation in the focus groups was voluntary and it was explained at the beginning that parents did not have to answer any of the questions if they did not want to. Parents were asked to sign consent forms, explaining that whatever they told us would be kept confidential and not be shared with the settings.

3.1.4 Focus groups with local authority representatives

Six focus groups were conducted with local authority staff (representing 21 local authorities in total), all of whom worked with early years settings to support them in improving quality.

Representatives were identified who had in-depth knowledge of both ECERS/ITERS, Ofsted and quality assurance schemes, so they could provide views on how they compare. Four focus groups were recruited through A+ Education Ltd's network of contacts, using the UK ECERS Network[9]. This ensured a good coverage of local authorities likely to be using the Environment Rating Scales. As these participants were in the ECERS network they clearly represent local authorities who are engaged with this tool, which may bias their views. To help retain some balance, two focus groups were conducted via the National Quality Improvement Network, comprising of a range of participants not all currently using ECERS[10]. Since the focus groups took place at an event in London, participants generally represented local authorities in London and the South East.

Participants were asked:

- How they perceived quality in early years education and care;
- To what extent the concepts of quality embodied in the measures considered here (Ofsted, ECERS and other tools) aligned with their perceptions of quality; and
- How effectively the approaches considered here worked as tools to improve quality.

3.1.5 Focus group with providers

Two focus groups were conducted with representatives from a range of settings, to ensure coverage of issues which may vary according to setting type. The majority of participants were managers of settings, including one head teacher of a primary school with pre-school provision. We chose managers of settings (as opposed to owners or other staff members) because we felt they would be most likely to be involved in leading quality improvement work. In total there were 21 participants, 11 from the private sector, eight from the voluntary sector, and two from the maintained sector. One focus group took place in Derby and one focus group took place in Surrey. These two areas were chosen to ensure representation of settings from urban, rural and deprived areas. We used the contacts we had with these two local authorities to help us to recruit providers.

9. Including representatives from Suffolk County Council; Halton County Council; Wiltshire County Council; London Borough of Tower Hamlets; Devon County Council; Kent County Council; Worcestershire County Council; Coventry County Council; Southampton County Council; Isle of Wight council

10. Including London Borough of Islington, Surrey County Council; London Borough of Camden; Peterborough Council; Brighton and Hove council; Kingston; Hillingdon, Norfolk, Sutton, Essex, Buckinghamshire

Participants were asked:

- How they perceived quality in early years education and care;
- To what extent the concepts of quality embodied in the measures considered here (Ofsted, ECERS and other tools) aligned with their perceptions of quality;
- How effectively the approaches considered here worked as tools to improve quality;
- About the practical issues they faced in preparing for assessment using the various mechanisms; and
- Which of the different measures they found most useful for communicating to parents about the quality of their service.

3.2 Quantitative analysis: methods

The quantitative element of the study was designed to compare three of the best known approaches for assessing the quality of early years settings in England: the inspections of the regulatory body Ofsted, the Environment Rating Scales (ECERS and ITERS) and quality assurance (QA) schemes.

3.2.1 Sample: Environment Rating Scales data

The sample was drawn from two pre-existing research studies carried out by the University of Oxford and from audits of settings carried out by A+ Education on behalf of local authorities in England, all of which included assessments using at least one of the Environment Rating Scales (ECERS-R, ECERS-E and/or ITERS-R, see Section 3.2.2) between 2007 and 2011:

Research studies:

- **The Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund (GLF; Mathers et al, 2011):** the purpose of this study was to assess the impact of Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) on quality of provision in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector. Baseline quality assessments (ECERS-R, ECERS-E and/or ITERS) were carried out in 324 PVI settings between 2007 and 2008. Follow-up assessments took place in 254 of the sample settings in 2010. Settings were selected because they did not have an EYP working at the settings but showed an intention to improve qualifications.
- **The Evaluation of the Early Education Pilot for Two Year Old Children (Smith, et al, 2009):** this evaluation aimed to assess the impact of offering early education places to disadvantaged two year olds on children's language and behavioural outcomes. ITERS-R quality assessments were carried out at 75 PVI settings between 2007 and 2008 (one time-point only).

Audits

- A+ Education Ltd carried out 1,321 audits on behalf of 12 local authorities in England between 2008 and 2011, for the purpose of quality improvement. Data was gathered using the ECERS-R, ECERS-E and/or ITERS-R, primarily in the PVI sector. The majority of audits were conducted at a single time-point, with 190 settings audited at two time-points. Within two local authorities, all PVI settings were audited. These two local authorities represented over 800 of the 1,321 settings. In other local authorities, settings had been selected due to specific criteria, e.g. settings with a satisfactory Ofsted grade, or settings offering places to two year olds.

In total, therefore, data were available on 1,720 settings, with 26 per cent of settings (444) also visited at a second time-point. A sub-sample of the settings also had data available on the use of quality assurance schemes (see Section 3.2.6). Due to the way in which the sample was gathered (i.e., using pre-existing sources, with settings selected according to the purpose of each project) it is therefore not fully representative of all settings in England.

Due to the fact that the legislative frameworks for inspections differ across sectors, it was not possible to include settings from different inspection frameworks within the same analysis. Maintained schools, independent schools and Children's Centres were therefore excluded from the sample. After exclusion and data cleaning, a total of 1,423 settings[11] with a 'childcare on non-domestic premises' (CNDP) Ofsted report, and for which a Unique Reference Number (URN) could be identified, was available for analysis. For settings visited at two time-points, quality data at one time-point was selected dependent on the gap between the ECERS or ITERS observation and the Ofsted inspection/s (see below for further details).

In all cases, the ECERS and ITERS observations were carried out by trained observers, with rigorous reliability standards and a common thread of training across the University of Oxford and A+ Education teams[12].

3.2.2 Measures: Environment Rating Scales

Within the sample, quality data was available for three measures:

- The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ECERS-R) (Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2005), designed to assess provision for children from 30 months to 5 years;
- The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Extension (ECERS-E) (Sylva, Siraj- Blatchford & Taggart, 2003), designed to assess curricular provision for children aged three to five years;
- The Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ITERS-R) (Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2003), designed to assess provision for children from birth to 30 months.

See Chapter 2 for further background information on the Environment Rating Scales, and Appendix A for an overview of items in each scale.

The items of the ECERS-R and ITERS-R are arranged under seven broad headings (known as 'subscales'):

- Space and furnishings *(e.g. furniture for play and learning, display for children)*
- Personal care routines *(e.g. health and safety practices, hygiene, mealtimes)*
- Language and reasoning/ Listening and talking *(e.g. supporting children's developing communication)*
- Activities *(e.g. fine motor activities, sand and water play)*
- Interactions *(e.g. supervision, staff-child interactions and peer interactions)*
- Program structure *(e.g. the balance between child-initiated and adult-directed play)*
- Parents and staff *(e.g. provision for professional needs of staff, partnership with parents).*

The first six subscales relate to childcare quality. The seventh subscale considers the extent to which settings work in partnership with parents, as well as their provision for staff members.

The extension to the ECERS-R (the ECERS-E) supplements the broad and balanced focus of the ECERS-R by providing more curricular focus. Its subscales contain additional items covering four specific aspects of learning and development:

- Literacy *(e.g. support for language, reading*

11. 3.3 per cent (332) from the University of Oxford and 76.7 per cent (1,091) from A+ Education Ltd

12. More details on fieldwork reliability are reported in the Evaluation of the Two Year Old Pilot (Smith et al, 2009) and the Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund (Mathers et al, 2011) study reports. A+ Education Ltd auditors are trained to accepted standards for the ECERS and ITERS (85 per cent of items scored within 1 mark of the consensus across 3 separate observations).

with children, support for emergent writing)

- Maths *(e.g. supporting children's understanding of number; sorting, matching and comparing)*
- Science *(e.g. living processes, food preparation)*
- Diversity *(e.g. racial and cultural awareness, planning for individual learning needs)*

Each of the subscales comprise a number of individual items, rated on a seven-point scale with explicit indicators for scores of 1 (inadequate), 3 (minimal), 5 (good) and 7 (excellent). There are clear rules for giving even numbered scores between the 'anchored' criteria for the odd numbers.

For the analysis, an overall quality score (Total Childcare Quality) was also created for the ECERS-R and the ITERS-R by calculating the mean of all items in subscales 1 to 6 (i.e. without the 'parents and staff' subscale). A 'Total Quality' score was also calculated for the ECERS-E (i.e. the mean of all items).

ECERS-R, ECERS-E and ITERS-R data were gathered according to the purposes of each study or project; the numbers of observations therefore vary. The vast majority of the 1,423 settings (1,319) had a completed ECERS-R observation, with smaller numbers of ECERS-E (800) and ITERS-R (361) observations.

3.2.3 Sample: Ofsted data

Our second measure of quality was provided by the reports of the regulatory body Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills[13]). Using the Unique Reference Number (URN) to identify settings, Ofsted provided multiple reports for the 1,423 settings (all available reports between 2005 and August 2011), which were merged with the Environment Rating Scales data.

The reports provided by Ofsted (2005-2011) for this study included reports from both before and after the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework in September 2008. Pre-EYFS inspections (i.e. prior to September 2008) were either 'Care', for settings not providing funded early education places, or 'Integrated', for settings providing both 'care' and 'education'. In September 2008, Ofsted changed the inspection structure in line with the new legislation supporting the EYFS framework. This removed the distinction between care and education so that all settings on the Early Years Register were inspected in the same way. One pre-EYFS and one EYFS inspection report was selected for each setting. Where more than one pre-EYFS or EYFS report was available, reports were selected on the basis that they were the closest to the Environmental Rating Scales data collection point (i.e. to minimize the time-gap between ECERS/ITERS and Ofsted assessments)[14].

Table 3.2 shows the number of available pre-EYFS and EYFS reports, following the sample selection[15].

Table 3.2 Final EYFS and pre-EYFS sample: number of Ofsted reports available

	Inspection (EY register)	Care inspections	Integrated inspections	Total
EYFS reports	1094			1094
Pre-EYFS reports		77	1179	1256

13. See Chapter 2 for further information about the regulatory Ofsted process and reports.

14. We also deleted 'monitoring' inspection reports; in these inspections, settings which have previously received an inadequate grade are re-inspected on the areas in which they have 'failed'. Full data is therefore not available on all Ofsted grades for these reports.

15. Separate analyses were completed for pre-EYFS and EYFS datasets. Where both EYFS and pre-EYFS reports were available for a setting, quality data was duplicated in both datasets. However, since the pre-EYFS and EYFS datasets were analysed separately, no setting ever appeared more than once in any of the analyses.

Table 3.3 Grades provided within Ofsted inspection reports (EYFS)

	Sept 08-Sept 09	Sept 09 onwards
Overall effectiveness		
The overall effectiveness of the early years provision	✓	✓
How well does the setting meet the needs of the children in the EYFS?	✓	✓
The capacity of the provision to maintain continuous improvement	✓	✓
Leadership and management		
How effectively is the EYFS led and managed?	✓	✓
Effectiveness of leadership and management in embedding ambition and driving improvement		✓
Effectiveness with which the setting deploys resources		✓
Effectiveness with which the setting promotes equality and diversity/inclusive practice	✓	✓
Effectiveness of safeguarding	✓	✓
Effectiveness of self-evaluation, including steps taken to promote improvement	✓	✓
Effectiveness of partnerships*		✓
The effectiveness of the setting's engagement with parents and carers*		✓
How well does the setting work in partnership with parents and others?*	✓	
Quality/ Quality and standards		
The quality of the provision in the EYFS		✓
How effectively are children in the EYFS helped to learn and develop?	✓	
How effectively is the welfare of children in the EYFS promoted?	✓	
Outcomes for children in the EYFS		
Outcomes for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage		✓
The extent to which children achieve and enjoy their learning/ How well are children helped to enjoy and achieve?**	✓	✓
The extent to which children feel safe/ How well are children helped to stay safe?**	✓	✓
The extent to which children adopt healthy lifestyles/ How well are children helped to be healthy?**	✓	✓
The extent to which children make a positive contribution/ How well are children helped to make a positive contribution?**	✓	✓
The extent to which children develop skills for the future/ How well are children helped develop skills that will contribute to their future economic well-being?**	✓	✓

* These three grades were formed into two variables for analysis. The first, 'effectiveness of engagement with parents/carers' used only data from September 2009 and onwards. The second variable ('effectiveness of partnerships with parents and others') used the relevant sub-grade pre-September 09. For inspections reports post-September 2009, a mean of 'effectiveness of partnerships' and 'how well does the setting work in partnership with parents and others' was used.

** Between 09/08 and 09/09 these grades did not relate to outcomes but to how well the provision helped children to achieve outcomes (e.g. how well are children helped to stay safe?)

3.2.4 Measures: Ofsted grades

Ofsted reports contain a textual description of a setting, as well as a number of grades assessing different aspects of provision. These judgements are made on a four point scale, where:

- 1 = Outstanding
- 2 = Good
- 3 = Satisfactory
- 4 = Inadequate

Pre-EYFS Inspections (2005-2008) included both Integrated and Care reports. For the Integrated reports, we used the two overall grades awarded: the 'Quality of Nursery Education' and the 'Quality of Care'. Care reports did not have a 'Nursery Education' grade and therefore only the 'Care' judgement was included.

For EYFS inspections (September 2008 and onwards), we use the 'Overall Effectiveness' grade and all the sub-grades provided within Ofsted reports which feed into this overall grade. The inspection framework changed slightly in September 2009, with revisions to the grades and grade descriptors. Table 3.3 shows the different measures available for each time period.

We also created a composite Ofsted measure, using the mean of all sub-grades (excluding overall effectiveness).

3.2.5 Final Sample: ECERS-R, ECERS-E, ITERS-R and Ofsted

Table 3.4 summarises the final sample, setting out the number of ECERS-R, ECERS-E and ITERS-R observations available within both the pre-EYFS and the EYFS datasets. Some settings had multiple observations (e.g. an ECERS-R, an ECERS-E and an ITERS-R). Within both the pre-EYFS and EYFS datasets, ECERS-R data were available for the majority of settings. An ECERS-E observation was also available for more than half of the settings, completed at the same time as the ECERS-R. Fewer observations were available for the ITERS-R. Approximately 75per cent of ITERS-R observations were carried out in settings which also had an ECERS assessment, while approximately 25 per cent were 'ITERS only'.

Table 3.5 shows the time-gaps between Ofsted and ECERS/ITERS assessments for the pre-EYFS and EYFS datasets. These gaps were taken account of (i.e. 'controlled for') in the analysis, see Section 3.2.7.

Table 3.4 Number of observations available within the pre-EYFS and EYFS datasets

	ECERS-R (30 mths-5 years)	ECERS-E (3-5 years)	ITERS-R (birth-30 mths)
EYFS Ofsted reports (n=1094)	1035	624	247
Pre-EYFS Ofsted reports (n=1256)	1165	718	324

Table 3.5 Gaps between Ofsted and ECERS/ITERS assessments, pre-EYFS and EYFS (in months)

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
EYFS					
ECERS-R/E[16]	1035/624	0	37.9	11.7	8.5
ITERS-R	247	0	44.7	13.1	9.8
Pre-EYFS					
ECERS-R/E	1165/718	0	69.3	23.8	12.7
ITERS-R	324	0	60.2	17.0	13.0

3.2.6 Sample: quality assurance (EYFS only)

Data on whether settings participated in a quality assurance scheme were available within the Evaluation of the Graduate Leader Fund (GLF) dataset and from two of the audits carried out by A+ Education Ltd, for 428 settings[17] in total. The starting point for selecting the quality assurance sub-sample was the main 'childcare on non-domestic premises' sample. The first step was to select only settings with an EYFS Ofsted inspection report. Following this, settings were selected according to the same 'rules' as the full dataset, in order that the Ofsted and ECERS data were from the same time-points as the main analysis[18]. Following data selection, the sub-sample comprised 249 settings, of which 29 per cent (72 settings) reported participating in a quality assurance scheme and 71 per cent (177 settings) did not. Table 3.6 shows the breakdown of schemes reported.

Table 3.6 Quality assurance schemes reported

Type of scheme	%	Number
Local authority quality assurance scheme	63.9	46
National Day Nurseries Association 'Quality Counts'	9.7	7
Pre-School Learning Alliance 'Reflecting on Quality'/ 'Aiming for Quality'	5.6	4
Other scheme	20.8	15
TOTAL	100	72

16. ECERS-R and E assessments for a single setting were always carried out on the same day.

17. The GLF data collection was carried between 2007 and 2011 at two time points (see Section 3.2.1). Of 324 baseline settings, 87.7 per cent (284) completed the questions on quality assurance participation. 254 of these settings were visited again at follow-up, 248 of which (97.6 per cent) completed the quality assurance questions again. The A+ Education audits were carried out between July 2010 and July 2011 in Surrey and Derby (one time-point only). All settings were asked via a voluntary questionnaire whether they participated in a quality assurance scheme and if so, which scheme they participated in. Of 300 settings, 48 per cent (144) completed the questionnaire. In all therefore, data were available for 428 settings, 248 of which had data available at two time-points. Since the majority of settings did not have ITERS-R data available, this part of the analysis was carried out using ECERS-R and E scores only.

18. Quality assurance data was only used where it was collected at the same time-point as the ECERS quality data for a particular setting, and where that quality data had been selected for the main analysis. Where quality assurance data was available at two different time-points, data from the same time-point as the ECERS data was used. For each setting, the gap between the Ofsted inspection and the quality assurance data collection time-point was therefore the same as for the main analysis.

3.2.7 Analysis

The main analysis was conducted on the full 'childcare on non-domestic premises' dataset of 1,423 settings. Three main analysis questions were explored:

1. What are the associations between ECERS/ITERS scores and the overall grade awarded by Ofsted (and are these different pre and post EYFS)?
2. What are the associations between ECERS/ITERS scores and the various sub-grades awarded by Ofsted (EYFS)?
3. How do ECERS/ITERS and Ofsted categorise settings into high and low quality, and to what extent do these methods of grouping align with each other?

A fourth question related to the smaller 'quality assurance' sub-sample:

4. Do settings that participate in a quality assurance scheme achieve higher ECERS scores or Ofsted gradings than settings that do not participate in a quality assurance scheme?

The first two questions were addressed using correlational techniques to explore the relationships between the different Ofsted grades and ECERS/ITERS measures. Partial correlations were carried out, controlling for the time-gap between the Ofsted and ECERS /ITERS assessments. All analyses were confirmed using non-parametric Spearman's rank tests, since not all of the data were normally distributed. Questions three and four were answered using analysis of variance and independent t-tests (Kruskal Wallis and Mann Whitney tests).

3.3 Quantitative analysis: sample characteristics

This section describes the characteristics of the sample in relation to the two quality measures used in the analysis (i.e. ECERS/ITERS scores and Ofsted grades), showing the proportion of settings achieving high and low grades on each measure. Figures 3.1 to 3.3 show the characteristics of the sample as measured by the ITERS-R, ECERS-R and ECERS-E. For both the ECERS-R and the ITERS-R, the majority of settings achieved overall scores in the mid-range 3 to 4.9 (on a scale of 1 to 7), with fewer settings achieving very low or high scores. Greater spread can be seen in the ITERS-R scores than the ECERS-R scores. Scores on the ECERS-E scale tended to be lower, with the majority of settings achieving scores in the range 1 to 3.9 (low to medium-low). Overall, quality on all three measures appears to be relatively stable over time.

Fig 3.1 Proportion of high, medium and low quality settings as measured by the ITERS-R (pre-EYFS and EYFS samples)

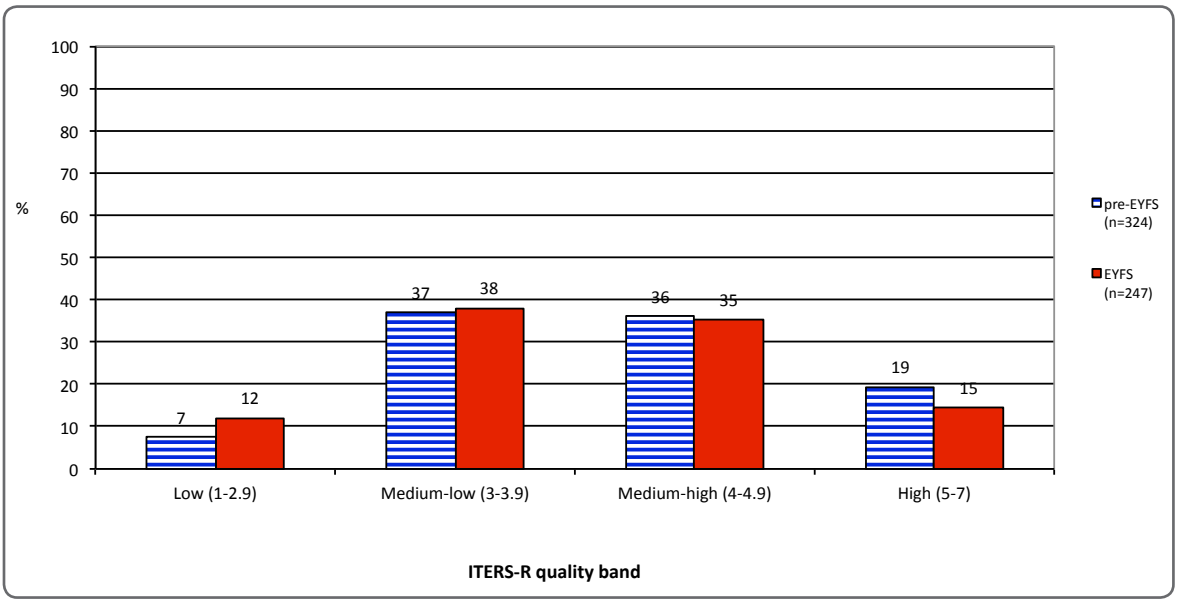


Fig 3.2 Proportion of high, medium and low quality settings as measured by the ECERS-R (pre-EYFS and EYFS samples)

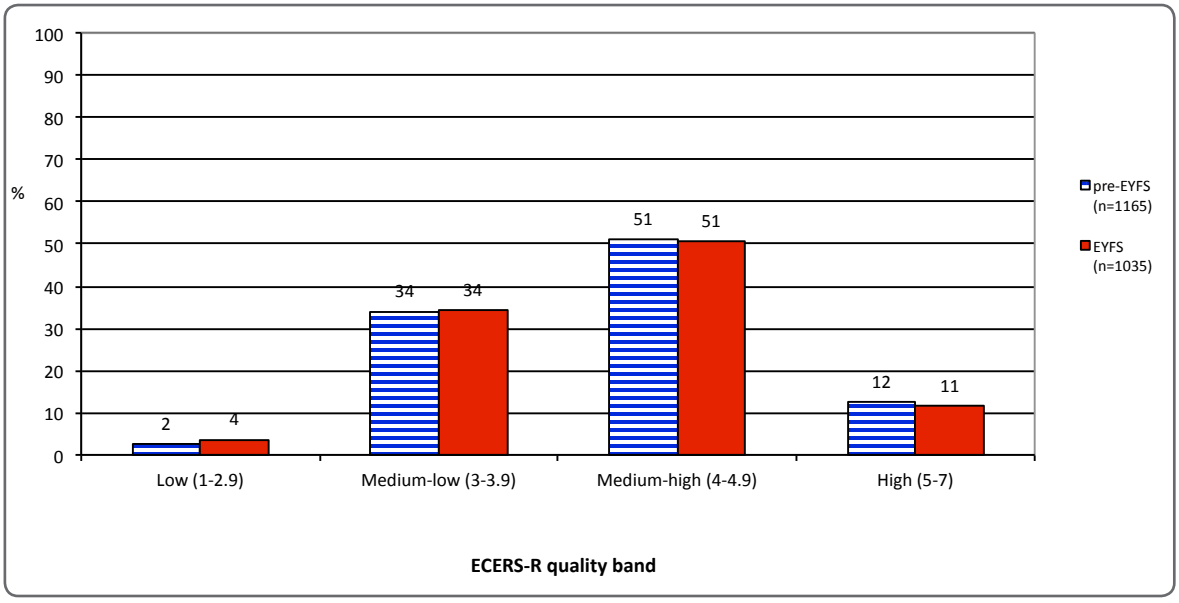
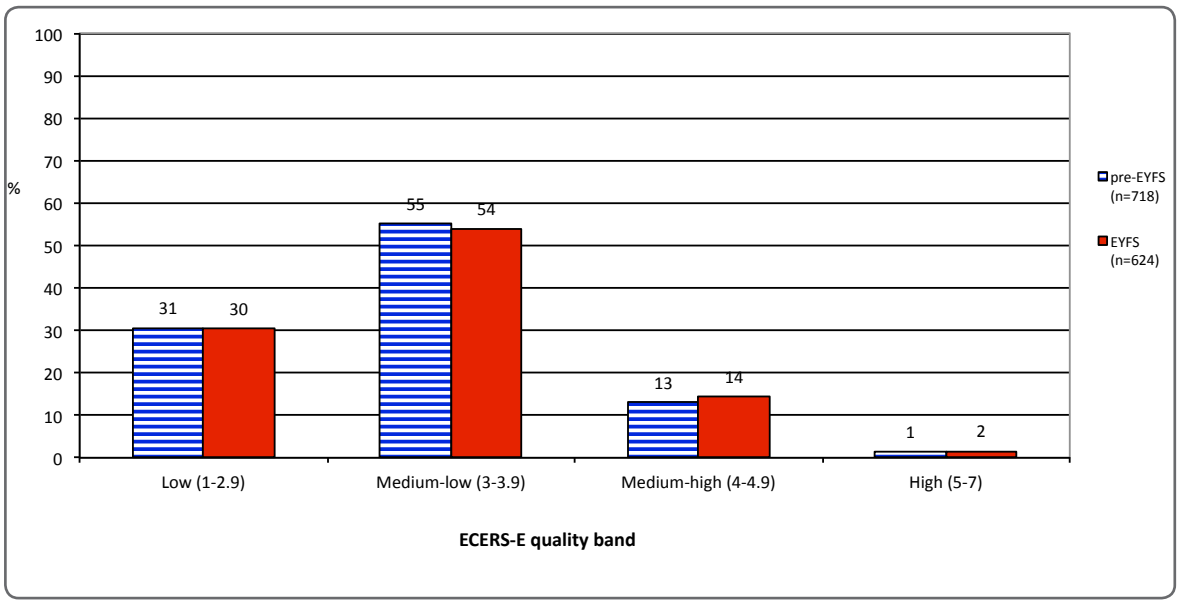


Fig 3.3 Proportion of high, medium and low quality settings as measured by the ECERS-E (pre-EYFS and EYFS samples)



Figures 3.4 and 3.5, and Table 3.7, show the characteristics of the sample according to the grades awarded by Ofsted, alongside comparative data from Ofsted Annual Reports from the same period[19]. As with the ITERS and ECERS measures, the majority of settings fell within the 'mid-range'; over 60 per cent were graded as 'good', with smaller proportions being awarded outstanding, satisfactory or inadequate grades. Comparison with Ofsted data at a national level shows that our sample was reasonably representative, with broadly similar proportions of settings within each grade category. Within the pre-EYFS sample, there were slightly more providers rated as 'good' and slightly fewer providers rated as 'satisfactory' or 'inadequate' than the Ofsted Annual report suggests was the case at that time. Within the EYFS sample, proportions of 'good' and 'inadequate' settings were broadly representative of national trends, but our sample contained proportionally more 'outstanding' settings and fewer 'satisfactory' settings. Thus, the settings in our sample tended to achieve slightly higher grades than Ofsted Annual Reports suggest was the case nationally at the time. More details on the characteristics of the sample are provided in the separate Technical Report (Karemaker et al, 2012).

Table 3.7 Number and proportion of settings within the study sample achieving each Ofsted grade

	Pre-EYFS		EYFS	
Outstanding	48	(3.8%)	190	(17.4%)
Good	809	(64.4%)	661	(60.4%)
Satisfactory	387	(30.8%)	212	(19.4%)
Inadequate	12	(1.0%)	31	(2.8%)
	1256		1094	

19. Combined totals for 'full day care', 'sessional day care' and 'multiple day care'.

Fig 3.4 Proportion of settings in the pre-EYFS sample achieving each Ofsted grade, compared to the Ofsted Annual report (06-07)

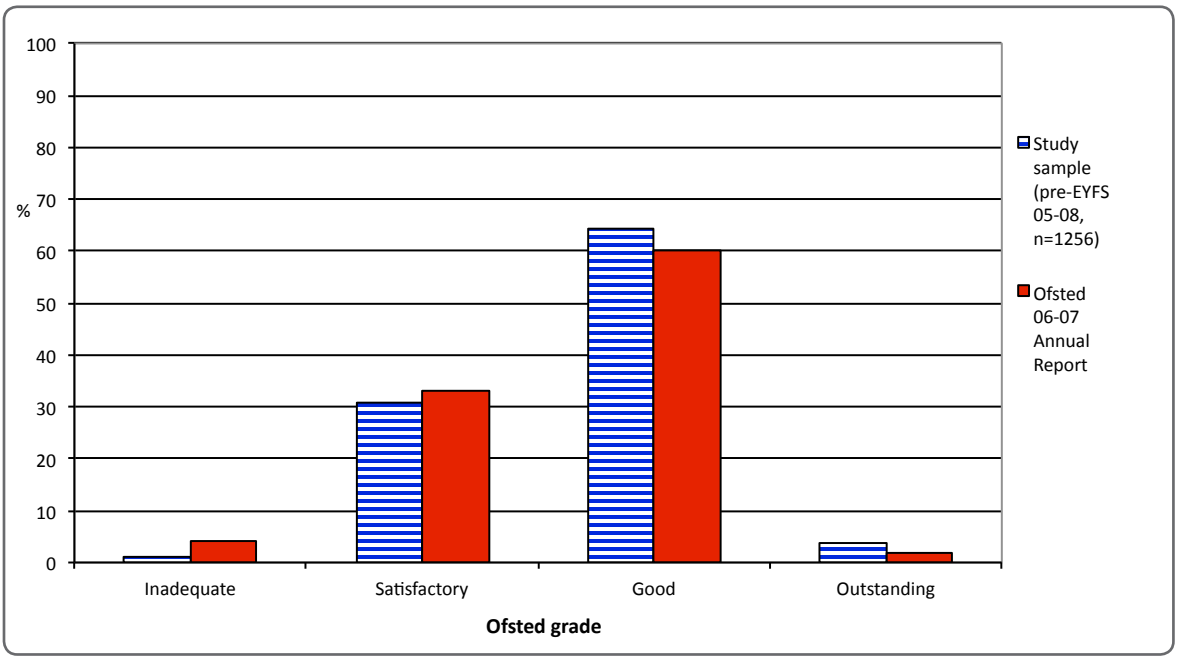
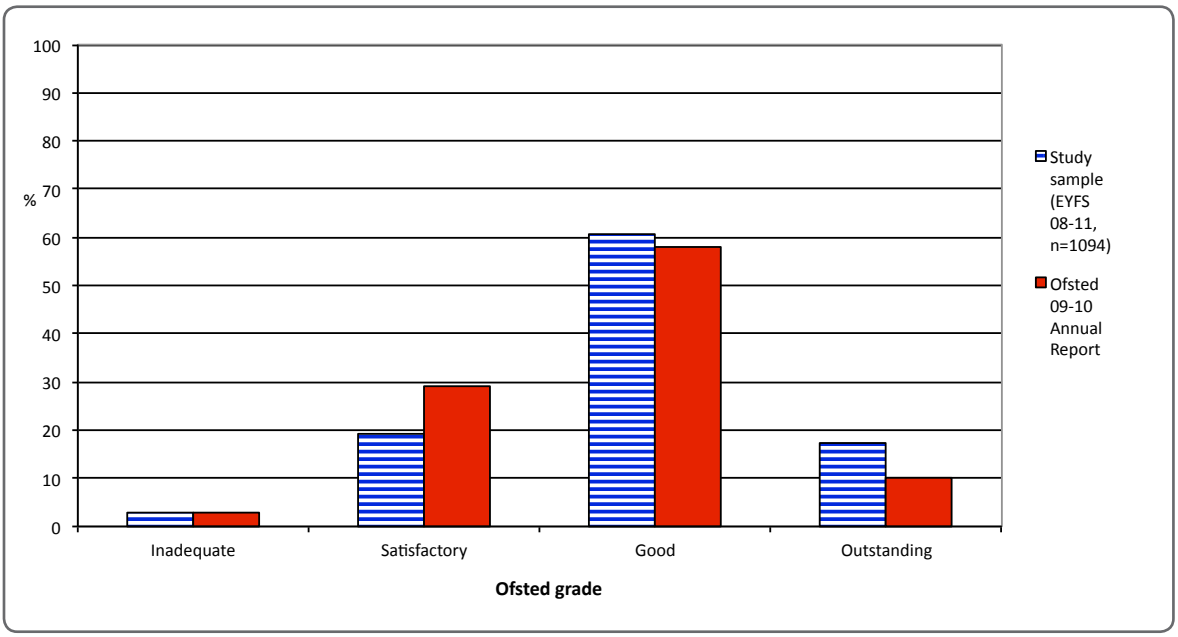


Fig 3.5 Proportion of settings in the EYFS sample achieving each Ofsted grade, compared to the Ofsted Annual report (09-10)



Chapter 4: Focus Group Findings – Stakeholder Views

Rosanna Singler (Daycare Trust)

The qualitative element of this study sets out to ask the following research questions:

- How do the different stakeholders (parents, providers and local authorities) perceive quality in early years education and care?
- To what extent do the concepts of quality embodied in the measures considered here align with stakeholder perceptions of quality?
- How effectively do the approaches considered here work as tools to improve quality?

To answer these questions, focus groups were conducted with parents, key local authority staff involved in quality improvement work, and managers from a range of settings (including nurseries, pre-school provision and playgroups). Although the sample is not fully representative of all stakeholders, participants were carefully selected to represent a range of perspectives, contexts and views (see Chapter 3 Methodology for details). When we refer to parents, local authority staff and providers in this chapter we are referring to those which participated in this study. A brief review of the relevant literature was also conducted; and key elements have been included where they help to answer the research questions.

4.1 How do different stakeholders perceive quality in early years education and care?

Parents, local authority staff and providers were asked in the focus groups what they felt constituted high quality provision. It is important to know how different stakeholders perceive quality to ensure that the measures available can meet their needs for identifying quality.

Key Findings

- Parents, local authority staff and providers and perceived quality in a similar way, all agreeing that high quality staffing was a major aspect of quality provision.
- There was agreement that a high quality staff team would:
  - Provide warm and nurturing relationships to make children feel emotionally secure;
  - Plan activities which support children's learning and development, as well as encouraging imagination and independence;
  - Provide for and respond to children's individual needs, planning activities accordingly;
  - Support peer to peer interactions between children;
  - Have a good understanding of child development and spot children who are falling behind;
  - Form good relationships with parents and value them as partners in their children's learning; and
  - Operate an effective key person approach (i.e. having someone ultimately responsible for each child, with whom the child can form a secure bond, and who would keep a record of their development and inform parents of any areas of concern).

- Although most parents valued having a good outside space, respondents from all groups all felt that the quality of the physical environment, including its resources, was less important than the qualities of the staff. Parents with disabled children did however want their setting to provide specialist equipment which enabled their children to do the same activities as other children their age.
- Where stakeholders differed in their perception of quality was in their emphasis:
  - Although all stakeholders focused on the importance of staff who were nurturing, parents placed more importance on warm and friendly staff who they felt they could trust to care for their children.
  - Some parents who had disabled children said it was important to them that staff have an understanding of their child's particular condition or at least have access to people who do.
  - In contrast, local authority staff and providers placed more emphasis on qualified and experienced staff who had a good understanding of child development and an ability to put this understanding into practice. These groups also highlighted the importance of managers having good leadership skills.
- Another key difference was the language parents used to describe quality:
  - Although many parents said it was important that settings helped to ensure their children were hitting the key milestones so they were not behind once they got to school, parents generally did not view early years provision as being about 'education', which they equated with school and rigid routines.
  - Other stakeholders were more comfortable viewing and describing provision as being about early years education as well as care.
- Some parents mentioned structural elements of quality such as low staff turnover and the ratio of staff to children, two elements that research has identified as being related to provision which influences positive outcomes for children.

4.1.1 Parents

Parents[20] play a key role in improving quality in early years settings in the way they are responsible for selecting and purchasing provision. That is, if market mechanisms are to be used to drive up quality, then parents need to be able to select high quality childcare. This requires them to be informed about what constitutes high quality and to be able to access information about the quality factors in different childcare settings. It is important, then, that we know what parents see as the essential aspects of high quality provision, to ensure that the tools available to them meet their needs in terms of identifying quality.

Parents attending the focus groups were asked to describe what they felt constituted high quality care. The answers they provided were informed by their experiences of using the setting in which the focus group was carried out, as well as previous experiences. Most parents described high quality provision as requiring staff who could provide nurturing relationships; making their child feel emotional secure; and staff who could plan activities to support their child's individual needs. The following sections describe in detail the aspects of quality highlighted by parents as being most important to them.

20. When we refer to parents in this chapter we are referring to those which participated in this study.

Staff characteristics

Staff characteristics featured prominently in all focus groups and it was clear this was a highly important indicator of quality for all parents. Most parents said that friendly, warm staff who they could trust to be able to comfort and take care of their child's needs was essential. Parents wanted staff who could create a warm nurturing environment for their children (eg. giving their children a cuddle when they were upset). Some parents used words like 'homely', 'family' and 'love' when describing high quality care, which may suggest that they wanted the setting to mirror their child's own home environment. Some parents felt it was important that staff had children of their own, specifically stating they wanted to know they were mothers themselves. This could reflect a desire for staff who knew what it was like to be a mother and could provide care accordingly. It could also be that parents felt able to relate to practitioners who were parents themselves.

"It is important to me that my son has formed strong bonds with a lot of the workers here. My son is always reading with a worker, sitting having a cuddle etc. I know that if he didn't like that person he wouldn't do it. I know my son trusts the staff."

[Parent, Setting H]

"My child has bonded with the staff here well. They are ready to give her a hug if she is upset. It's so homely for them – especially for those who are young."

[Parent, Setting H]

"I think it comes from their heart – you don't get that with other nurseries. You feel that they actually love them."

[Parent, Setting A]

"I feel happy with the staff here – a lot of them are mums, they are people you see in the playground. They have 'life experience', they have children and their children have been through the nursery themselves so they know what it is like.

[Parent, Setting F]

Understanding of child development

Most parents wanted staff who were able to monitor the development of their children, spotting any potential problems as they arise, suggesting that most parents wanted more than care that could merely mirror their own. This featured highly in discussions and most parents also said it was important the setting helped to ensure their children were hitting the key milestones so they were not behind once they got to school age. For some parents, focusing on their children's development became more of an issue as their child got older. Although one parent recognised that having qualified staff was important for this process, many parents did not mention qualifications of staff explicitly. However, it is clear from this that parents want to place their children with providers whose staff had some level of expertise and knowledge.

It is perhaps notable that parents who had disabled children who were currently in the nursery or who had older children with a disability were particularly keen that staff were able to spot development issues and be prepared to work on helping children who did have them. This was perhaps because they were more acutely aware of the importance of dealing with things as early as possible. For parents who had disabled children in the nursery it was important that staff had an understanding of their child's particular condition, or they at least had access to professionals with this knowledge.

"It's my first son so I have not got anything to compare it to so it's important to know he is where he should be. I don't want my son starting school when he is five and being behind the other children. It's about being at the right stage of development.

[Parent, Setting C]

"They [the nursery] are going to bring in highly qualified staff and I think this is good for the development of [my daughter's] care. At this age it's really about the care but I like the fact that they are starting to look at what she can do and how to help her develop.'

[Parent, Setting H]

'They can teach really well – individually where a child is lacking, if it is maybe confidence – they can pick it up. That is what I like about it. After a couple of weeks/months you will see a difference. If you have a problem with your child – such as behavioural problems – if you tell the staff then they will work on it. It's not just a case you leave your child and they are given some toys. They actually learn something and they are ready for school and they are well prepared."

[Parent, Setting B]

These findings are reflected in previous research which found that the one of the most frequent reasons given for using childcare was to support a child's educational development (Ben-Galim, 2011). This study found that parents viewed childcare as preparation for school and that parents felt it was important that settings could help children's verbal language skills and reading and writing. Parents commented in the study that if their children were not prepared for school they were in danger of falling behind and potentially being overlooked throughout their school lives (Ben-Galim, 2011). This study also found that educational concerns became more important as parents' children got older, reflecting some of the comments from the parents in this study.

Play and routine

A focus on play was an important indicator of quality for most parents, for example in helping their children to learn how to be independent and to use their imagination. Many contrasted this with education, which was something they felt children should experience at school but not during the early years. Some parents felt that a rigid approach to routines, which they equated with education, meant that the setting would not be able to adapt to their child's individual development needs and interests. However, emerging from the discussions was a sense that even though parents did not want education as provided by schools, they wanted play which was balanced with structure, routine and stimulating activities. Although parents felt it was important that children should have some free reign, they wanted staff to encourage children to try new activities, to further encourage their curiosity, and to support children in learning as much as possible from the activities they were engaged in. Some also recognised the value of routines in enabling enable their children to feel settled.

"I think each and every individual child is completely nurtured - as a person, their personality and what they like to do. So if they like water or rough and tumble that is built upon. It's not to say they won't be given opportunities and encouraged to do other things but they build upon the individual child.

[Parent, Setting H]

"I don't want my son to be left to play with whatever he likes all the time, this way children may just always play with one thing and never experience anything else. I went to this one nursery and for two terms he played with the trains and he never did anything else. Rather than trying to draw him to experience anything else they just let him play with trains."

[Parent, Setting F]

"I think children aren't pushed into doing anything - they are 'pulled'. This is a much gentler way of encouraging learning. They are inspired by what other children are doing and by what the leaders are doing. They come back brimming full of new ideas. So something they [the children] never even thought about doing, they think, oh I would quite like to go and do that.

[Parent, Setting F]

"The children learn new language – they sit down and talk about what they hear. In an adult led way they talked about what they had heard. Otherwise [my child] would have just gone and ran around and not got as much out of it. It is about the staff knowing how to lead a conversation with a child, not asking closed questions. I can tell they are very good at this – they have done training and they know how to do this."

[Parent, Setting F]

Parent relationships with staff and the key person approach

Being able to form good relationships with management and staff was rated as an important element of quality for almost all parents. Parents discussed the importance of having a key person who had the ultimate responsibility for their child; who would keep a record of their development and inform them of any areas of concern. A few parents recognised that the key person was important to monitor their child's development and plan around their specific needs, as discussed above.

Parents also discussed the importance of feeling like staff treated them as a partner in their child's care, for example taking on board their wishes in regard to routines. A couple of parents wanted staff to be able to give them parenting advice – so they knew how to help their children with their development when they were at home.

"It is important – meeting the needs of individual children... because they progress at different rates.. you know?"

[Parent, Setting B]

"I was concerned because I felt that [my son] wasn't communicating properly and I felt that he is a bit behind his brothers. [The manager] really helped me, she told to encourage him to say the words when he points to things, where I hadn't been doing that. I want staff who can tell us where we are going wrong! I want their feedback."

[Parent, Setting B]

Social interaction

Some parents mentioned that they felt it was important that the nursery enabled their children to interact with other children, with staff supporting them to interact in a positive way. This is echoed in a recent study conducting deliberative workshops with parents from low-income backgrounds across the UK (Ben-Galim, 2011). In this study, parents were asked to talk about the reasons for using childcare and found that many focused on the importance of childcare enabling their children's social development. The report goes on to conclude that most parents recognised that through interacting with other children their child would learn and develop (Ben-Galim, 2011).

Health and safety

Health and safety was a concern for all parents and this was one element they would not compromise on. Parents needed to be sure that their children would be kept safe and monitored at all times; and that settings would comply with health and safety procedures.

Staff turnover and ratio of staff to children

Some parents mentioned structural elements of quality such as low staff turnover and ratios of staff to children, two elements that research has identified as being related to provision which influences positive outcomes for children (e.g. Melhuish, 2004). Low staff turnover was an indicator of quality for some parents as they felt it beneficial for their children that carers were around for long enough to form relationships with them. They also said this would enable them to build trusting relationships with the staff. Parents also felt that low turnover was a sign of happy staff, committed to their job. Having a high ratio of staff to children was important to some parents as they felt it ensured staff would be able to safely monitor the children in their care properly. Some parents illustrated a good knowledge of early development when they said that high ratios would enable staff to have the time to understand the needs of the children, improving the quality of interactions between staff and children.

"You feel that every single member of staff here really cares for your child – some of the staff have been here years... they have built up a relationship with them, which is really important – they have seen them develop from babies to young children."

[Parent, Setting A]

"It is about consistency – if you have a key worker which changes every other week then it's not good for the child – it's not good for you, you have to learn to communicate with a new person."

[Parent, Setting G]

"If you have lots of adults per child, you know then that the child is going to get the right sort of attention, in terms of the carers understanding of what the child needs. And also it is going to be a better environment – if they have like five children to one adult the member of staff is going to be very stressed."

[Parent, Setting B]

Physical environment

Parents were less concerned with toys and equipment, with some parents stating that the qualities of staff were far more important. However many parents did mention the importance of enabling children to play outside. Parents with disabled children were more concerned with the equipment as having specialist equipment enabled their children to do the same activities as other children their age and to give them the extra help they need to progress.

Management and staff as a team

A few of parents mentioned working relationships between staff, and between managers and staff, as contributing to high quality, although this did not feature highly amongst the majority of the discussions.

4.1.2 Local authorities

When discussing their concepts of quality, local authority staff also largely focused on the qualities of staff. Reflecting parents' views from their focus groups, local authority staff[21] felt that practitioners needed to be able to plan and develop activities which would promote development, and to do this in a way which was appropriate to the development level of individual children. However, whereas parents focused on the importance of staff who were warm and nurturing, local authority staff placed more emphasis on staff qualifications; understanding of child development and how to put it into practice, and on the qualities of managers. The findings of the focus groups are set out in detail below.

Staff characteristics

Staff were regarded as being fundamental to the quality of early years education and care. The quality of the leadership and management in particular was a recurrent theme across the local authority focus groups. Most agreed that managers who could drive quality improvement from the top, were essential; from this, all else followed. Important aspects of leadership highlighted by local authority staff included: an ability to be self-reflective and encourage self-reflection among other staff; a commitment to continual quality improvement, assessing strengths and weaknesses and planning improvements accordingly. Local authority staff also mentioned as important: the ability to communicate their vision to the rest of the team, setting out the steps everyone needed to take to improve; and an ability to support staff, looking after their emotional needs, so they were able to take on the emotional needs of the children.

As well as valuing the role of the manager, local authority staff also talked about the qualities they felt all staff needed to be able to provide high quality care. Most felt that it was essential for all staff to hold relevant qualifications, have a commitment to ongoing training and development, and have an ability to put this knowledge into practice. For example, respondents explained that practitioners needed to have knowledge of child development in order to be able to plan and develop activities appropriate to the development level of individual children, and those which would further promote their development. Mirroring parent views, some respondents also felt it was important that staff were able to spot when children were falling behind developmentally and consult with other relevant professionals if necessary.

The ability of staff to provide a secure environment for the children, supporting children to feeling safe and happy, was mentioned by some local authority staff as an essential part of the 'Key Person Approach' and supporting children's progression.

Additionally, most local authority staff felt it was important that staff were able to support positive peer-to-peer interactions between the children, that staff were inclusive to all children (making necessary adjustments for children with disabilities), and that they were able to support children to make smooth transitions when they move from one part of the nursery to another.

Like parents, local authority staff also highlighted the importance of having a balance between a child-led approach (whereby children have freedom to determine their own activities) and an adult-led approach whereby staff plan activities which encouraged children's development. However, unlike our parent respondents, local authority staff were much more likely to use the word 'education' when talking about these strategies. Thus, parents and local authority staff wanted the same things, but differed in the language they used to describe them.

21. When we refer to local authority staff in this chapter we are referring to those which participated in this study.

Engaging with parents

Reflecting the parent focus group findings, local authority staff also recognised the importance of parent engagement. However they tended to place more emphasis than parents had done on the coordination of approaches at home and in the the setting. Focus group respondents said they thought it was important that settings coordinated the care they provided with how care was provided by parents with their children at home (e.g. approaches to behaviour management). Supporting and enabling parents to create a good home learning environment was felt to improve the chances of children achieving the best possible cognitive outcomes. Some participants felt that a good relationship with parents was particularly important when children were falling behind, so parents could be made aware as soon as possible and be supported to help their child at home.

Physical environment

While almost all local authority staff mentioned the physical environment as having an impact on quality, most rated it is as less important than the quality of leadership and of staffing. When describing the components of a high quality physical environment, respondents highlighted stimulating toys and equipment which were accessible to all children. However, for many there was a clear feeling that what staff did with the environment was more important than the physical environment itself.

"There is no point in having all the gear and no idea"

[Quality improvement officer, focus group D]

4.1.3 Providers

Providers largely valued the same dimensions of quality as parents and local authority staff, emphasising the importance of staff who were able to respond to children's individual needs and respond sensitively and plan appropriate activities. Like local authority staff, the managers who participated in the focus groups highlighted the importance of good management and leadership skills, and of having a knowledgeable and well-qualified staff team with the ability to put their knowledge into practice.

Staff characteristics

A key theme which emerged from the focus groups with providers (comprising mostly setting managers) was that the quality of provision was determined by the qualities of the staff working within their settings. Staff needed to be able to respond to the social, emotional and cognitive needs of the children in their care. Some providers also went on to emphasise the importance of staff having a deep-rooted desire to do the job, to, 'almost be a child'. Some providers mentioned that it was important that staff had a commitment to training throughout their career, as they felt it was important staff were motivated and keen to reflect on their knowledge and practices.

Putting knowledge into practice to meet children's development needs

The majority of providers believed it was important staff were trained, had a good knowledge of child development, and were able to put this training and knowledge into practice. Providers also highlighted the individual qualities of staff, stating that staff needed to be nurturing and empathetic so they were able to respond to children's individual interests and needs, and plan activities accordingly. Others highlighted the need for staff to provide activities for the children which developed their skills, independence and social development, whilst ensuring they felt emotionally secure.

Relationship with parents

Like parents and local authority staff, most providers also felt it was important that settings had a good relationship with parents, making parents feel comfortable in order that their child also felt comfortable. Some providers highlighted the need for that staff to be able to relate to families from all backgrounds and make them feel welcome.

Physical environment

There was some discussion about the role of the physical environment with some providers feeling that it needed to look friendly and inviting. Like the other groups however, most felt it was more important that staff were able to adapt the environment so children were stimulated and engaged.

Role of the manager

The role of the manager was highlighted by most providers, describing an effective manager as: self-reflective, continually thinking about how quality can be improved; regularly assessing training needs of the team; drip feeding their ideas on a continual basis and encouraging a positive attitude throughout the rest of the team. For some it was important that the manager was able to recruit staff who would contribute the right qualities to the team.

'If you have a passion for the job, then you will want to go on training and sometimes you will attend a training course and not necessarily learn anything new but it might cement the knowledge you already have, make you feel confident and more enthusiastic about the things you do already, then you bring that enthusiasm back into the setting.'

[Manager, private day nursery]

However, when the issue of training came up, there was some discussion amongst providers regarding the quality of many courses. Some remarked that there was no consistency or set standards amongst the vast array of courses. Moreover, one participant remarked that if someone did the practical element of their training course in a poor quality setting this would have a large effect on the quality of the care they went on to provide when employed. Some wanted more control over how training was being provided and how the standards were regulated.

4.2 How effectively do the approaches considered here (Ofsted, ECERS/ITERS and other tools) capture elements of quality as defined by stakeholders and work as tools to improve quality?

If the different stakeholder groups (parents, local authorities and providers) are to fulfil their role in identifying and promoting high quality provision, then it is important that the tools available to them:

- Capture a definition of quality which is recognised by all stakeholders;
- Are useable and accessible to all stakeholders, so that all can understand the findings and use them to support their role in improving quality.

This section presents findings from focus groups with all three stakeholder groups, alongside existing research, where relevant. Parents were asked about how they made childcare decisions, and which tools they used to inform that decision, to see how well supported they were to choose high quality. Given that Ofsted reports are the primary 'external' tool available to parents to guide their childcare choice, the discussion of quality tools focused largely on Ofsted reports. Parents were asked to read and comment on an example Ofsted report, particularly on how well it captured elements of quality they valued and how useful they felt it would be to them when making choices about providers[22]. A brief explanation of the role of Ofsted was provided, as for the purposes of this study it was important to gather actual views of Ofsted reports (that is, parents would normally only have the information provided in the report). Finally, a short summary of the main themes of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) was shown to the parents in order to garner parents' views of how well it reflected their own quality values.

Providers and local authority staff[23] were asked more specifically about how the tools available to them captured the elements of quality they felt were important, and supported them in identifying and improving quality. The discussion focused primarily on the three measures which form the focus of this study (Ofsted inspections, the ECERS/ITERS scales and quality assurance schemes) but also included discussion of other tools used by providers and local authorities where this was the case.

22. A report was chosen which had received a range of sub-judgements, from satisfactory to outstanding to give examples of a range of practices

23. As set out in Chapter 3, the majority of provider respondents were managers of their settings, and local authority staff were those with a responsibility for early years and quality improvement.

Key Findings

- The main theme emerging from all stakeholder focus groups was the need for multiple tools to capture a full picture of quality and to support them to improve quality (or in the case of parents, choose the best quality provision for their child) and so they relied on a range of tools, where available to them.

Parents

- Parents view quality as an important factor in their childcare choice, alongside practical considerations such as cost and location.
- When choosing a provider, most parents relied on the instinctive impressions they formed during their initial visit and recommendations from other parents to inform their decisions. Ofsted reports were used by some, as 'one piece in the jigsaw'.
- Parents looked for a range of other things during the visit:
  - Whether they felt they could trust staff to provide a nurturing and friendly environment for their children. This was emphasised as the most important aspect by most parents;
  - The range of activities children were engaged in and how staff were supporting them; and
  - The ratios of staff to children (to ascertain whether their child could get enough one-to-one attention).
- The range of quality indicators parents looked for during the visit was much narrower than those parents mentioned when they were later asked to describe what they felt contributed to high quality provision. It was clear that parents' perception of quality changed and broadened since they had started using the setting.
- Of the parents who did use Ofsted reports to inform their decision, most said it helped them decide which settings did not fulfil basic requirements (and therefore did not warrant a visit).
- While some parents found the Ofsted reports useful as a reference, the vast majority felt that the Ofsted report did not help them identify all the elements of quality they felt were important.
  - Reviewing an example Ofsted report, most parents said it did not tell them anything about interactions between staff and children (a key indicator of quality for them).
  - Other things parents felt was missing from the Ofsted report included: information on staff turnover and whether staff were capable of spotting development issues. Parents with disabled children said they wanted to know how the setting accommodated the needs of disabled children.
- There was a perception amongst parents that Ofsted reports evaluated how settings provide education, something most said they were not looking for from provision. However, parents had previously said they were looking for settings which could help the support their child's development. This is a key part of the EYFS and something Ofsted is set out to measure, suggesting that there is a misconception amongst parents as to what Ofsted reports can provide.
- Parents had a number of suggestions to make the report more accessible:
  - Better directions in the summary of judgements to where they can find further information in the main part of the report;
  - Explanations of key terms as to how it will affect the care their child might receive; and
  - A section which summarised the views of parents using the setting.

- When parents were taken through the main themes of EYFS most agreed that it adequately covered most of the aspects they felt were essential.

- Parents expressed a desire for further support to identify high quality provision and some felt that having a summary of the EYFS would give them the confidence to ask how settings were meeting requirements.

Local authorities

- When local authority staff were asked what they felt worked when it came to capturing quality, and helping them to encourage and support quality improvement, several key themes emerged:

  - The importance of being able to use a range of tools, supplemented with regular visits on the part of local authority staff to determine the level of quality and to identify areas for development and provide targeted support;

  - Being able to use a group of indicators to determine funding for the three and four year old offer which included participation in various quality assurance schemes such as ECERS and their own bespoke schemes, encouraged settings to take part in a wider variety of programmes;

  - Providing settings with ongoing support and ensuring they felt a sense of ownership over the quality improvement process was important.

  - Funding cuts were having an impact, forcing local authorities to cut back on training and the support necessarily to improve quality.

- Most local authority staff felt that the Ofsted regulatory process was not able to capture all of the elements that they felt created quality provision.

- Many local authority staff felt that it was important that Ofsted inspectors liaised with them so they could provide inspectors with information regarding the quality of a setting.

- There was a concern that the Ofsted inspection results would not be the most useful way of determining high quality for the purposes of deciding funding for disadvantaged two year olds. As some local authority staff explained, settings which had done well on Ofsted had tended to do well on ECERS (evaluating provision for children aged 30 months – five years) but not on ITERS (evaluating provision for those aged under 30 months).

- Most local authority staff felt that Ofsted was also limited in its ability to help them support and encourage settings to improve. Some local authority staff felt that settings were more likely to engage with them when they felt they were due an inspection (if they had not had one for three years or more).

  - Some felt that relying on Ofsted to encourage settings to engage with quality improvement activities was limited as they would only engage for a short amount of time when they felt an inspection was imminent, rather than thinking about quality improvement on an ongoing basis, as many felt necessary.

  - When settings got a high grade, some local authority staff said it could reduce the likelihood that the setting would engage with local authority staff on quality improvement work as they felt they had met all their requirements.

  - Some also felt that the Ofsted inspection process necessitates settings spend a lot of time gathering evidence and preparing so they perform well on the day rather than encouraging settings to be self-reflective or make actual improvements.

- Local authority staff felt that ECERS was able to capture important elements of the environment which Ofsted could not (e.g. the physical environment, and staff-to-child interactions). However, they also noted that does not cover aspects of leadership and management; an aspect which is assessed by Ofsted.
- Some local authority staff said ECERS helped local authority staff to identify specific areas where improvement was needed.
- However, some local authority staff said that when used externally, ECERS ran the risk of becoming a 'box-ticking exercise' or a reflection of managers who could 'talk the talk'.
- It was also helpful for providing settings with a clear idea of what they needed to do to improve.
- Most local authority staff felt that ECERS was a valuable tool when used for internal self-evaluation. It was important that providers did not feel it was another thing being 'done to them' but had ownership over the process.

Providers

- All providers interviewed were engaged in quality improvement processes, using a variety of tools. Elements providers felt were important included those tools which could:
  - Enable managers to feel a sense of ownership over the quality improvement process; and
  - Encourage ongoing self-reflection and support managers to plan improvements on a continual basis.
- Providers felt that the regulatory Ofsted process was not enough on its own to drive quality improvement:
  - Some providers acknowledged that they were more likely to engage in quality improvement work when they felt they were due an Ofsted inspection to get a good grade to attract parents.
  - However, most providers felt that, despite an increased use of Ofsted reports by parents, most parents still came to the setting through recommendations from other parents. They felt that parents largely based their decision on the impression they got when visiting the setting.
  - Some providers said they thought that the Ofsted report did not help parents to decide which settings to use as the language was clinical and did not give an impression of the setting.
  - There was widespread scepticism about whether Ofsted inspections could capture a true picture of the quality of their settings due to the limited time inspectors were able to spend observing their staff.
  - Those who managed settings in disadvantaged areas felt that the Ofsted inspection process often did not recognise the additional barriers they faced in delivering high quality provision.
  - Providers were more positive about the use of ECERS and ITERS as self-improvement tools than as an external audit tool. They said that ECERS helped them to audit their practices and it was important for them to have ownership over the process.
  - When compared with Ofsted, ECERS and ITERS were thought to be more transparent but less flexible.
- Providers used alternative methods for communicating the quality of their setting to parents, including a plaque on the wall showing they had successfully completed a quality assurance scheme and through their own website.

4.2.1 Parents

As set out in detail above, this section sets out how parents in the focus groups said they made childcare decisions and how they felt Ofsted reports supported them in their ability to choose high quality provision alongside existing research, where relevant.

What informed parents' choice of childcare setting

Most parents view quality as an important factor in their childcare choice, alongside practical considerations such as cost and location and most said they relied on instinctive impressions formed during their initial visit to make their decision, with Ofsted reports used mainly to rule out which settings to visit and which to avoid. The main aspects parents said they looked for when they chose childcare included: nurturing and friendly staff and those who could engage children in a range of stimulating activities. Other aspects some parents looked for included high ratios of staff to children, to ascertain whether their child could get enough one-to-one attention. These findings are now set out in detail below.

Visiting a setting

Where parents had a choice of settings which met their practical needs (including location, cost, opening hours), all said that they would only make the final decision about which childcare setting to use after visiting it at least once. For many, this was the most dominant factor in their decision. At this initial visit parents made instinctive judgements about quality, focusing primarily on staff characteristics, which were seen as the most important indicators of quality. When describing in more detail the characteristics they valued, parents said they wanted staff who were warm, friendly and who they could trust to be nurturing and attentive to their children's needs; providing comfort when they were hurt or upset. In contrast, parents described ruling out settings where they saw children crying and not being attended to by staff.

"You don't see the quality of a nursery until you actually see the people who work here – they are what makes it, and you don't get that from an Ofsted report – it doesn't tell you that."

[Parent, Setting A]

"I had originally looked at other nurseries but when I went in there, I thought, I don't know anyone here, he is a little baby so he can't tell me anything. You hear these stories in the news, you just have this fear. I know quite a few members of staff at this nursery personally and I trusted them."

[Parent, Setting B]

This view of the importance of staff qualities is reflected in research elsewhere. The Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents (2009) found that parents rated whether providers were affectionate or well trained (55 per cent) slightly higher than convenience (52 per cent) when stating the reasons for choosing their main formal childcare provider. Similarly, the Families, Children and Child Care (FCCC) study found that the qualities most valued by parents were: a loving and caring environment (81 per cent); followed by the provision of a safe physical environment (68 per cent) (cited in Goddard and Groucutt, 2011).

Stimulating activities

Although parents wanted their children to be able to have some freedom in what they did at the nursery, most parents also said they were looking for staff who could guide their children into certain activities. A few parents said the extent to which their children could be stimulated and challenged featured prominently in their selection of setting. However, the provision of 'education' was not generally highlighted as an important feature. Many parents in our focus groups were referring to a decision they made when their child was still a baby, which may explain why education was not mentioned by many parents. This is supported by previous research showing that the importance parents place on their children being 'educated' increases with the age of the child (Bryson et al, 2006 cited in Stokes and Wilkinson, 2007). Additionally, the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents (2009) found that when choosing their main childcare formal provider, parents rated the importance of their child being able to be educated more highly according to the age of their child (39 per cent rated this as important whose child was aged 0-2; going up 45 per cent for those whose children are 3-4).The way parents perceive 'education' may also play a role. When parents were asked to consider in more detail what constituted quality care, many did talk about the importance of encouraging their children's healthy social and cognitive development, even though they did not feel this meant they were looking for 'education' (as explained in section 4.1).

Physical environment

A safe physical environment with good outside space was mentioned as essential by all parents.

Ratio of staff to children

A small number of parents who had children with a disability said they had considered ratios of staff to children when visiting a setting. One parent explained that she felt this was important because she believed her son needed one-to-one attention.

Existing research also found ratios did not heavily influence parents' choice of provider. In a questionnaire Goddard and Groucutt (2011) found that only 6 per cent of parents said that a good staff-to-child ratio was the most important factor for their choice of providers. The same report surmises that staff-to-child ratios did not figure prominently in parents' decision making processes as it is an aspect of childcare provision that is set in stone by the welfare requirements of the EYFS.

Ability of parents to determine quality

It is apparent from what parents said that they used relatively broad criteria for choosing settings, which to a limited extent reflect the expert defined criteria of quality (as set out in research and measures such as ECERS and in the EYFS). For example, parents looked for staff who were nurturing, and could engage and support their children in a range of stimulating activities children and some said it was important that there was a high ratios of staff to children. However, the range of quality indicators parents looked for during their initial visit to choose their setting was much narrower than their current description of what they felt contributed to high quality provision (based on their actual experience of using their provision, as set out in 4.1.1).

Existing research which evaluates parents' ability to select high quality provision finds that they lack the ability to make decisions about quality in the same way that experts do. Research from the US indicates that parents generally rate the childcare their children use more highly than independent observers (Cryer and Burchinal, 1997, cited in Leach et al, 2008). Recognising this problem, Leach et al (2008) argue that this could be due to a variety of factors,

> **"It may be that parents' ratings reflect their own positive relationship with the caregiver, or their hopes for their children's care, rather than a reality that may be difficult for them to observe or, perhaps, to tolerate."**

Despite this, Leach et al (2008) found that parents who reported basing their child care choice on quality indicators did actually place their children in higher-quality care settings than parents who used practical criteria for care selection (for example, nearness to home or work). When parents are more informed of quality indicators it seems, there is potential for them to make decisions which lead them to choosing higher quality. Our findings tentatively support this theory, as parents in this study had a relatively good awareness of a range of quality indicators and all had chosen a higher quality setting (all but one of the settings were rated good or outstanding). However one setting in the study was rated by Ofsted as satisfactory (following an inadequate grade earlier in the year). The parents using this setting were aware that Ofsted had rated it of lower quality but said that it was more important to them they could trust the staff and they all talked about having a good partnership with the manager. Existing research could provide a potential explanation for this: Leach at al (2008, citing Britner & Phillips, 1995; Barnes, et al, 2006) found that parental satisfaction with care is likely to be especially high when parent involvement is encouraged and the care provider listens to the parent.

The role of Ofsted

Parents were asked whether they were aware that Ofsted inspected childcare and early years settings and if so, whether the report factored in their decision about which provider to use. Most parents were aware of Ofsted reports and some used them as 'one piece of the jigsaw', usually to decide which settings to visit. For example, some parents said that, as long as there were enough alternatives, they would not bother visiting settings which got a particularly low grade, or those which the report found to not fulfil something they felt to be very basic. Some parents also said that they would find the report helpful as a reference as it helped them to know what settings were required to do by law and so gave them the confidence to ask managers about this when they visited the setting.

These qualitative findings are supported by previous research exploring the role of Ofsted in informing parents' decisions, showing that a significant proportion of parents use Ofsted reports and that this affects their choice. In the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents 2007[24] (Kazimirski et al, 2008), 63 per cent of parents questioned were aware of the inspection report on their current provider; just over half said that the inspection results had influenced their decision to use the provider. In an online survey sent to members of Ofsted parents' panel (comprised of parents who agreed to fill out a series of online surveys for Ofsted throughout the course of a year), 70 per cent of parents said they knew 'a little' and 12 per cent 'a lot' about Ofsted's role inspecting childcare providers (Ofsted, 2010). Around one in five parents of children in registered Early years provider (18 per cent) said they knew 'nothing at all'. The same survey found that around six in ten parents of children attending a registered early years setting said they had looked at Ofsted inspection reports when choosing their childcare provider.

24. The last survey to ask this question

Parents were given a short explanation of main themes of Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)[25], and told that Ofsted inspects a setting largely on how well it is meeting the standards as set out by the EYFS framework. Most parents said that the EYFS covered aspects of quality which they felt were important and necessary. There was, however, a prevalent view that the Ofsted reports themselves did not provide parents with all the information they needed to make their decisions, and that they would need to supplement information from Ofsted with other sources (e.g. their own impressions gained through visiting). For example, parents remarked that although Ofsted was good at finding what was wrong with a setting, they questioned its ability to find anything that they thought constituted good elements of care. For example, some parents felt the reports did not give them an impression of how their child might experience the nursery as they were written from an adult's perspective and it was perceived that Ofsted inspectors did not consult the children in the setting. Other parents found Ofsted reports inappropriate as they perceived them to be focusing on how well the setting provided education. Parents had however, previously said they looked for a setting which provides stimulating activities for their children, and that they wanted practitioners who could support their children's healthy social and cognitive development. Given that Ofsted reports do cover these aspects, it would appear that parents may hold a misconception about what Ofsted reports can provide for them, as well as a misunderstanding of what the term 'education' means in the early years. Interestingly, the parents who were the most positive about Ofsted reports tended to be those who reported having a strong focus on the 'education' which settings could provide for their children.

"If I find something basic like health and safety isn't right then it helps me to weed out the places which are a definite no. Ofsted is very good at picking out negative things like this but when it comes to the positive things – you can only find these out by actually going there."

[Parent, Setting D]

We probed further on parents' views of the usefulness of Ofsted reports by asking parents to read and review a report[26] during the focus groups. Parents were asked to imagine they were using it to inform their choice of provision and were asked to comment on how useful they would find it as a tool. Overall parents did find elements of the report useful (e.g. the summary of judgements table at the back of the report) and in some cases parents were able to find information they needed, such as adherence to basic health and safety rules. However, in general parents said that it was difficult to find all the information regarding elements of quality which were important to them and many commented on the format and language of the report, which made it difficult to understand. Additionally, many parents felt that the fact that the information covered in each section was different in different reports, made it difficult to compare settings quickly.

25. The parent EYFS overview is shown in the Technical Appendix

26. A report was chosen which had received a range of sub-judgements, from satisfactory to outstanding to give examples of a range of practices. This report is shown in the Technical Report (Karemaker et al, 2012).

The structure and usability of Ofsted reports

Parents had a number of suggestions as to how to make the report more 'parent-friendly'. Many parents felt that 'Annex A: record of inspection judgements' should be at the front of the report as it contained a quick overview and was helpful for giving a quick impression, telling them if they needed to look any further. A number of parents found it difficult to understand which parts of the text related to each of the judgements given in the table. For this reason some parents suggested that hyperlinks (for those who read reports online) or directions to where they could find further information in the report should be provided in the table.

Similarly, many parents suggested the report would be more usable if it could provide hyperlinks to more detailed explanations of key terms and what different judgements mean (including examples of what they would look like in practice). Some parents suggested that the report could be structured along the key themes of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), with the report describing how well the setting was doing at meeting each of the key themes.

Additional information which parents would find useful

Most parents said they would value a section which summarised the views of parents who had a daily experience of having a child in the setting.

Parents mentioned a variety of things which they felt were key indicators of quality but which they could not find in the report. This included information relating to staff turnover, evidence of how staff interacted with the children, and whether staff were capable of spotting development issues. Additionally, some parents wanted to know if a setting was linked to other professionals with expertise in how to deal with development problems, and parents of disabled children wanted information on how capable a setting was of supporting children with disabilities. It is interesting to note that Ofsted reports do in fact often contain these details, suggesting that the issues may lie at least partly in the accessibility of this information to parents. Parents also noted that they would want to visit a setting to make their own judgements on some of these important issues (e.g. to meet the staff) and would not reply on an Ofsted report alone.

Lastly, some parents questioned the Ofsted process and whether the inspection gave a fair reflection of what a setting was like. Some parents questioned whether settings might do better when they were more 'savvy' at knowing what Ofsted wanted, which led them to distrust the overall judgement made by the inspector.

"There is a lot about procedures which I don't understand. It's a bit like a code – if you know about it more you might understand it. It is not 'user friendly'. If they could simplify it, put it into laymen's terms, take out all the government language and help explain what it really means."

[Parent, Setting H]

One parent read out a part of the Ofsted report,

"'However, some staff have an insecure understanding of planning and this has led to an imbalance between the emphasis in the different areas of learning in some cases.'

So what do I read into that? I could read that and think, ooh that's bad, but I don't really know what the implications are. I don't know how serious this is. If this is bad, what is the expectation? What would it look like if it was right."

[Parent, Setting H]

In an online survey sent to members of Ofsted parents' panel (comprised of parents who agreed to fill out a series of online surveys for Ofsted throughout the course of a year) (Ofsted, 2010), it was found that all parents who read the report thought it was easy to understand, with just under half (45 per cent) saying it was very easy to understand. However, as the report acknowledges, this was based on the views of only 34 parents (out of 407 respondents) and so the report advises that the results be treated with some caution. When asked specifically whether they thought parents' views were given enough weight in the overall report findings, just over half of parents (52 per cent) thought that not enough weight was given to parents' views. Nearly all parents who had read the report on their childcare provider thought it did reflect their views about the strengths and weaknesses of the provider either 'very accurately' or 'fairly accurately' (92 per cent). Again, both of these findings should be treated with caution due to a low base (49 parents).

Desire for further information and guidance

A desire for further support and guidance in choosing high quality childcare featured prominently in the discussions among parents. Although all parents were happy with their current childcare they felt that, when initially making their choice, they would have benefited from 'knowing what they know now' about what makes a setting high quality. Parents said that even though they now know what a quality childcare looks like, they would have liked to have known this when originally selecting their childcare. Some parents felt that having a summary of the EYFS would have been helpful, to support them in knowing what to look for and give them the confidence to ask questions. Some parents pointed out that when they originally chose their nursery their child was only a baby and felt the EYFS was more relevant for when their children got older but having thought about it, it would have been helpful to have known about it. Existing research also found that some parents were unaware of where to find information which would help them choose the best quality childcare for their child (Goddard and Groucutt, 2011).

4.2.2 Local authorities

There are several aspects to the work that local authority staff do in their role to improve quality:

- Identifying quality to direct funding for the free entitlement for three and four year olds (soon to include disadvantaged two year olds) to the highest quality providers (i.e. settings which will provide best outcomes for children);
- Directing resources to lower quality settings to improve quality where necessary to uphold sufficiency and accessibility for parents (particularly those delivering the free entitlement). For this purpose, local authorities need to be able to identify areas of weaknesses and need for improvement at the setting level; and
- Encouraging settings to engage in quality improvement work and provide support (i.e. quality improvement tools and other forms of support such as local authority staff time).

We asked key local authority staff which tools they used to identify the quality of providers, and in their quality improvement work; and which tools worked best for them. This section presents the findings, divided into sections according to the different aspects of local authority work set out above.

4.2.2.1 Identifying quality

Local authority staff felt that identifying quality, for the purposes of deciding which settings to allocate funding and to identify where settings needed to improve, involved using a wide range of tools, of which Ofsted was just one. Many also used ECERS and ITERS to identify quality (see below). Other tools mentioned included the government's EYQISP (Early Years Quality Improvement Support Programme) materials, bespoke schemes which drew on the principles of Every Child Matters, quality assurance schemes. The majority of local authority staff said they had developed a RAG (red, amber, green) rating system, often drawing on the findings of various schemes mentioned above, which they used to plan which settings needed support (and how much). For most respondents it was important to supplement these tools with information gathered through their own regular observations and getting to know a setting. For example, some local authority staff felt the School Improvement Partner programme was effective in capturing quality as it involved detailed observations over six visits in a year. The Participants emphasised the importance of using multiple tools, saying that no one tool could capture all aspects. For example, many authorities supplemented their use of Ofsted and ECERS (set out in more detail below) with the use of quality assurance schemes, which they felt has a broad focus and could capture aspects not captured by either Ofsted or ECERS. This is again mirrored in another study of local authority officials who work with early years settings, with many participants commenting that the quality schemes they had adopted were much wider in their definitions of quality than those set out by Ofsted (Campbell-Barr and Wilkinson, 2010).

Ofsted

Although all local authority staff said they used Ofsted inspection results in their work, they felt that the Ofsted regulatory framework could not capture a rich and full picture of quality for a number of reasons.

Almost all local authority staff felt that the short inspection times meant Ofsted was limited in its ability to capture a broad range of quality as it only produced a 'snapshot of provision'. Many also noted the tendency of settings to 'perform on the day', again limiting the ability of inspectors to capture a true reflection of what the setting was like. Some felt that managers who were able to 'sell' themselves and their setting effectively were likely to get better grades. These findings are echoed in a study by Campbell-Barr and Wilkinson (2010).

Many participants also felt that some inspectors lacked an understanding of early years practice, which meant they were unable to judge accurately the more complex elements of quality such as the key person approach. Nearly all interviewees in Campbell-Barr and Wilkinson's (2010) study also expressed a concern regarding the consistency and accuracy of the Ofsted inspections, with some saying that they felt different inspectors interpreted the standards (to be met) in different ways, and that inspectors may have personal 'bug bears' that they are looking out for.

Lastly, some local authority staff cited examples of occasions where the judgement made by an Ofsted inspector had not reflected their own views of a setting; in most cases the inspector had awarded a higher grade than they thought was appropriate. This links to a perception of local authority staff that Ofsted was capturing whether settings were meeting 'minimum requirements' and rather than a broad and rich picture of all the elements they felt constituted high quality. This again is supported by previous research (Campbell-Barr and Wilkinson, 2010).

Some local authority staff in our study said it was important that Ofsted inspectors liaised with people in the setting's local authority (who had worked with the setting on quality improvement) so they could glean extra information from them which could provide a broader view of the quality of the setting than they felt an inspector could pick up alone. There is no legal requirement for Ofsted inspectors to liaise with local authority staff. Information sharing with local authorities outside this legal requirement is underpinned by a published protocol setting out each side's responsibilities and what they will do[27], Ofsted, inspectors are encouraged (via their guidance) to ask settings about any information they hold from local authority development officers in the form of reports or meeting notes, use of any quality assurance tools such as ECERS, or other quality assurance measures and to use such information as additional evidence to validate the setting's self evaluation.

Identifying quality for the two year old offer

An additional point made by some local authority staff also raised a specific concern about how effectively Ofsted was able to capture quality for younger children, and the implications of this for the use of Ofsted grades in determining funding for disadvantaged two year olds. This was largely based on experience in using the Environment Rating Scales, and comparisons of these scores with Ofsted grades (mirroring the findings of the quantitative research set out in Chapter 5). Local authority staff who made this point said that they felt confident that settings chosen to deliver the free entitlement for three and four year olds provided high quality care for this age group, because they had a good Ofsted score and a high ECERS score (ECERS evaluates care for children aged 30 months to 5 years). However, these same settings had not done so well on their ITERS (evaluation provision for those aged under 30 months), despite getting a good Ofsted grade), raising questions over the extent to which Ofsted reflected quality for the younger age group

27. available here http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/protocols-between-ofsted-and-other-organisations-relation-childcare

ECERS and ITERS

Most local authority staff had used ECERS to help them to identify the level of quality of settings and some respondents had also used the ITERS (largely those who were involved in delivering the free entitlement for disadvantaged two year olds).

Overall, local authority staff which had used ECERS and ITERS found them to be useful tools, as part of a broad basket of tools they used to identify quality. Most respondents felt that ECERS was an effective tool for measuring the general environment of a setting. This included aspects of both the physical environment and resourcing, and the interactions between staff and children, i.e. how the staff provided care. It was felt to capture a detailed picture of the quality of practice because of the time spent on observation. Respondents also noted that ECERS did not cover broader setting-level aspects such as leadership and management, the specific welfare requirements of the EYFS or a detailed picture of how settings work in partnership with parents. For this reason, other tools (e.g. Ofsted, and quality assurance schemes) were needed to capture the full range of dimensions they valued as important.

For most respondents, ECERS worked well to identify where to direct funding and support, as part of basket of indicators they used, to give them a baseline measurement of the level of quality across their settings. Some local authority staff said that ECERS was an important tool for helping them to direct resources according to each setting's specific areas of need. However, some local authority staff noted that when ECERS was used an audit tool, it can be subject to same limitations as an Ofsted inspection. Such limitations included where providers 'performed' on the day and viewed it as a box-ticking exercise; or where only one room was observed as a 'sample' of the quality provided. This idea of a single snapshot in time providing a limited view of quality is an important one, which arose often in the focus groups, suggesting that improvement tools such as ECERS are more effective when used frequently over time to capture multiple 'snaphots'. In relation to the parts of the ECERS scale which can be answered through questions, some suggested that auditors needed to talk to staff as well as the manager.

4.2.2.2 Encouraging settings to engage with quality improvement work

Local authority staff who used a basket of indicators to determine funding said that this encouraged settings to participate in a wide range of schemes, rather than solely focusing on getting a good Ofsted grade. Some explained that this helped these settings to consider quality in the broad way they felt was necessary, rather than fixating on meeting what most local authority staff described as 'minimum standards'. Some local authorities provided funding only for settings which had been through an ECERS assessment, whilst others increased the level of funding to those which had had an assessment (but not necessarily restricting funding from those which had not). This was through the use of premiums in their Early Years Single Funding Formula[28]. Additionally, some local authority staff said their local authority gave increased funding to settings which had better qualified staff, particularly those who employed Early Years Professionals (EYP) and graduates. For settings already engaged and doing well, local authority representatives said that they were using Kitemark-type schemes, to help encourage settings to continue to improve.

However, some local authority staff explained there were limits to this strategic use of funding due to the duty on local authorities to ensure that there are sufficient places. For example, local authorities found it hard to threaten closure or withdraw funding for the three and four year old entitlement if they would be left with too few places to meet local demand.

The role of Ofsted encouraging settings to improve quality

We asked local authority staff whether they felt Ofsted contributed to their work in encouraging settings to engage in quality improvement. Although respondents said that settings were more likely to engage pre and post Ofsted inspection, there was strong agreement that Ofsted inspections played a limited role in supporting providers and local authorities to improve practice and drive up quality.

Some local authority staff felt that settings were more likely to engage with quality improvement work, and to ask the local authority for support, when they thought they were 'due' an inspection (i.e. when settings felt if they had not been inspected for almost three years, they would have one soon. However, settings can be inspected at any point in their 47 month inspection 'cycle' and inspections are unannounced. Some local authority staff felt that the long gap between inspections was the most limiting factor in Ofsted's potential to encourage improvement; settings tended to engage only towards the end of their perceived 'cycle' or immediately following an inspection where a low grade was received. Thus, settings would only engage in quality improvement work, at most, once every three to four years, rather than committing to ongoing quality improvement (which most local authority staff felt was essential to creating high quality). The motivating impact of receiving a low grade was also seen to be limited by issues around sufficiency. That is, if an area does not have enough nursery places to meet demand, and parents therefore cannot choose between providers, a poor Ofsted grade may be less likely to lead to parents withdrawing their child from the setting. Furthermore, some local authority staff said that settings may feel they do not need to improve if they have got a good or outstanding, even though local authority staff feel this only means they are meeting 'minimum standards', which prevented them engaging in further work to improve quality in some cases.

> **"When they get an 'outstanding' or even 'good' [grade] they think they are untouchable."**
>
> [Quality Officer, Focus group B]

28. It is a government requirement that all local authorities devise a single local Formula to fund providers for the free entitlement to early years education and childcare. It must properly reflect the different provisions and cost bases for early years provision in the maintained and PVI sectors

These findings are mirrored in existing research in which interviewees from local authorities commented that in their experience settings often felt they did not need support once they had been awarded a high Ofsted grade (Campbell Barr and Wilkson, 2010). On a related point, interviewees in the same study felt that the Ofsted process itself meant that providers became fixated on meeting minimum standards rather than thinking about how to improve practice which was best for the setting and ultimately for the children.

Finally, some local authority staff felt that the Ofsted inspection process necessitated settings spending a lot of time gathering evidence rather than making changes which led to real quality improvement. As some participants explained, managers of settings prepared so they would perform on the day but the process failed to encourage them to reflect on their practices and plan to make actual improvements.

4.2.2.3 Supporting settings in their quality improvement work

When local authority staff were asked what worked when it came to supporting settings to improve, several key themes emerged. The most important themes were the importance of using a range of tools to be able to provide targeted support; working in partnership with providers and ensuring providers felt a sense of ownership over the process of quality improvement.

Providing targeted and continual support

Local authorities said they provided individualised, targeted support through a range of quality improvement tools. These included the ECERS and ITERS, quality assurance schemes, other tools such as Pascale and Bertram's Effective Early Learning project (EEL), and local authorities' own bespoke schemes. Some local authority staff felt that for quality improvement work to be most effective it was important that someone from their team was assigned to provide support throughout the process. This not only helped the local authority officer to get a good idea of how the setting was run and what they needed to do to improve but also to help ensure that settings did not feel quality improvement was something forced upon them but something they could do in partnership with the local authority. In contrast, if there was a weak or antagonistic relationship, settings may not engage in quality improvement. However, funding cuts were cited as having an impact on how likely they were able to offer this type of intensive support many found necessary and some had to cut back on training they could offer. Some local authorities had found alternative ways to give support such as helping settings to apply for different funding streams which were available, to fund staff training. A couple of local authorities have a register of best practice, so early years staff could find settings which exemplified best practice in an area of interest and go and visit them to see how it was being implemented, with the aim of replicating it.

Many local authority staff also used national programmes such as Every Child a Talker (ECAT) and the Early Years Quality Improvement Support Programme (EYQISP) to support their quality improvement work.

ECERS

As a tool which could support settings in their quality improvement work, most local authority staff felt ECERS worked well, particularly if settings were engaged with the tool. Most local authority staff valued what they described as ECERS transparency, mostly because it enabled settings to see clearly what they needed to do to improve. Moreover, because it was possible to provide settings with the ECERS books, which detailed clearly what settings need to do to score on each scale, they were able to use it as an internal tool, giving them a sense of ownership over the quality improvement process. It was important, these participants explained, that

settings felt it was something they were in control of, rather something that was done to them. For example, one respondent said that this enabled settings to see for themselves what next steps they needed to take to improve and exactly what they needed to do it. A small number of respondents specified that the scale was helpful as it helped them to set out to settings why they might be being asked to change certain things, when they felt there had been a slip in standards or if they needed to improve something.

Some local authority staff felt that ECERS was able to inspire settings to aim higher, providing a clear vision of what a high quality setting should look like, with one participant describing ECERS as 'aspirational'. However, some said that settings who were very far from this high level of quality, particularly those in disadvantaged areas, find it too challenging to aim for. For this reason, explaining to settings that it was something to aspire to, rather than something they had to achieve perfectly, was important to ensure it remained effective, according to some.

Two respondents, however, pointed out that ECERS and ITERS required substantial personnel time to implement it as an audit tool in the first case and then to use it to ensure it was kept implemented by settings. Contrastingly, one respondent said it was helpful for settings, as the audit did not require them to do any extra work, such as providing a portfolio of their work or evidence of their planning.

4.2.3 Providers

Providers need effective tools to identify their own strengths and possible areas for development so that quality can be enhanced. Managers in particular need to know where they need to make changes, and therefore need practical tools which can help them to improve practice. All of the setting managers interviewed as part of the focus groups were engaged in quality improvement processes and most reported using one or more quality improvement tools, primarily those provided to them by their local authority. All providers had experienced ECERS as part of a local authority project, as the focus groups took place in local authorities using the ECERS-R and E as part of their quality improvement programme. A number also reported using other tools. Providers were also asked about the role played by Ofsted in helping them to identify where they needed to improve, and in encouraging this improvement through regulation.

Although providers were using different schemes, when they talked about how they helped them to improve, several themes emerged. That is, having a sense of ownership over the process, those which encouraged ongoing self- reflection, and tools which supported and encouraged them to plan improvements on a continual basis. Some providers talked about tools which were effective at encouraging them to take a thorough look at everything they do. Some providers also valued tools which enabled them to get a good sense of how well their team was working and whether they needed any training or support.

> **"It is about looking at what you do, every day of the year. Ofsted is different – it is every three years so you won't do anything for two and a half years because Ofsted won't be there.'**
>
> [Playgroup manager, Focus group B]

ECERS

Providers were positive about their use of ECERS as an internal tool to support their quality improvement activities, helping them audit their practices to see what they were missing or where they needed to adapt. Several highlighted

the importance of having a sense of ownership over the process (reflecting what local authority staff had said).

ECERS was seen as a transparent quality improvement tool, in some cases more than Ofsted (see below), allowing settings to see the next steps for improvement and to know what they were being marked on when the ECERS was being used as an audit tool.

Providers were less positive about the use of ECERS as an audit tool (many in this sample had experienced ECERS in this way). When used as a snapshot on one day, providers felt ECERS had the same disadvantages as Ofsted (below), with 'marks lost' if staff were not doing something whilst the ECERS assessor was there, despite it being something they usually did.

Many providers also remarked on the inflexiblility of the ECERS approach. For example, some felt that it did not take individual circumstances into account; so if you did not pass on one aspect, perhaps because you had immutable barriers to doing so, you were unable to move on to the next level. For example, one provider explained that they were marked down because their doorways were inaccessible to wheelchairs by ECERS standards, but because they were using a shared hall it was impossible to do anything about this. There was a sense that this left people feeling defeated, rather than inspired to improve. This relates well to the point made by local authorities in the previous section, about the importance of providers having a good understanding of what the ECERS tool is and how it works (i.e. that it presents an 'ideal' view, rather than something on which full marks can be scored).

Ofsted

Providers were also asked how well Ofsted captured all the elements of quality they felt to be important, and about the contribution of the regulatory process to their quality improvement efforts. Like other stakeholder groups, providers had a clear view that the Ofsted regulatory process could not fully capture a rich picture of the quality within their settings. Providers felt, for example, that the limited observation times meant that inspectors were not able to fully capture the quality of staff characteristics. As with the ECERS when used for audit, providers also highlighted the limited view of an observation at a single time-point; some felt they were unfairly marked down if staff were not doing something during the inspection, even though it was something they may ordinarily do. However, providers did feel that Ofsted had a more flexible approach which complemented the more rigid ECERS framework, since inspectors were able to use their professional judgement.

Providers also raised the question of objectivity; it was felt that the grade attained often depended on the personal opinion of inspectors and that different inspectors had different things which they were looking out for. Mirroring local authority views, providers felt that the regulatory process would capture a more accurate picture of quality if inspectors consulted with their local authority adviser, i.e. someone who knew the setting well. It should be noted that a protocol for liaison between Ofsted and the local authority is in place, as set out above. To recap, although there is no legal requirement for Ofsted inspectors to liaise with local authority staff, information sharing with local authorities

outside this legal requirement is underpinned by a published protocol setting out each side's responsibilities and what they will do[29].

Finally, managers of settings in disadvantaged areas felt that the Ofsted inspection process often did not treat them fairly and recognise the 'value added' taking into account children's starting points. Explaining this, providers said that an Ofsted inspector might focus on one child, and if do not feel they have progressed enough then they will mark the setting down. There was a general feeling that settings with more children with additional needs would find it more challenging to get a good Ofsted grade and they wanted Ofsted to recognise this in their marking scheme.

The role of Ofsted in encouraging quality improvement

Some providers felt that they were more likely to engage in quality improvement work when 'due' an Ofsted inspection (i.e. nearing the end of their inspection cycle) as the grade they received had an impact on whether parents would choose their setting. However, they also acknowledged (as stated by the parents themselves) that despite an increased use of Ofsted reports most parents still came to the setting through 'word of mouth'. Some providers expressed a desire for Ofsted to play a more supportive role. For example, some providers commented that the same inspector never saw the same setting more than once and so there was no sense that inspectors had any commitment to the setting.

The Ofsted Self Evaluation Form

Providers are encouraged to complete a Self Evaluation Form (SEF) as part of the Ofsted regulatory process. This is designed to encourage self-evaluation between inspections and also provide a base for discussion with the inspector. The self evaluation form received a mixed response from providers. Some providers found it effective when it was an internal too, that is when they were solely thinking about it in terms of providing extra evidence for Ofsted inspectors. These providers said it helped them to reflect on their practices and guide their planning. However, when providers talked about it as something they felt they had to produce for the Ofsted inspection, they described it much more negatively. For example, many providers felt that it created a lot of work, 'just to prove a point', which used up time which could be better spent improving quality. This however, may be a misconception on the part of providers, as the self evaluation form is not mandatory.

Communicating quality to parents

Providers felt that parents largely based their decision on the feeling they got when visiting the setting (reflecting what many parents had also said). Settings also used a number of other methods which they felt helped them communicate their 'quality' to parents, including their websites and having a plaque on the wall showing they had done a quality assurance. Several providers commented that parents often asked about their quality assurance plaque when they saw it and that it communicated well that they were committed to producing high quality provision. While managers did say (as discussed above) that parents used Ofsted reports as part of their decision-making process, these were not felt to be the most effective means of communicating quality. Reflecting parent views, some providers commented that the Ofsted report did not help parents to decide which settings to use as the language was clinical and did not give an impression of the setting.

29. available here http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/protocols-between-ofsted-and-other-organisations-relation-childcare

In summary

No one tool was felt to capture a full picture of quality. For example, providers felt that the transparency of the ECERS assessment complemented what was seen as Ofted's more flexible approach.

Although the most common sources of information for providers were Ofsted and ECERS, providers also used a number of other tools for quality improvement. Although providers were using different schemes, several common themes emerged when they talked about what it was about them that helped them to improve. That is, having a sense of ownership over the tool, those which encouraged ongoing self reflection, and those which supported and encouraged them to plan improvements on a continual basis. Some providers talked about tools which were effective at encouraging them to take a thorough look at everything they do. Some providers also valued tools which enabled them to get a good sense of how well their team was working and whether they needed any training or support.

Chapter 5: Quantitative Analysis - Relationships Between Quality Measures

Sandra Mathers (University of Oxford, A+ Education), Arjette Karemaker (University of Oxford)

The quantitative element of the study set out to compare two of the best known measures for assessing the quality of early years settings in England: the reports of the regulatory body Ofsted, and the Environment Rating Scales (ECERS and ITERS). The aim was to answer the following question:

- **What are the associations between ECERS/ITERS quality ratings and the gradings awarded by Ofsted?**

This chapter presents the findings for a sample of 1,423 early years settings in the private and voluntary sectors, based on observations carried out using three of the Environment Rating scales:

- The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ECERS-R; Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2005), designed to assess provision for children from 30 months to 5 years;
- The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Extension (ECERS-E; Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2003), designed to assess curricular provision for children aged 3 to 5 years;
- The Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ITERS-R; Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2003), which assesses provision from birth to 30 months.

These observations are compared with data from Ofsted inspection reports, both before and after the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in September 2008, when the Ofsted inspection regime changed to reflect the EYFS framework. Further details on the quality measures are shown in Chapter 2 (Approaches to Measuring Quality) and Chapter 3 (Methodology).

Sections 5.1 to 5.3 present the main analysis, which compares Ofsted gradings for 1,423 settings categorised as 'childcare on non-domestic premises' by Ofsted with quality data gathered using the ECERS and ITERS scales. The relationships between ECERS, ITERS and Ofsted were explored using three specific analysis strategies:

5.1 What are the associations between ECERS/ITERS and the overall grades awarded by Ofsted, and are these different pre- and post-EYFS?

5.2 What are the associations between ECERS/ITERS and the various sub-grades provided in EYFS Ofsted reports?

5.3 How do ECERS/ITERS and Ofsted categorise settings into high and low quality, and to what extent do these methods of grouping align with each other?

Section 5.4 presents a supplementary analysis, considering whether participating in a quality assurance scheme was related to scores on the ECERS-R and ECERS-E, or to the grades awarded by Ofsted. This analysis was completed for a sub-sample of 249 'childcare on non-domestic premises' settings, using EYFS inspection data.

Key findings for EYFS inspection reports are shown below. Throughout the chapter, brief overviews are also provided for each sub-section. Statistical results are shown in a separate Technical Report (Karemaker et al, 2012).

Key Findings: EYFS inspections

ECERS-R and E (provision for children aged 30 months to 5 years):

- There was broad alignment between the grades awarded by Ofsted at the setting level and quality of provision for pre-school children, as measured by the ECERS-R and E:
  - Correlations between ECERS scores and Ofsted grades were statistically significant, suggesting they are 'pulling in the same direction' and to some extent assess the same quality constructs.
  - Analysis of the way in which Ofsted and ECERS categorise settings as low or high quality shows alignment between the two approaches towards the higher end of the quality spectrum. A setting which achieved a high score on one measure was generally likely to receive a higher grade on the other.
- However, there was also a large degree of 'non-overlap' between the two approaches:
  - Although statistically significant, associations between ECERS scores and Ofsted grades were generally small. While to some extent the two measure the same thing, they are largely assessing different constructs.
  - In terms of categorisation, there was less agreement at the lower end of the quality continuum. For example, settings graded as inadequate by Ofsted did not necessarily receive the lowest ECERS scores.
- There was little variation in the different sub-grades awarded by Ofsted within EYFS inspection reports:
  - 45 per cent of reports in our sample had the same grade for all sub-judgements; a further 26 per cent had only one or two grades different to the majority.
  - The grades one might expect to be more closely associated with quality as assessed by the ECERS-R and E (e.g. 'provision quality') showed only marginally stronger associations with ECERS scores than other grades (e.g. 'leadership and management').
- The majority of associations between ECERS and Ofsted became stronger post-EYFS, possibly reflecting an increased focus within inspections (now based on the EYFS framework rather than the National Standards) on the provision of an 'enabling learning environment' for children.
- Settings participating in a quality assurance scheme (particularly a local authority scheme) achieved higher scores on the ECERS-R and E, and were also graded more highly by Ofsted on a number of aspects.

ITERS-R (provision for children from birth to 30 months):

- There were no significant associations between the grades awarded by Ofsted and scores on the ITERS-R. A setting graded as good or outstanding by Ofsted would not necessarily be rated as providing good quality for babies and toddlers (especially those under 2 years of age) as assessed by the ITERS-R.

5.1 What are the associations between ECERS/ITERS and the overall grade awarded by Ofsted, and are these different pre- and post-EYFS?

We begin the analysis by exploring the associations between ECERS, ITERS and Ofsted for inspections carried out before and after the EYFS was introduced. For pre-EYFS inspection reports, we explore associations between ECERS/ITERS and the overall 'Quality of Care' and 'Quality of Nursery Education' grades awarded by Ofsted. For EYFS inspections, we use the 'Overall Effectiveness' grade. See Chapter 3 (Methodology) for details on the structure and scoring of these different measures.

Throughout this section, the term 'association' refers to statistical correlations between the ECERS (or ITERS) and Ofsted measures[30]. Correlations are measured on a scale of 0 to 1[31], where:

- **1 = a perfect association between the two measures**
- **0 = no association at all**

Overview of Main Points

ECERS-R and E (30 months – 5 years):

- Analysis showed statistically significant but weak correlations between pre-EYFS Ofsted grades and the majority of ECERS-R and E measures (i.e. a setting achieving a high grade on one measure would not necessarily be rated highly by the other).
- The pre-EYFS 'Nursery Education' grade was most closely associated with the dimensions of ECERS which assessed the quality of interactions and support for learning; while the 'Care' grade was more closely associated with scores on the 'personal care routines' subscale.
- The majority of associations between ECERS and Ofsted became stronger post-EYFS (i.e., EYFS Ofsted reports assess more of the dimensions of quality measured by the ECERS).
- Post-EYFS, correlations between Ofsted's Overall Effectiveness grade and the ECERS measures were statistically significant but still relatively small. While to some extent the two tools measure the same thing, they largely measure different constructs.

ITERS-R (birth to 30 months):

- Analysis showed few significant associations between the overall grade awarded by Ofsted (either pre-EYFS or EYFS) and quality for infants and toddlers as assessed by the ITERS-R
- Tentative analysis suggests that there may be a relationship between the age of children and associations between ITERS-R and Ofsted; further research is required to establish whether this is the case.

5.1.1 ECERS-R and E (provision for children aged 30 months to 5 years)

We identified a number of significant associations between the ECERS-R quality measure for pre-school children and the overall grades awarded by Ofsted, but these were all relatively small (Fig 5.1).

30. Only statistically significant correlations are shown (at the $p<0.05$ level). The p-value represents the estimated probability that the difference between the groups could have occurred by chance alone. A p-value of less than 0.05 represents a statistically significant difference between the two groups (based on a two-tailed statistical test with a 5 per cent significance level).

Also note that the correlations have been inverted. Ofsted and ECERS grades run in opposite directions (for ECERS, a grade of 1 is poor while for Ofsted a grade of 1 is outstanding). We would therefore expect negative correlations (e.g. -0.2). For ease of reference, we have inverted the correlations so all are positive (e.g. 0.2).

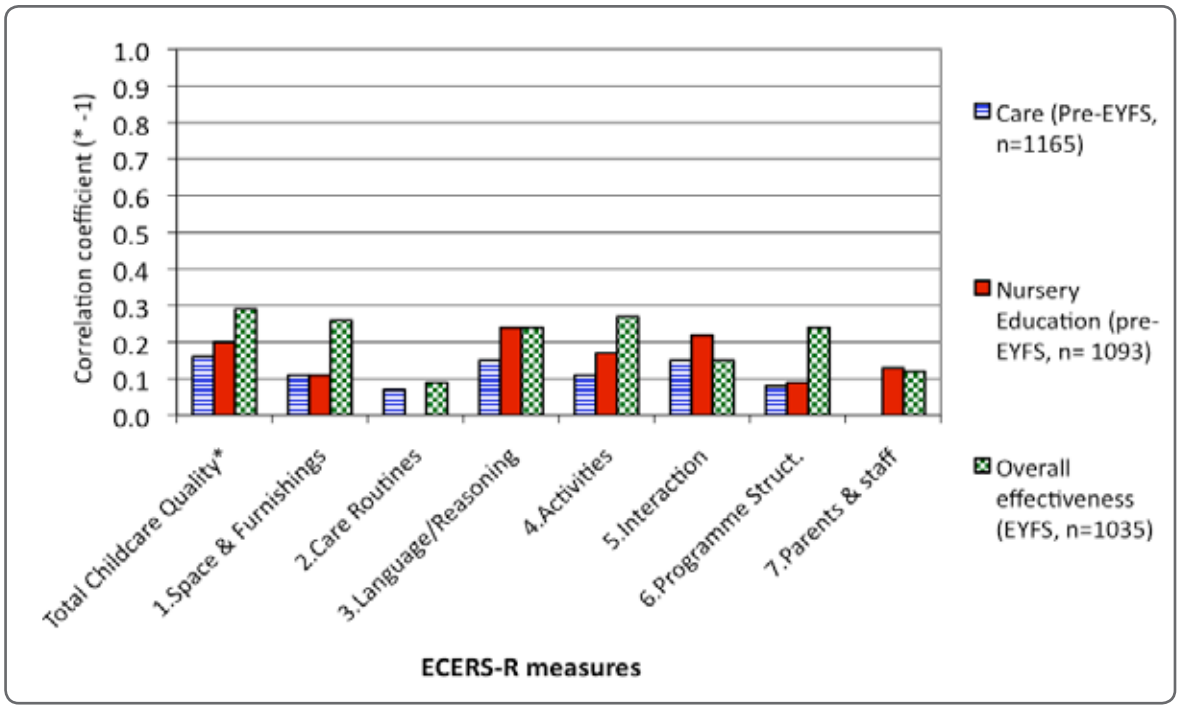
31. The size of the correlations can be categorised as follows: 0.1 to 0.3 (or -0.1 to -0.3) = small, 0.3 to 0.5 (or negative equivalent) = medium, 0.5 to 1 (or negative equivalent) = strong

Pre-EYFS, the Quality of Care grades were only weakly correlated with quality as measured by ECERS-R. This means that the ECERS-R and Ofsted's Care grade were largely measuring different things; a setting achieving a high grade on ECERS-R would not necessarily be rated highly by Ofsted and vice versa. The Nursery Education grade showed slightly stronger associations with the ECERS-R subscales which assess the quality of support for 'language/reasoning' (0.24), 'activities' (0.17) and 'interactions' (0.22). This is not surprising, since one would expect the Nursery Education grade to reflect the quality of hands-on practice with the children to a greater extent than the Care grade, which assessed the extent of compliance with National Standards. On the other hand, the Care grade was more strongly associated with the quality of 'personal care routines' than the Nursery Education grade; again not a surprising finding.

For our sample of settings, the majority of associations between ECERS-R and Ofsted grades become stronger once EYFS inspections were introduced. Increases were seen in correlations with the ECERS-R subscales assessing 'space & furnishings', 'activities' and 'programme structure' (all now above 0.2). The 'space and furnishings' subscale assesses the quality of the physical environment, including the building, room arrangement, furniture for routine care, play and learning, display and space/equipment for gross motor play. 'Activities' considers the range and accessibility of resources to support different types of play, learning and development. Finally, the 'programme structure' subscale considers how well adults provide an appropriate schedule which is tailored to meet individual needs. These findings may therefore reflect the focus of the EYFS framework on the provision of a high quality and developmentally appropriate learning environment for children.

Despite the stronger associations post-EYFS, the majority of correlations between Ofsted's Overall Effectiveness grade and the ECERS measures remained small. Correlations for the majority of subscales, and for the overall ECERS-R 'Childcare Quality' fell between 0.24 and 0.29 (see Technical Report for details (Karemaker et al, 2012)). Weaker but significant relationships (<0.2) were seen

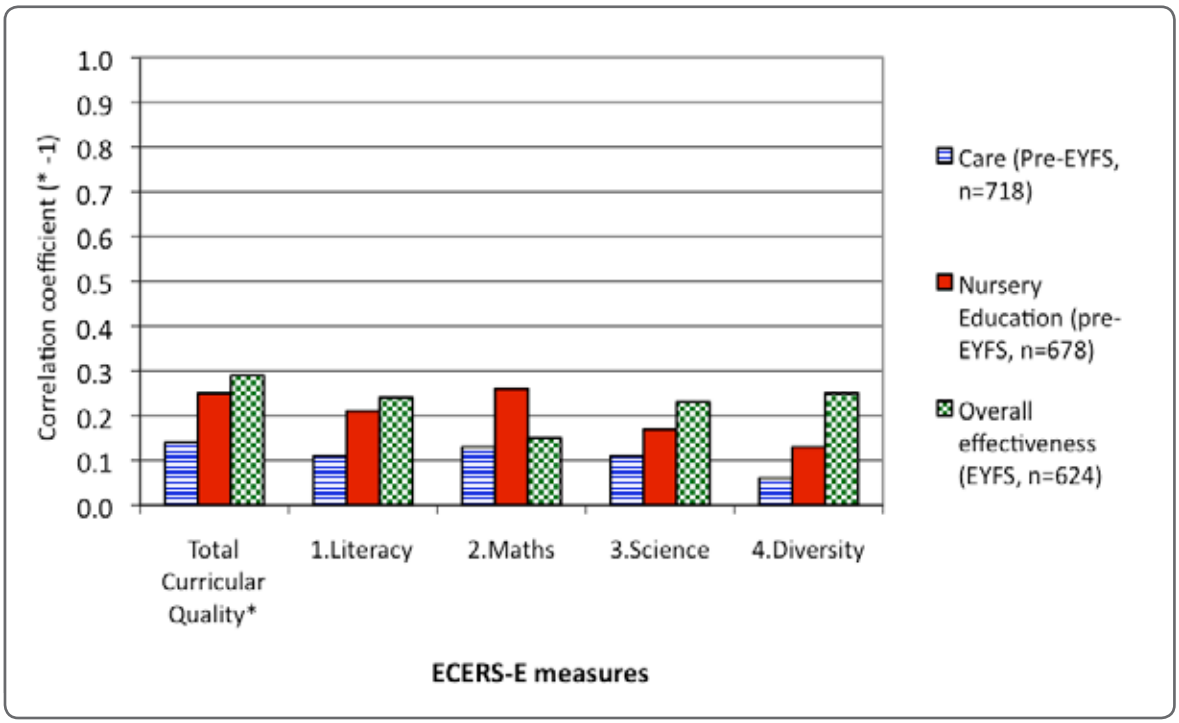
Fig 5.1 Associations between ECERS-R measures and Ofsted's overall grades, pre-EYFS and EYFS



* Mean of items in ECERS-R subscales 1 to 6.

**Only significant correlations are shown (significant at 0.05 level)

Fig 5.2 Associations between ECERS-E measures and Ofsted's overall grades, pre-EYFS and EYFS



* Mean of all items

**Only significant correlations are shown (significant at 0.05 level)

with the ECERS-R subscales assessing the quality of 'care routines', 'interactions' and 'provision for parents and staff'[32]. In these dimensions of practice, the Ofsted and ECERS-R measures were not strongly aligned. It may be that Ofsted does not assess the quality of care, interactions and provision for parents and staff in the same way that ECERS does. Equally, it could indicate that the ECERS-R scale itself is less 'effective' at discriminating between settings in these areas. For example, scores on the 'interactions' subscale tend to be relatively high, whereas scores for 'personal care routines' tend to be low due to the strictness of the ECERS-R scale on matters of hygiene and safety (e.g. Mathers & Sylva, 2007, Sylva et al, 2010). All we can conclude is that, for these dimensions, ECERS and Ofsted are measuring different things.

Figure 5.2 shows the equivalent associations for the extension to the ECERS-R (the ECERS-E), which measures the quality of curricular provision for children aged 3 to 5 years. We see very similar patterns to the ECERS-R, with significant but small associations between Ofsted grades and the majority of ECERS-E measures.

Pre-EYFS, the Nursery Education grades were more closely aligned with ECERS-E scores than the Care grades. Once EYFS inspections were introduced, the Overall Effectiveness grade was more closely related to all ECERS-E measures than either of the pre-EYFS 'Care' or 'Education' grades, with the exception of the 'maths' subscale. This means that Ofsted and the ECERS-E had more common ground following the introduction of EYFS inspections. Again, this may indicate an increased focus on the quality of learning and development within Ofsted inspections, following the introduction of the EYFS.

32. The differences between the correlations for these three subscales, and those for the subscales correlated 0.2 or higher with 'Overall Effectiveness' were significantly different from each other at the $p < 0.05$ level (see technical appendix for details)

As with the ECERS-R, the majority of associations between ECERS-E scores and EYFS Ofsted grades were still relatively small (i.e. <0.3). The strongest associations were seen for the overall ECERS-E total score (0.29), and for the individual ECERS-E subscales assessing provision to support 'literacy' (0.24), 'science' (0.23) and 'diversity' (0.25)[33]. A weaker but significant relationship (0.15) was seen with scores on the 'maths' subscale.

In summary, the findings indicate some degree of alignment between EYFS Ofsted grades and scores on the ECERS-R and E measures. However, these tools are largely measuring different constructs. This is not surprising, given that ECERS is designed to assess quality 'in the rooms', while Ofsted assesses a broader range of dimensions, including the effectiveness of setting-level factors such as leadership and management. Other reasons for the relatively weak associations must also be considered. For example, it may be that the time-gap between Ofsted inspections and ECERS observations played a role. However, since this gap was 'controlled for' in the analysis we do not believe that this is the reason for the relatively low associations identified[34] (see Chapter 3, Methodology for further details).

5.1.2 ITERS-R (provision for infants and toddlers from birth to 30 months)

We identified very few significant associations between the overall grades awarded by Ofsted at the whole setting level and quality for babies and toddlers as measured by the ITERS-R, either pre- or post-EYFS[35]. Only one correlation was statistically significant (0.12)[36], showing an association between the pre-EYFS 'Care' grade and the ITERS-R subscale assessing quality for parents and staff. This is perhaps not surprising, given that quality for parents and staff may vary less across a setting than the quality provided for individual age ranges of children. In fact, in a setting which has an ECERS and an ITERS assessment completed, the 'parents and staff' subscale is often completed only once. For EYFS inspections, no associations were found. This means that a setting graded as outstanding by Ofsted would not necessarily receive a high score on the ITERS-R, and vice versa[37].

As one further note, we did identify a slightly higher correlation between ITERS-R scores and the overall effectiveness grade, for one small sub-sample within the EYFS dataset. For the 30 settings assessed as part of the 'Early Education Pilot for Two Year Old Children', the correlation was 0.29 (on a scale of 0 to 1). It was not statistically significant, probably due to the small sample size, but is very similar in size to the relationships found for the ECERS-R and E. It is possible that, for the older end of the 'ITERS' age range (i.e. 2 years to 2.5 years), there is a slightly stronger relationship between ITERS scores and Ofsted grades. It is not possible to establish this with any more certainty as part of this analysis, as we have restricted data on age ranges. However, when discussing the lack of association between ITERS and Ofsted grades in the key findings, we highlight the implications for identifying quality for under 2s rather than for children under 30 months.

5.2 What are the associations between ECERS/ITERS and the various sub-grades provided in EYFS Ofsted reports?

So far, our analysis has focused on the overall grades awarded by Ofsted. In this second analysis, we consider inspections since the introduction of the EYFS, and drill down further into the Ofsted reports to explore the sub-grades awarded for different aspects of provision. ECERS and ITERS have a very specific focus

33. This subscale assesses race/gender equality and awareness, and the extent to which settings provide for individual learning needs.

34. The other possible explanation lies in the dispersion of the measures. Both the ECERS and Ofsted measures tend towards the mid-range (see Chapter 3 Methodology). For EYFS inspections, the majority of our sample (60 per cent) achieved an Ofsted grade of good, with fewer graded as inadequate (3 per cent) or outstanding (17 per cent). With the ECERS-R and E measures, although scores on the individual items can vary widely, the overall scores for our sample tended to fall within the range of 3 to 5 on a scale of 1 to 7. This lack of dispersion may play a role, but given that there were settings at the higher end of both scales, we do not believe that it fully explains the findings.

35. Nursery Education (pre-EYFS) was not included for the ITERS-R.

36. At the $p<0.05$ level

37. 74 per cent of ITERS observations were conducted in settings where there was also an ECERS observation. This lends weight to the comparison between the ITERS and ECERS findings.

on the quality of the environment provided for children, whereas Ofsted assesses a much broader range of setting-level dimensions. As well as the Overall Effectiveness grade, Ofsted also provides sub-grades for a number of different dimensions of quality (see Chapter 3, Methodology), all of which feed into and inform the Overall Effectiveness grade. While we might expect some of these sub-grades (e.g. the grade awarded for 'provision quality') to have a significant overlap with the ECERS/ITERS, others (e.g. 'the effectiveness of leadership and management') may have a less direct relationship with quality in the rooms.

Overview of Main Points

ECERS-R and E (30 months – 5 years):

- All of the sub-grades awarded by Ofsted showed significant but small associations with overall ECERS-R and E quality.
- The sub-grades most obviously associated with the quality of the children's environment (e.g. 'provision quality') were only marginally more associated with ECERS scores than grades for other aspects of provision, and in many cases not at all.
- This may be due to the lack of variation in the grades awarded by Ofsted: 45 per cent of EYFS Ofsted reports had the same grade for all sub-judgements; a further 26 per cent had only one or two grades different to the majority.
- Although the differences in associations were not large, the four Ofsted sub-grades most closely associated with overall ECERS-R and E scores were: the effectiveness with which setting deploys resources; provision quality; the extent to which children enjoy and achieve; and outcomes for children.

ITERS-R (birth to 30 months):

- No significant associations were identified between the grades awarded by Ofsted in EYFS inspection reports and quality for babies and toddlers, as assessed by the ITERS-R.

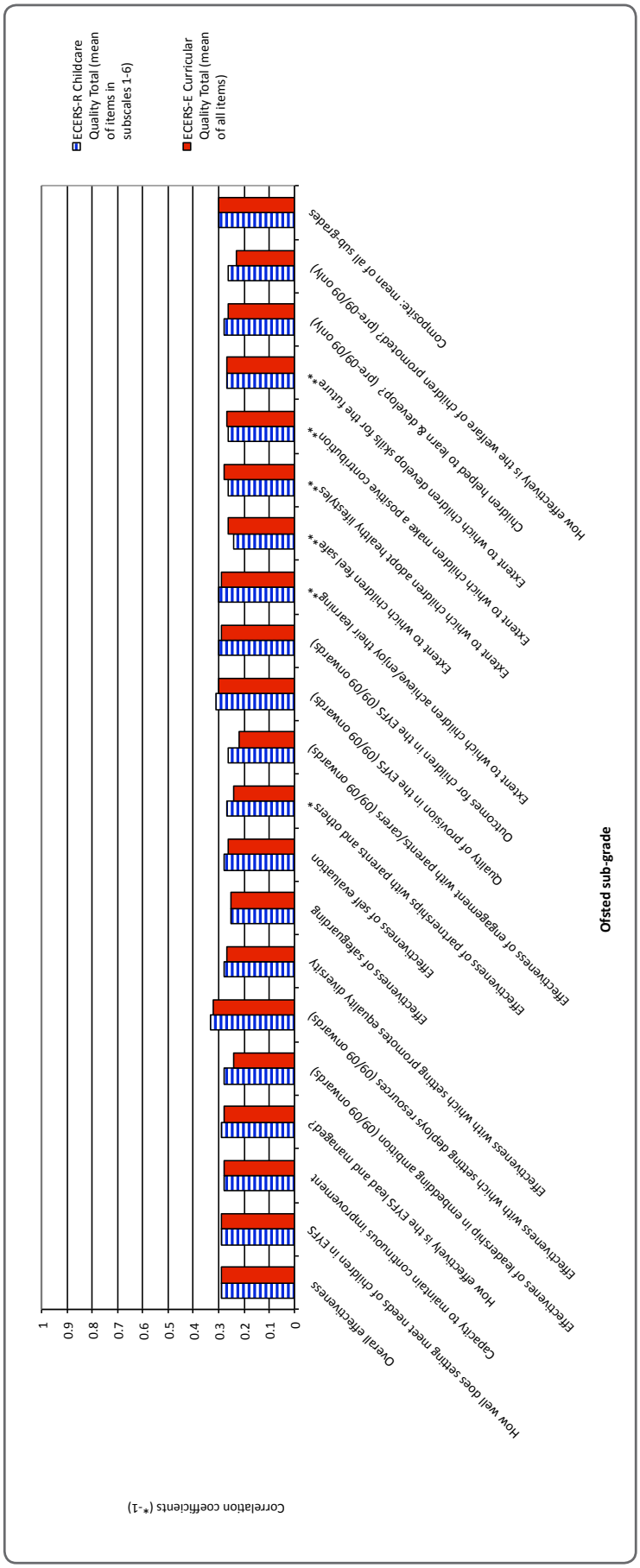
5.2.1 ECERS-R and E (provision for children aged 30 months to 5 years)

Figure 5.3 shows the correlations between the ECERS-R and ECERS-E overall totals and the various sub-grades awarded by Ofsted. The most interesting feature is the uniformity of the bars, indicating that there was little variation in the size of the correlations between overall ECERS scores and the different Ofsted sub-judgements (range: 0.22 to 0.33). While there were significant relationships between all of the Ofsted sub-grades and quality as assessed by the ECERS-R and E, the sub-grades most obviously associated with the quality of the children's environment (e.g. 'provision quality') were not much more strongly associated with ECERS-R/E scores than any others.

There are a number of possible ways in which we could interpret or explain this uniformity. For example it is possible that the four-point nature of the Ofsted grading scale may limit the discriminatory power of a system which is, after all, designed to regulate rather than to provide a refined quality measure. Whereas the ECERS-R is assessed as a seven point scale, Ofsted awards four grades (where 1=outstanding, 2=good, 3=satisfactory and 4=inadequate). The ECERS-R overall score is an average of the 43 ECERS-R items, and so is a semi-continuous measure. This means that settings can not only achieve a total score which is a whole number, but also all the possible grades in between (e.g. 3.41). Ofsted, on the other hand, awards an ordinal grade of 1, 2, 3 or 4. This is much clearer and easier to interpret as a regulation tool but means there is less fine-grained variation in grades awarded. We cannot tell, for example, whether a satisfactory setting was 'only just' satisfactory or was actually close to being awarded a 'good'. This lack of spread may be one reason for the similar findings seen for the individual sub-grades[38].

38. Both our measures also have a tendency to cluster settings in the middle range. As shown in the 'sample characteristics' (Chapter 3: Methodology) Ofsted tends to award the majority of settings a satisfactory or good grade, with very few achieving grades at the extremes (i.e. outstanding or inadequate). Likewise, although the scores for individual items on the ECERS tend to vary quite widely, the majority of the mean total scores are in the mid-range.

Fig 5.3 Correlations between ECERS/ITERS totals and the sub-grades awarded by Ofsted within EYFS inspection reports



**Only significant correlations are shown (significant at 0.05 level)

* From 09/09, this is a mean of the grades for 'effectiveness of partnerships' and 'effectiveness of engagement with parents and carers'

** Between 09/08 and 09/09 these grades did not relate to outcomes but to how well the provision helped children to achieve outcomes (e.g. how well are children helped to stay safe?)

We explored this theory by creating a composite Ofsted measure, using the different sub-grades awarded. If categorising settings into only four groups limits the variability, then spreading the settings out more widely may yield more varied results. For example, within the 'satisfactory' category, it would be helpful to discriminate between settings which were only just awarded a satisfactory (i.e. at the bottom end of the category) from settings which were roundly satisfactory, and from those which were nearing the 'good' range. We created a composite Ofsted measure for each of the settings by calculating a mean of all the sub-grades awarded, excluding the Overall Effectiveness grade[39]. Therefore a setting with 17 satisfactory sub-grades would have a mean of 3 (i.e. squarely satisfactory) but a setting which was awarded 10 satisfactory grades and 7 inadequate grades would achieve a mean of 3.41 (i.e. closer to the 'inadequate' grade of 4). Further details on the methodology are provided in Chapter 3, and the findings for this composite measure are shown by the last set of bars in Figure 5.3.

In fact, our new Ofsted measure was no more strongly associated with ECERS-R or E quality than the sub-grades assessed using the basic four-point scale. Further scrutiny of the data highlighted a possible reason; for many of our settings, the new composite measure did not in fact 'spread' the grades very effectively. Of the 1,094 settings inspected post-EYFS, 500 had a composite which was a whole number, indicating that all of the sub-headings had received exactly the same grade.

This suggests a second possible reason for the fact that all of the Ofsted sub-grades showed similar associations with the ECERS measures, i.e. that the grades awarded by Ofsted for different aspects of practice are in themselves very similar. Following the methodology of Hopkin et al (2010), we tested this theory by exploring patterns in sub-grades awarded, focusing particularly on the uniformity of grades. As expected, there was relatively little variety in the grades awarded for the different sub-headings; 45 per cent of EYFS Ofsted reports had the same grade for all sub-judgements and a further 26 per cent had only one or two grades different to the majority[40].

There are two possible interpretations of these findings. Firstly, that the different sub-grades awarded within Ofsted reports are in fact measuring the same thing and not discriminating between different aspects of practice. For example, whereas settings might actually show quite varied strengths and weaknesses (e.g. be very effective in deploying resources but less good at promoting inclusion), if a grade of 'good' is awarded for one aspect, the setting will also be rated 'good' for most other aspects. This is often known as a halo effect. The second explanation is that quality was actually uniform across the different judgements. This may arise if, for example, some aspects of provision (e.g. leadership and management) are so effective in influencing others (e.g. the extent to which children's needs are met) that the level of quality - and the association with the ECERS scores - is in effect the same.

Evidence in support of the first hypothesis is provided by exploring the variation in ECERS scores for individual settings. Figure 5.4 shows ECERS-R 'profiles' for three settings (selected at random) which were awarded completely uniform grades by Ofsted, i.e. for which all the grades were the same. For each setting, the proportion of items which were scored 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 or 7 is displayed (with 1 being the lowest achievable score on the ECERS-R and 7 being the highest). This shows that, using the ECERS-R measure, the three settings varied quite significantly in their strengths and weaknesses.

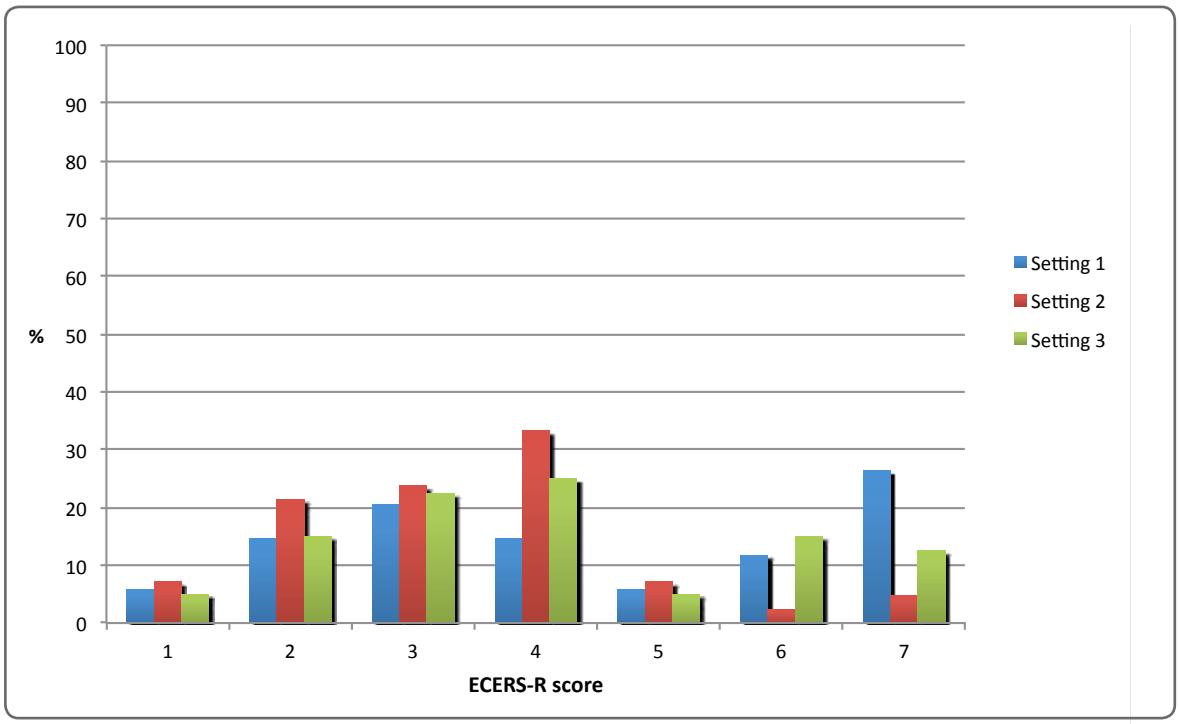
Although the criteria and coverage of ECERS and Ofsted are obviously different, this lends weight to the conclusion that the different grades awarded by Ofsted may provide less useful information about a setting's strengths and weaknesses than the text of the reports themselves. The grades appear to 'line up' behind the Overall Effectiveness judgement, feeding into the overall grade but adding little additional information in their own right.

And finally, although the variations were slight, it is still useful to consider which of the Ofsted sub-gradings were most closely associated with quality as measured by the ECERS-R and E. Figure 5.3 showed that the largest correlations were identified for:

39. This resulted in a mean of 17 grades for settings inspected in September 2009 or later, and a mean of 14 sub-graded for settings inspected before September 2009.

40. Of either 15 or 18 grades awarded, depending on whether the inspection was carried out before or after September 2009.

Fig 5.4 ECERS-R profile for three settings: the proportion of items achieving each possible score



- The effectiveness with which setting deploys resources[41] (0.33 ECERS-R, 0.32 ECERS-E);
- Quality of provision in the EYFS (0.31 ECERS-R, 0.30 ECERS-E).

Medium-sized correlations were also seen between the ECERS-R childcare quality total and:

- The extent to which children achieve and enjoying their learning (0.30);
- Outcomes for children in the EYFS (0.30).

Thus, these four grades within the Ofsted reports were the most closely related to the aspects of quality measured by ECERS.

5.2.2 ITERS-R (provision for infants and toddlers from birth to 30 months)

We identified no significant associations between the overall ITERS-R total and the grades awarded by Ofsted at the whole-setting level. Therefore, while the Ofsted sub-grades did to some extent reflect quality for pre-school children (as measured by the ECERS-R and E), there was no relationship between the grades awarded by Ofsted and quality as assessed by the ITERS-R.

41. The differences in the correlations between 'the effectiveness with which the setting deploys resources' (0.33 for the ECERS-R) and 'the extent to which children feel safe (0.24 for ECERS-R), and for 'the effectiveness with which the setting deploys resources' and 'the effectiveness of safeguarding (0.25 for ECERS-R) were the only ones which were statistically significant. See Technical Appendix for details.

5.3 How do ECERS/ITERS and Ofsted categorise settings into high and low quality, and to what extent do these methods of grouping align with each other?

This third analysis considers the ways in which our two quality measures (ECERS/ITERS and Ofsted) categorise settings into high or low quality, and the extent to which these methods of grouping align with each other.

Overview of Main Points

ECERS-R and E (30 months – 5 years):

- Overall, settings graded as outstanding by Ofsted achieved significantly higher ECERS scores than good settings, which achieved significantly higher ECERS scores than settings graded as satisfactory. Settings graded as higher quality by ECERS were most likely to be graded as good or outstanding by Ofsted.
- There was less 'agreement' between the ECERS and Ofsted measures at the lower end of the quality continuum. For example:
  - Settings graded as inadequate by Ofsted did not necessarily receive the lowest ECERS scores;
  - Settings graded as low or medium-low quality on ECERS were just as likely to be graded as 'good' by Ofsted than as 'inadequate' or 'satisfactory'; this suggests a high Ofsted grade may not necessarily guarantee high quality as assessed by the ECERS.

ITERS-R (birth to 30 months):

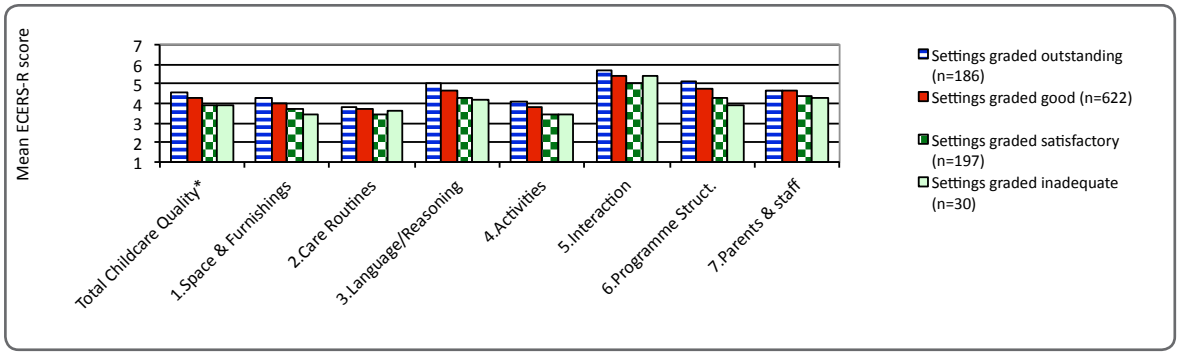
- There was little obvious association between the grades awarded by Ofsted for the whole setting and quality for children under 30 months, as assessed by the ITERS-R. For example, settings graded as outstanding by Ofsted often achieved the lowest scores on the ITERS-R.

5.3.1 ECERS-R and E (provision for children aged 30 months to 5 years)

Focusing initially on the ECERS-R and E measures for pre-school children, we calculated the average ECERS-R and ECERS-E scores for groups of settings achieving each Ofsted grade (Figures 5.5 and 5.6). The first interesting feature of the graphs is that the patterns are broadly as we might expect. On the whole, settings which were graded as 'satisfactory' by Ofsted tended to receive lower ECERS-R and ECERS-E scores than settings graded as 'good' or 'outstanding'. Thus, ECERS and Ofsted were pulling in the same direction, tending to 'agree' on whether settings were high, medium or low quality.

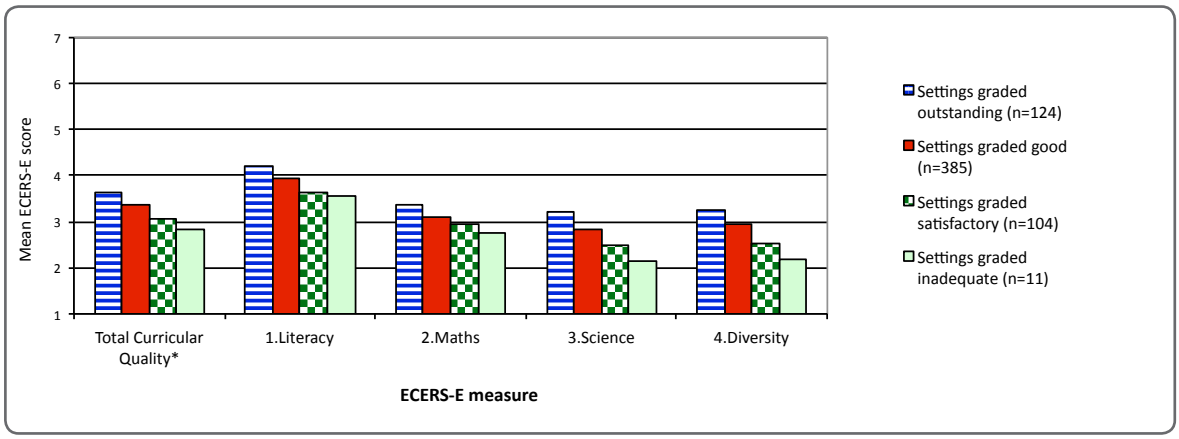
We look now at the differences between 'pairs' of Ofsted grades (e.g. settings graded 'outstanding' and 'good'). Figures 5.5 and 5.6 suggest that, with the exception of the 'parents and staff' subscale, there was a clear distinction between outstanding and good settings for all ECERS measures, with outstanding settings rated as higher quality on both the ECERS-R and ECERS-E. Likewise, good settings were rated as higher than satisfactory settings on all ECERS-R and ECERS-E subscales. The distinctions between satisfactory and inadequate settings appear to be less clear-cut; while settings graded as inadequate by Ofsted did receive the lowest ECERS-E scores, the inadequate group were sometimes rated as higher on the ECERS-R than the satisfactory group (e.g. on 'personal care routines' and 'interactions').

Fig 5.5 Average ECERS-R scores for groups of settings achieving each Ofsted grade (EYFS inspections)



* Mean of items in ECERS-R subscales 1 to 6.
Standard deviations for each of these groups are shown in the Technical Report (Karemaker et al, 2012).

Fig 5.6 Average ECERS-E scores for groups of settings achieving each Ofsted grade (EYFS inspections)



* Mean of all ECERS-E items.
Standard deviations for each of these groups are shown in the Technical Report (Karemaker et al, 2012).

We also tested these patterns statistically[42] (see Table 5.1). Confirming what we see in the bar graphs, the majority of differences between settings graded as outstanding, good and satisfactory were statistically significant. Outstanding settings achieved significantly higher scores on the ECERS-R and E measures than good settings, which in turn tended to achieve significantly higher scores than settings graded as satisfactory by Ofsted.

A relatively small number of settings within the sample received an 'inadequate' grade from Ofsted (see Figures 5.5 and 5.6 for sample sizes), making it more difficult to test these against other grade groups. Analysis of ECERS-R scores confirmed our initial conclusions, i.e. that there were fewer distinctions between settings graded as 'inadequate' and the other groups. Settings graded as 'inadequate' were not significantly different to those graded as 'satisfactory' on any ECERS-R measure. On the 'personal care routines' and 'interactions' subscales, inadequate settings did not differ from any other. Due to the smaller ECERS-E sample size (see Chapter 3, Methodology), the number of settings graded as inadequate was too small to test these differences for ECERS-E scores.

Thus, while ECERS and Ofsted tend to agree that 'outstanding' settings are better quality than 'good' settings, which are better than 'satisfactory' settings, they do not agree on the categorisation of settings graded as 'inadequate' by Ofsted. This is likely to be related to the purpose of Ofsted's inadequate grading. A low score on the ECERS is achieved by scoring poorly on many different items. However, an inadequate judgement can be awarded by Ofsted to a setting which is otherwise 'good' but which has not complied with the regulatory standards in one or more aspects. The two approaches are therefore providing different assessments; one reflects a specific failure to meet the basic requirements of the EYFS, while the other indicates a more widespread inability to adequately meet children's needs for a high quality environment.

42. Using analysis of variance techniques (see Chapter 3 Methodology)

Table 5.1 ECERS-R and ECERS-E: significant differences between pairs of Ofsted grade groupings

	ECERS-R Childcare Quality Total [43]	1. Space & Furnishings	2. Care Routines	3. Language & Reasoning	4. Activities	5. Interactions	6. Programme Structure	7. Provision for parents & staff	Total ECERS-E Quality	1. Literacy	2. Maths	3. Science/Environment	4. Diversity
Outstanding-Good	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Outstanding-Satisfactory	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Outstanding-Inadequate	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓						
Good-Satisfactory	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
Good-Inadequate	✓	✓		✓			✓						
Satisfactory-Inadequate													

✓ means that the average ECERS scores for the two grade categories shown (e.g. 'outstanding' and 'good' settings) were significantly different from one another (using Kruskal Wallis and Mann Whitney tests), and in the expected direction. Statistical test results for each of these pairs of groups are shown in the Technical Report (Karemaker et al, 2012).). Shaded boxes indicate where statistical tests were not possible due to the size of the groups. For sample sizes see Figures 5.5 and 5.6.

43. Mean of items in subscales 1 to 6, excluding the 'parents and staff' subscale.

Our final exploration involved splitting the ECERS scores into four categories, to mirror the Ofsted grading system. Settings were divided as follows:

- Low ECERS quality = scores of 1-2.9
- Medium-low ECERS quality = scores of 3-3.9
- Medium-high ECERS quality = scores of 4-4.9
- High ECERS quality = scores of 5-7[44]

We then calculated the number (Tables 5.2 and 5.3) and the proportion (Figures 5.7 and 5.8) of settings graded as outstanding, good, satisfactory and inadequate within each group.

Fig 5.7 Proportion of low, medium and high quality settings (as measured by the ECERS-R) awarded each of the Ofsted grades for Overall Effectiveness (EYFS inspections)

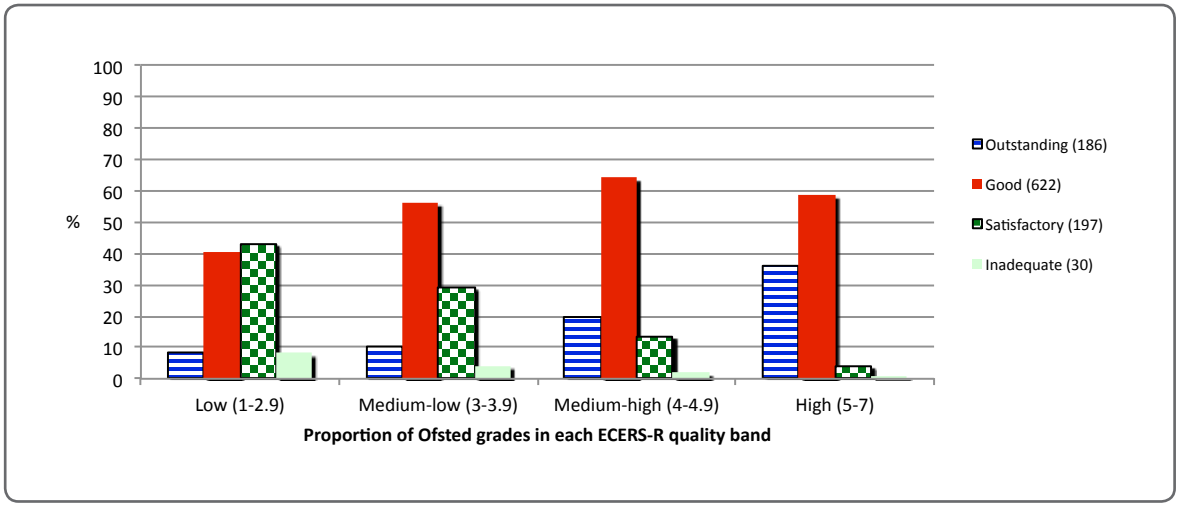
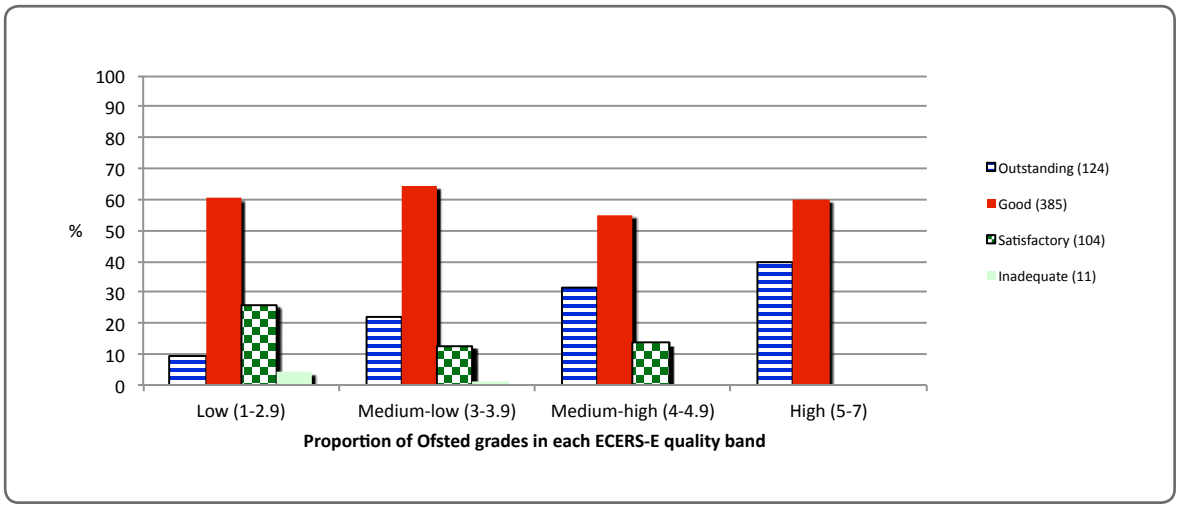


Fig 5.8 Proportion of low, medium and high quality settings (as measured by the ECERS-E) awarded each of the Ofsted grades for Overall Effectiveness (EYFS inspections)



44. The categories are not evenly divided. This was done to spread out settings more broadly across categories, since the ECERS total scores tended to cluster in the mid-range.

Table 5.2 Number of low, medium and high quality settings (as measured by the ECERS-R) awarded each of the Ofsted grades for Overall Effectiveness (EYFS inspections)

ECERS-R quality band	Number of settings achieving each Ofsted grade				
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate	Total
Low (1-2.9)	3	15	16	3	42
Medium-low (3-3.9)	36	200	104	15	350
Medium-high (4-4.9)	104	337	72	11	532
High (5-7)	43	70	5	1	111
Total	186	622	197	30	1,035

Table 5.3 Number of low, medium and high quality settings (as measured by the ECERS-E) awarded each of the Ofsted grades for Overall Effectiveness (EYFS inspections)

ECERS-E quality band	Number of settings achieving each Ofsted grade				
	Outstanding	Good	Satisfactory	Inadequate	Total
Low (1-2.9)	18	114	49	8	189
Medium-low (3-3.9)	74	216	43	3	336
Medium-high (4-4.9)	28	49	12	0	89
High (5-7)	4	6	0	0	10
Total	124	385	104	11	624

The findings are broadly positive in terms of highlighting an alignment between ECERS and Ofsted, but also indicate some important differences. The two approaches were most closely aligned at the top end of the 'quality continuum'. Settings which received a high or medium-high ECERS quality score (i.e. an average of between 4 and 7) were most likely to be graded as good or outstanding by Ofsted. Thus, Ofsted largely agreed on the categorisation of settings graded as higher quality by ECERS.[45]

There was less alignment at the lower end of the ECERS scale. Settings graded low or medium-low on ECERS were just as likely to be graded as 'good' by Ofsted than as 'inadequate' or 'satisfactory' (and in some cases much more likely). This was particularly the case for the ECERS-E scale, where 330 of the 525 settings rated as low or medium-low on the ECERS-E (63 per cent) were rated as 'good' by Ofsted. This indicates that a high Ofsted grade may not necessarily guarantee high quality as assessed by the ECERS-R and ECERS-E.

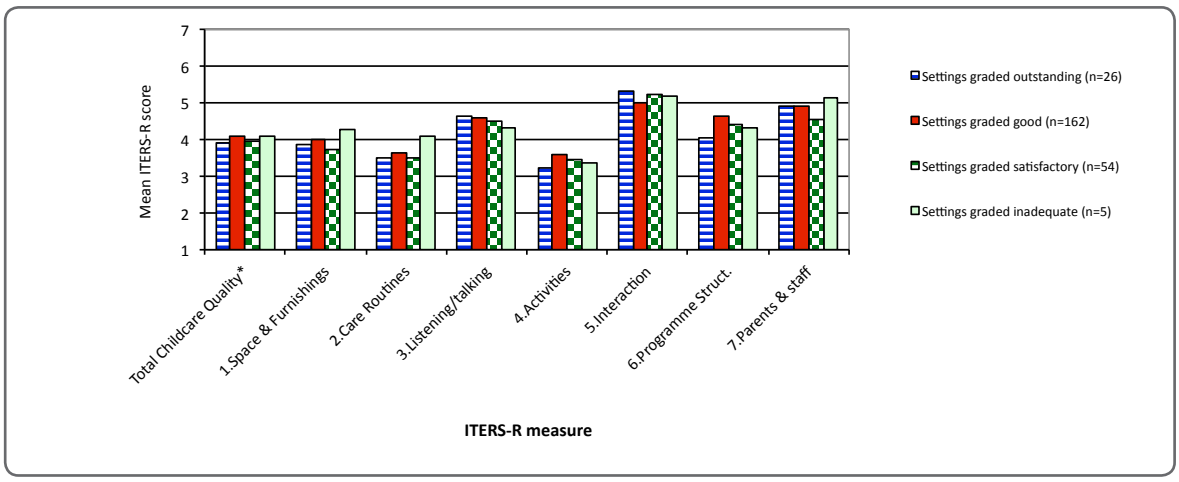
45. We should note here the 12 settings rated as high or medium-high quality on ECERS which were rated as inadequate by Ofsted. Although these form a very small proportion of the high/medium-high ECERS settings, they do form quite a large proportion of the settings graded as inadequate by Ofsted. This confirms the conclusions in the first part of this analysis concerning the different ways in which ECERS and Ofsted view these 'inadequate settings'.

This is also reflected in the very large proportion of settings rated as 'good' quality. In a regulatory system, where the purpose is to move settings from the lower ratings as a basic measure of quality assurance, grades are likely to tend towards the 'good' rating unless settings are under- or over- performing in an obvious way (in all, just over 60 per cent of the settings were graded as good). The 'good' category may therefore function as a regulatory 'pass' rather than as a detailed measure of a setting's quality. This can be seen clearly in Figures 5.7 and 5.8. The proportion of outstanding settings increases through the quality range and is highest in the 'high ECERS quality' category. The proportion of satisfactory settings and inadequate settings decreases through the ECERS quality range, and are at their lowest in the 'high ECERS quality' category. However, there is a large proportion of settings graded as 'good' in all of the ECERS quality bands. This rating therefore indicates that 'nothing serious is wrong' rather than providing a fine-grained assessment of quality.

5.3.2 ITERS-R (provision for infants and toddlers from birth to 30 months)

Finally, Figure 5.9 shows the average ITERS-R scores for groups of settings achieving each Ofsted grade. This confirms the pattern seen so far in the ITERS analysis, with little obvious relationship between the grade awarded by Ofsted for the whole setting and quality for children under 30 months as assessed by the ITERS-R. Settings graded as outstanding by Ofsted achieved the lowest scores on many of the ITERS-R measures; conversely those graded as inadequate by Ofsted often achieved higher scores than the other groups on the ITERS.[46]

Fig 5.9 Average ITERS-R scores for groups of settings achieving each Ofsted grade (EYFS inspections)



* Mean of items in ITERS-R subscales 1-6.
Standard deviations for each of these groups are shown in the Technical Report (Karemaker et al, 2012).

46. This was confirmed by the statistical analysis for distinctions between outstanding, good and satisfactory settings (Kruskal Wallis and Mann Whitney tests). There were too few inadequate settings to test for differences with other groups. See Technical Appendix for details.

5.4 Do settings participating in a quality assurance scheme achieve higher ECERS scores or Ofsted gradings?

The final stage of the analysis considered whether participating in a quality assurance scheme was related to scores on the Environment Rating Scales (ECERS-R and ECERS-E), or to the grades awarded by Ofsted in EYFS inspection reports[47]. Data on quality assurance participation was available for a sub-sample of the 249 'childcare on non-domestic premises' settings used for the main analysis[48]. Of these, 72 settings (29 per cent) reported that they had achieved or were participating in a recognised quality assurance scheme while 177 (71 per cent) were not. Of the settings which participated in a quality assurance scheme, the majority (64 per cent) were participating in a local authority scheme. A further 10 per cent were taking part in the National Day Nurseries Association 'Quality Counts' scheme, 6 per cent in the Pre-School Learning Alliance 'Reflecting on Quality' or 'Aiming for Quality' and 21percent were participating in other schemes[49].

Overview of Main Points

- Settings participating in a quality assurance scheme achieved significantly higher ECERS scores than settings not participating in a quality assurance scheme, i.e. they were rated as offering higher quality provision for pre-school aged children.
- These differences were primarily related to settings taking part in quality assurance schemes led by local authorities:
  - There were no significant differences between the ECERS scores achieved by settings taking part in non-local authority schemes and those achieved by settings not undertaking quality assurance.
  - However settings taking part in local authority schemes were rated more highly than 'non-QA' settings in terms of overall childcare and curricular quality, and on a number of specific dimensions of practice assessed by the ECERS-R and E, suggesting they were more skilled at providing an appropriate and challenging learning environment for pre-school aged children.
  - It is not possible to establish whether settings take part in a quality assurance scheme because they are of higher quality, or whether the participation itself leads to higher quality. However, the findings indicate that quality assurance participation provides an additional and useful measure of a setting's quality.
- Settings that participated in a quality assurance scheme also received significantly higher grades from Ofsted on a number of dimensions (leadership and management, self-evaluation, capacity for continuous improvement, and the extent to which children's needs are met), as compared with settings not participating in quality assurance.

47. Due to the smaller number of ITERS-R observations available, it was not possible to include these in the analysis.

48. The sample was drawn from the main sample of 1,423 settings, with ECERS/ITERS and Ofsted data selected as described in the methodology chapter. Relationships between ECERS and Ofsted were very similar to those seen in the full sample. See Chapter 3 (Methodology) and the technical appendix for further details on the sample.

49. Other schemes include: Aiming Higher (2) Montessori schemes (2), CREC Quality Assurance/ Effective Early Learning (2), Investors in Children (1), unspecified (8). Note that we cannot exclude the possibility that the unspecified' settings may in fact belong to one of the other groups.

5.4.1 Do settings participating in a quality assurance scheme achieve higher ECERS scores?

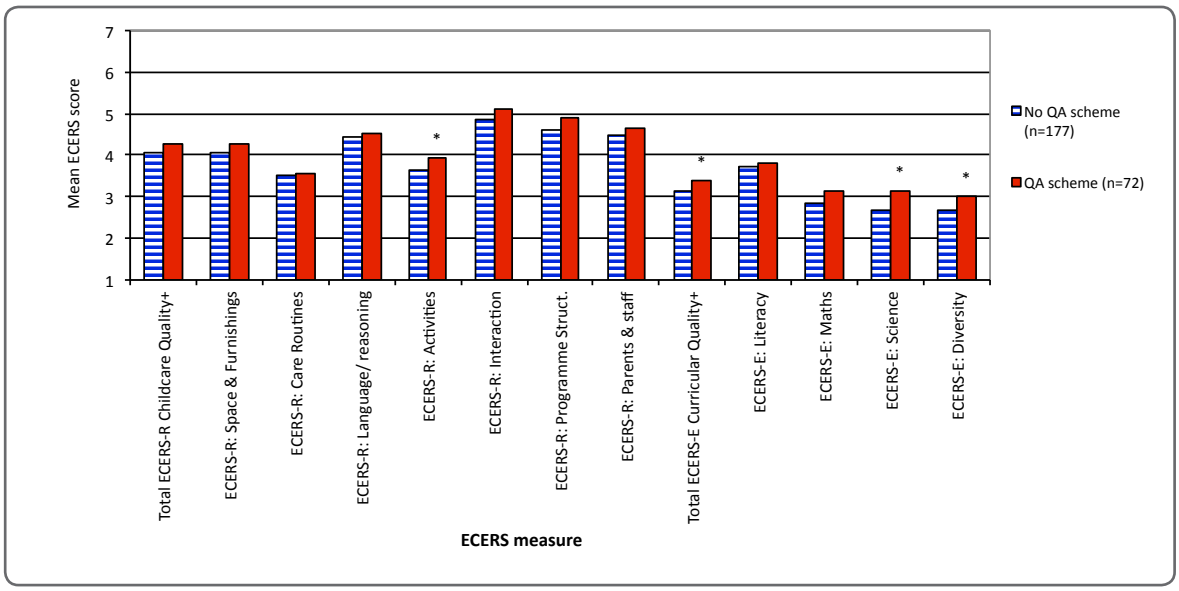
Comparing settings which participated in a quality assurance scheme with those which did not (Figure 5.10), we see that settings which reported participating in a quality assurance scheme were of higher quality on all ECERS-R and E measures.

We also tested these differences statistically[50]. While the differences in mean ECERS scores achieved by settings participating and not participating in a quality assurance scheme were not large, they were statistically significant for a number of the ECERS 'subscales'. Settings participating in a quality assurance scheme achieved significantly higher scores on the following ECERS measures:

- ECERS-R 'Activities' (mean score 3.9 vs 3.6)
- Overall ECERS-E Quality (mean score 3.4 vs 3.1)
- ECERS-E 'Science' (mean score 3.1 vs 2.7)
- ECERS-E 'Diversity' (mean score 3.0 vs 2.7)

The ECERS subscales associated with quality assurance participation are among some of the more 'educational'. 'Activities' assesses the range and accessibility of resources to support different types of play and learning.
The ECERS-E 'Science' subscale assesses the extent to which adults support children's scientific thinking and critical processes. The 'Diversity' subscale assesses race and gender equality and awareness, and also considers whether settings cater and plan for children's individual learning needs. The findings suggest that settings which participate in a quality assurance scheme are more skilled at providing an appropriate and challenging learning environment for pre-school aged children.

Fig 5.10 Mean ECERS scores for settings participating and not participating in a quality assurance scheme (statistically significant differences marked *)



+ Mean of items in ECERS-R subscales 1 to 6/ Mean of all ECERS-E items

50. T-tests and non-parametric Mann-Whitney tests, see Technical Appendix for details. All significant differences reported were significant at the $p<0.05$ level.

For most of the quality assurance schemes being used within our sample, the numbers of settings participating were too small to consider individual schemes separately. However, a large proportion of settings taking part in quality assurance (64 per cent) said that they were taking part in a local authority scheme. We therefore carried out some additional analysis, treating settings participating in a local authority scheme as one group. Figure 5.11 compares settings participating in a local authority scheme with those participating in a non-local authority scheme[51], and also with those not participating in a recognised scheme at all.

The findings suggest that the majority of the differences between 'quality assurance' and 'non-quality assurance' settings (Figure 5.10) were in fact due to settings participating in a local authority scheme. There were no significant differences between the ECERS scores achieved by settings participating in a non-local authority scheme and settings not participating in quality assurance at all. However, settings participating in a local authority quality assurance scheme achieved significantly higher scores[52] than the 'non-QA' group on the following ECERS measures:

- ECERS-R Childcare Quality Total (mean score 4.5 vs 4.1)
- ECERS-R Space and Furnishings (mean score 4.5 vs 4.1)
- ECERS-R Activities (mean score 4.2 vs 3.6)
- ECERS-R Interactions (mean score 5.2 vs 4.9)
- ECERS-R Program Structure (mean score 5.0 vs 4.6)
- Overall ECERS-E Quality (mean score 3.5 vs 3.1)
- ECERS-E Maths (mean score 3.3 vs 2.9)
- ECERS-E Science (mean score 3.3 vs 2.7)
- ECERS-E Diversity (mean score 3.2 vs 2.7)

Therefore, settings taking part in local authority schemes achieved significantly higher ECERS scores than 'non-QA' settings on many more measures than the 'quality assurance' group had done as a whole[53]. Again, the aspects of the ECERS scale on which the local authority quality-assured settings scored more highly were the most 'educational'. They were rated more highly on the quality of their physical environment and resourcing (ECERS-R Space & Furnishings and Activities), the quality of interactions between adults and children (ECERS-R Interactions), and the extent to which they provided a developmentally appropriate schedule, met children's individual needs (ECERS-R Program Structure and ECERS-E Diversity) and supported learning in specific areas (ECERS-E, Maths, Science). No differences were identified for the quality of care routines (ECERS-R, Personal Care), the quality of provision for parents and staff (ECERS-R) or for the quality of provision to support literacy and language (ECERS-R, Language and reasoning; ECERS-E, Literacy).

It is not possible to establish from this analysis whether settings took part in a quality assurance scheme because they were of higher quality, or whether the participation itself led to higher quality. However, the findings do indicate that participation provides an additional and useful measure of a setting's quality, for example by which parents and local authorities can judge the quality on offer.

5.4.2 Are settings participating in a quality assurance scheme graded more highly by Ofsted?

We also identified a number of associations between participation in a quality assurance scheme and the grades awarded by Ofsted. Settings participating in a quality assurance scheme achieved significantly higher grades than settings which did not on the following aspects:

- Leadership and management of the EYFS
- The capacity of the provision to maintained continuous improvement
- The effectiveness of self-evaluation

51. 'Non-Local Authority' schemes include those taking part in the National Day Nurseries Association scheme 'Quality Counts' (7 settings), schemes accredited by the Pre-School Learning Alliance (4 settings) and 'other schemes' (15 settings, as described previously).

52. Significant at the $p<0.05$ level, see Technical Appendix for details.

53. They also achieved significantly higher scores than the non-local-authority-QA settings on a number of measures (see Fig 5.11)

- The effectiveness with which the setting meets children's needs

In line with the findings for the ECERS measures, settings taking part in local authority schemes were graded more highly on a greater number of Ofsted measures. This group achieved significantly higher grades on the following Ofsted dimensions:

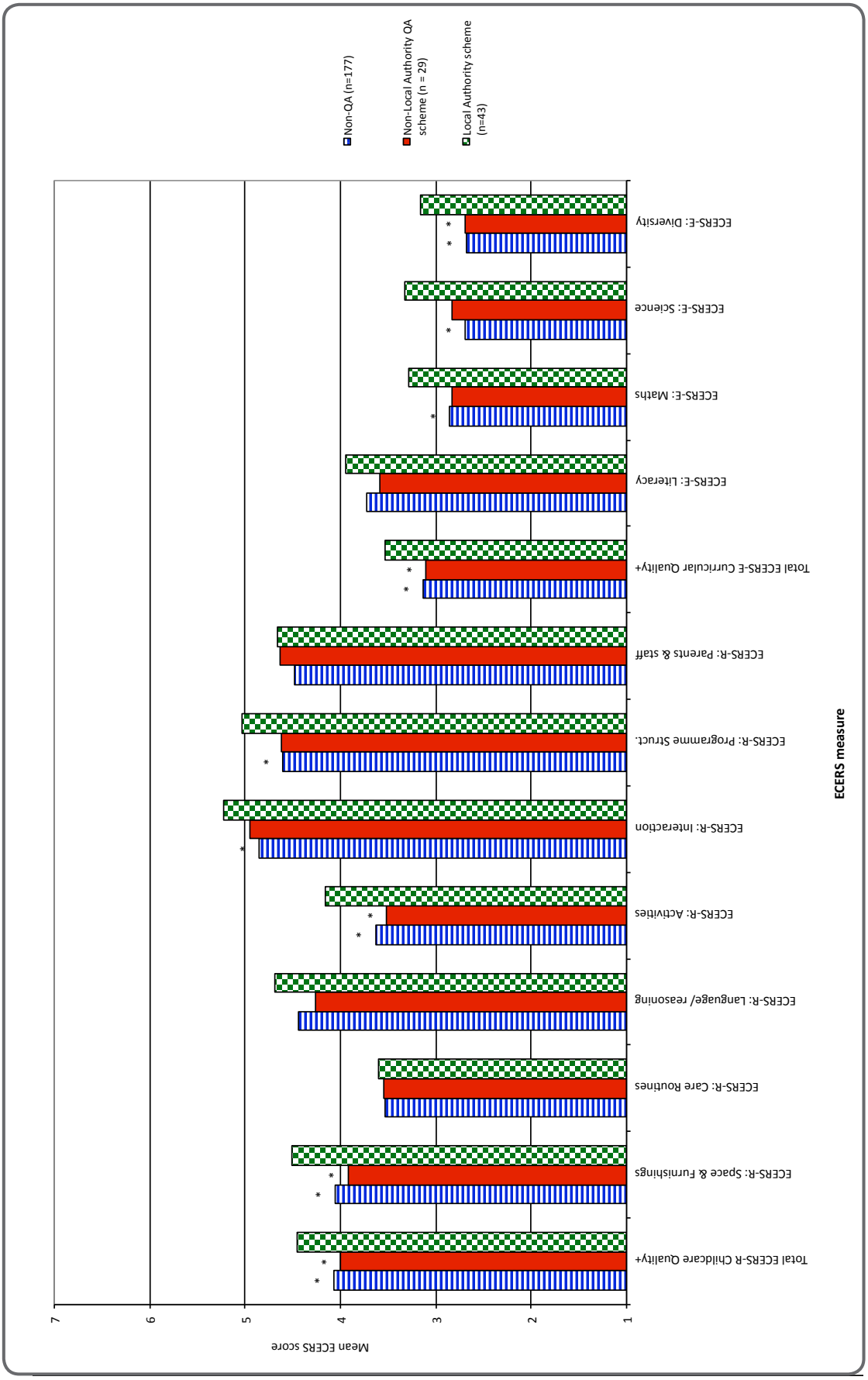
- Leadership and management of the EYFS
- The capacity of the provision to maintained continuous improvement
- The effectiveness of self-evaluation
- The effectiveness with which the setting meets children's needs
- The extent to which children achieve and enjoy their learning
- The extent to which children develop skills for the future

Settings that participated in a recognised quality assurance scheme were therefore considered by Ofsted to be led and managed more successfully, to have greater capacity to maintain continuous improvement, to be more effective in their self-evaluation and to meet children's needs more effectively.

Settings taking part in local authority schemes were also graded more highly on two outcome measures: the extent to which children achieve and enjoy their learning, and the extent to which they develop skills for the future.

These are positive findings, indicating that the reflective approach employed by settings participating in recognised schemes (particularly local authority schemes) is recognised by Ofsted and reflected in their inspection reports.

Fig 5.11 Mean ECERS scores for settings participating in a local authority quality assurance scheme, compared with settings taking part in a non-local authority QA scheme and settings not participating in a scheme (statistically significant differences from the local authority QA group marked *)



+ Mean of items in ECERS-R subscales 1 to 6/ Mean of all ECERS-E items

Chapter 6: Overview and Interpretation of Findings

Sandra Mathers (University of Oxford)

This chapter pulls together all aspects of the research to consider three of the most easily accessible and frequently used measures for identifying the quality of centre-based early years settings in England:

- The inspection reports of the regulatory body Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills);
- The Environment Rating Scales (ECERS-R, ECERS-E and ITERS-R); and
- Quality assurance schemes.

The following sections consider each of our research questions in turn:

6.1 How do the different stakeholders (parents, providers and local authorities) perceive quality in early years education and care?

6.2 To what extent do the concepts of quality embodied in the measures considered here align with stakeholder perceptions of quality?

6.3 What are the statistical associations between the grades awarded by Ofsted, scores on the ECERS and ITERS, and participation in quality assurance schemes?

6.4 How effectively do the three approaches considered here support stakeholders in identifying and improving quality?

6.1 How do the different stakeholders perceive quality in early years education and care?

In line with previous research (Campbell-Barr and Wilkinson, 2010) the quality of the staff team was seen as the most important factor in determining quality of provision; parents, providers and local authorities all placed staffing firmly at the centre of their 'concept of quality'. There was consensus among all three stakeholder groups that practitioners need to be able to respond to the social, emotional and developmental needs of the children in their care, for example by providing warm and nurturing relationships, stimulating experiences, and a schedule suited to individual needs. Thus, the stakeholders who took part in this research primarily valued what we might call 'process quality', defined as 'actual experiences that occur in [early years settings] including children's interaction with caregivers and peers and their participation in different activities' (Vandell & Wolfe, 2000). In addition, all three stakeholder groups recognised the importance of engaging with parents, and involving them as partners in their children's learning.

In contrast to the more 'dynamic' process quality, structural aspects of provision include 'the more stable aspects of the environment in which care are produced' (Munton et al,1995:14). These include factors such as adult child ratios, staff training, space and materials. In terms of physical space and resources, stakeholders agreed that what practitioners 'did' with the environment was more important than the

environment itself. However in relation to other structural aspects, differences between the three stakeholder groups were more evident, tending to vary according to their specific priorities, roles and knowledge. This is supported by previous research, for example Harrist et al (2007) suggests that, while parents may ask "what is good for my child", providers want to know "what allows me to succeed in my role as a provider". Providers and local authority staff were more likely than parents to mention training and qualifications. They also placed a stronger emphasis on the importance of leadership and management, stating that without self-reflective managers leading quality improvement 'from the top' it would be difficult for settings to achieve high quality. Both these groups are more likely than parents to have direct knowledge of the role a manager plays in leading a setting. Local authority staff also mentioned inclusion more explicitly than other groups; unsurprising given that one aspect of their role is to ensure that providers support children with additional needs in accessing their provision, and meet their needs appropriately. Thus providers and local authorities, with their deeper understanding of the aspects which lead to high quality provision, were more likely to mention these aspects.

It should not be assumed that parents do not value these factors at all; or at least that they would not value them were they to have access to additional knowledge. For example, parents were clear that they wanted staff to have a good understanding of child development in order to help their children progress and be aware of possible developmental delays, even though they may not have mentioned the qualifications likely to lead to such theoretical knowledge. Similarly, where parents had direct experience of specific issues relating to inclusion, for example as parents of disabled children, they valued inclusive practice highly.

A further difference was seen in the fact that parents were more likely than providers to list structural aspects such as health, safety and supervision as essential components of quality. It is hard to believe that providers and local authorities do not consider these factors to be important. A possible explanation may lie in differing understandings of the term 'quality'. Perhaps providers and local authorities saw health and safety issues as being so fundamental that they need not be mentioned during a focus group on 'quality'; their understanding of the word quality may exclude aspects they consider to be so basic.

Our findings indicate that, in some cases, stakeholders differed less in their concepts of quality than in the ways in which these were articulated. This was particularly evident in the use of the word 'education'. Providers were more likely to use this term, along with other sector-specific terms such as 'the balance between adult-directed and child-initiated learning'. While parents also showed a good understanding of the need for a combination of child and adult-led approaches, and valued many other aspects of early years education, they did not necessarily recognise it as such. Rather, they viewed 'education' as something that happened in school. Thus, even where stakeholder groups were not always speaking the same language, their concepts of quality were similar.

These findings have several implications for our consideration of quality measures, the first being that they must effectively capture process quality, since this was valued most highly by all stakeholders. Process quality is important because of the widely held view that it is these interactions which impact most on children's outcomes (LoCasale-Crouch et al, 2007; Pianta, 1999). However, it is complex and time-consuming to assess, as it can only be captured through observation of practice. Structural indicators such as qualification levels and ratios are easier to assess, but important only in that they affect process quality (e.g. Mathers et al, 2011). Our findings suggest that, to meet the needs of all stakeholders, quality measures should include an assessment of the structural 'basics' but also capture the more complex aspects of process quality, as well as broader setting-level dimensions such as leadership and self evaluation, which are not in themselves 'process quality' but which providers and local authorities reported as having an impact on the quality of practice.

The second implication lies in the fact that parents valued similar aspects to providers and local authority staff (i.e. those with expertise in early years), indicating that they had a good understanding of 'quality' and its different dimensions. However, the fact that these understandings were often articulated in different ways suggests that continued efforts

to improve communication between parents and 'experts', would be beneficial. The findings also indicate a need for quality measures to be understandable to all stakeholders, so that differing interpretations and 'languages' do not form a barrier to choice or to communication.

This does not mean that all measures should necessarily be accessible to all stakeholders; the fact that parents, providers and local authority staff did also report different priorities indicates that they may sometimes have different needs for information about quality (which may need to be met using different tools).

6.2 To what extent do the concepts of quality embodied in the measures considered here align with stakeholder perceptions of quality?

The three approaches considered as part of this study (Ofsted inspections, ECERS/ITERS and quality assurance schemes) are set out in detail in Chapter 2, and vary in scope and content according to their different purposes. Ofsted inspections are a broad regulatory tool, while ECERS/ITERS are designed to provide a detailed profile of quality. Both ECERS/ITERS and quality assurance schemes are used to support self-evaluation, but quality assurance tends to involve a continuous, reflective and portfolio-based approach, while ECERS and ITERS provide a systematic means of observing quality at a specific point in time (which can then be used to prompt reflection).

Our review of the scope and content of these three approaches focused primarily on Ofsted reports and on the ECERS/ITERS scales, since quality assurance measures vary so widely, but we consider the quality assurance approach where possible. Stakeholders were also asked for their views on these different measures, and on how well they aligned with their own perceptions of quality. This knowledge is important to establish how well each tool can meet the needs of stakeholders, to support their role in driving up quality.

In terms of scope and content, we identified a large degree of overlap between Ofsted inspections and the ECERS/ITERS tools[54]. Both consider the extent to which settings provide for children's social, emotional and cognitive needs, and therefore align strongly with the stakeholder perceptions of quality reported in this study. Both show a strong recognition that high quality staffing and practice are essential components of quality. Both strongly reflect the themes and commitments of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)[55] and consider, for example, whether settings provide warm and nurturing relationships, offer stimulating, varied and developmentally appropriate activities, meet individual needs, and support interactions among children. Both Ofsted and ECERS/ITERS also cover 'structural' aspects of provision such as the quality of the physical environment and resourcing, and the extent to which providers meet basic welfare requirements such as health, safety and supervision.

The key differences between the two approaches, and the ways in which they align with stakeholder perceptions of quality, relate largely to their differing purposes. Our review suggests that neither tool completely fulfils all the requirements set out by stakeholders for identifying quality; rather, the two tools used together provide a more comprehensive picture (i.e. they are complementary). For example:

- The ECERS and ITERS have a more explicit focus on the observation of 'process quality', which was valued highly by all stakeholder groups. The majority of time during an ECERS/ITERS assessment is spent observing, with a strong focus on the quality of interactions between staff and children. In contrast, Ofsted inspectors are required to assess many different setting-level aspects during their visit and are therefore less able to spend time directly observing practice. This was reflected in the view of providers that the ECERS and ITERS were able to capture the quality of staffing, and of actual practice 'on the day', more effectively than an Ofsted inspection.

54. A summary table comparing ECERS and ITERS with the most current Ofsted inspection framework is shown in the Technical Report (karemaker et al, 2012)

55. A 'mapping of the ECERS to the EYFS Themes and Commitments can be found here: http://www.ecersuk.org/11.html

- In contrast, the broader focus of Ofsted encompasses setting-level dimensions not covered by ECERS/ITERS, such as the quality of leadership and management, the effectiveness of self-evaluation and the level of commitment to continuous quality improvement, all of which were identified by local authority staff and providers as important dimensions of quality.

- Parents said it was important that provision helped their children to achieve 'key milestones'. Ofsted has an explicit focus on children's outcomes, grading settings on outcomes for children in the EYFS (e.g. 'the extent to which children achieve and enjoy their learning'). In contrast, ECERS and ITERS focus on the extent to which settings provide effectively for children, assessing key aspects shown by research to lead to improved child outcomes.

- ECERS and ITERS are used worldwide, and focus on universal quality concepts rather than the specific standards set out by any one country. In contrast, Ofsted has a more explicit focus on the extent to which providers meet the requirements of the English early years curriculum (EYFS). For example, all stakeholder groups said that the 'key person' approach embodied within the EYFS was an important aspect of quality. ECERS and ITERS consider some key components of the key person approach, such as the relationships between staff and children, the extent to which routines are individualised, and whether information about children is passed between parents and providers. However, since they are not UK-specific, they do not directly evaluate the 'key person approach' as Ofsted might. Similarly, while Ofsted assesses whether a setting meets the English legal requirements for minimum qualification levels, ECERS and ITERS take a more universal approach to assessing staff professional development opportunities.

- The systematic nature of the ECERS and ITERS were seen as beneficial as they were clear and transparent. However, the more inflexible nature of this systematic approach meant that ECERS/ITERS could not always take account of a setting's constraints. In contrast, providers felt that the outcome of the Ofsted inspection could sometimes vary depending on the inspector, but liked the more flexible approach to gathering evidence.

In summary, all stakeholders groups were clear that regulatory Ofsted inspections could not adequately capture the depth of information needed to gain a full understanding of how a setting works, and to make a detailed assessment of the aspects of quality they valued (particularly complex elements such as staff and child interactions). For example, local authority staff cited cases where the Ofsted grade awarded for a setting had not corresponded with their own assessments built up through regular visits over time. These are interesting findings, supported by previous research (Campbell-Barr and Wilkinson, 2010) and prompting reflection on the extent to which it is possible for a brief inspectorial visit to capture quality. The purpose of Ofsted is to fulfil a broad regulatory purpose, and it is clearly necessary to assess the 'basics' and ensure that children's welfare requirements are met. However, our findings indicate the need to supplement this regulatory process with additional measures of quality to provide a broader and deeper picture.

An important overall theme was limitation of any single evaluation at one time-point to provide a rich and complete picture of quality. This was the case both for Ofsted, and for ECERS and ITERS, when they were used as an external audit tool. In addition to the limited picture gained by taking only one 'snapshot', local authority staff also highlighted the tendency of providers to perform on the day, and the risk that articulate managers would be able to 'sell themselves' to achieve better grades for their setting, despite not being of higher quality. Both local

authority staff and providers agreed that truly capturing the quality of a setting required regular observations, getting to know a setting over time and consultation with professionals who know the setting well (e.g. local authority advisers).

A number of these features were evident in the quality assurance schemes being used by providers in the focus groups. While we were not able to carry out a full review of all schemes within the scope of this research, local authority staff and providers using quality assurance schemes were positive about their scope, saying that they enabled them to look at their everyday practices but also to gain a good sense of how well their teams worked, and whether they needed training or support. Quality assurance schemes generally work on a more continuous basis, in contrast to the snapshot provided by Ofsted or an external ECERS/ITERS audit. Several of the providers also used the ECERS and ITERS tools in this more self-evaluative way, to positive benefit. A full picture of quality is therefore provided by using multiple tools, with different perspectives.

6.3 What are the associations between the grades awarded by Ofsted, scores on the ECERS and ITERS and participation in quality assurance schemes?

The quantitative element of the study considered the statistical relationships between the three different approaches (Ofsted, ECERS/ITERS and quality assurance). The analysis was based on a large sample of over 1,000 private and voluntary settings for which we held a 'childcare on non-domestic premises' Ofsted inspection report, and which had also been assessed using either the ECERS or the ITERS. One cannot assume that ECERS and ITERS are perfect tools which capture all the important elements of quality. However, they have been shown through many research studies to be associated with children's outcomes; that is, children who attend settings which score higher on ECERS or ITERS do better than children who attend lower quality settings (e.g. Burchinal et al, 1996; Sylva et al, 2010). The primary aim was therefore to explore the alignment between the regulatory assessments completed by Ofsted and scores on the ITERS-R, ECERS-R and E quality measures.

The majority of associations between ECERS and Ofsted were stronger for inspections carried out following the introduction of the EYFS framework in September 2008, than for pre-EYFS inspections. This may reflect an increased focus within current inspections, built around the EYFS framework, on the provision of an 'enabling learning environment' for children. Pre-EYFS inspections reports assessed compliance with the more basic National Standards (DfES, 2003). The remainder of the analysis focused on the EYFS inspection framework.

6.3.1 Associations between ECERS/ITERS and Ofsted for EYFS inspection reports

We identified a broad alignment between the overall grade awarded by Ofsted at the setting level and quality of provision for pre-school children (aged 30 months to 5 years), as measured by the ECERS-R and E. Correlations were statistically significantly but small, suggesting that to some extent the measures assess the same quality constructs. Analysis of the ways in which the two approaches categorise settings as high or low quality also indicated a broad alignment, particularly at the higher end of the quality spectrum. Settings graded as 'outstanding' by Ofsted tended to achieve significantly higher ECERS scores than those graded as 'good'; which in turn achieved higher ECERS scores than settings graded as 'satisfactory' by Ofsted. Similarly, settings graded highly on the ECERS-R or E tended to be graded more highly by Ofsted. Overall therefore, these two approaches are 'pulling in the same direction' and broadly supportive of each other.

However, there was also a significant degree of non-overlap between the two measures. On a scale of 0 (no association) to 1 (perfect association), the statistical correlations between the two were generally between 0.22 and 0.33. This supports previous research in identifying significant but small associations between ECERS and Ofsted assessments (Hopkin et al, 2010). It also supports the qualitative findings in suggesting that, while ECERS and Ofsted to some extent measure the same dimensions, they are largely assessing different constructs. Given the differences in scope and purpose, it is not surprising that the Ofsted grades awarded for the 'overall effectiveness of the setting' do not align perfectly with the ECERS assessment for that setting. As we saw in Section 6.2, ECERS has an explicit focus on assessing the quality of practice experienced by the children, while the Ofsted 'overall effectiveness grade' is a broad regulatory measure which includes assessments of many different dimensions, including leadership and management and child outcomes. The most important implication is that the overall Ofsted grade should not necessarily be relied upon as a full and accurate measure of the quality of practice.

The second stage of our analysis therefore considered the different sub-grades awarded by Ofsted for these different aspects, to explore whether the individual sub-grades captured more fully the quality likely to be experienced by children in a particular setting. One might expect the grades awarded for the quality of practice to show a stronger association with ECERS quality scores than those awarded for other aspects (e.g. the effectiveness of leadership and management). In fact, the sub-grades assessing the quality of the children's environment (e.g. provision quality) were only marginally more associated with ECERS scores than the 'overall effectiveness' grade or than the other sub-grades, and in many cases not at all.

The fact that the most easily available measures of quality (i.e. Ofsted grades) do not necessarily assess the same dimensions of quality as the research-validated ECERS is important to note. It does not mean that Ofsted is not fulfilling its regulatory purpose or, as stated earlier, that ECERS is an ideal measure. However it does suggest that Ofsted grades, even those awarded for 'provision quality', do not fully reflect all aspects of quality (clearly mirroring the qualitative findings). The Ofsted framework is not designed as a fine-grained quality measure and should not be relied upon as such.

This is illustrated in a slightly different way by exploring the ways in which Ofsted and ECERS categorise settings as high or as low quality. While there was reasonable agreement for higher quality settings, there was less agreement at the lower end of the quality continuum. For example, settings graded as inadequate by Ofsted did not necessarily receive the lowest ECERS-R or E scores. This is likely to relate to regulatory purpose of Ofsted's 'inadequate' grading. Whereas a low ECERS score is achieved by scoring poorly across many different items, an inadequate judgement can be awarded by Ofsted because a key aspect of provision has not been met (e.g. one relating to the legal requirements of the EYFS). An otherwise 'good' quality setting can be graded as inadequate because it has not complied with an aspect of the regulations. This lends weight to the suggestion that different approaches to quality assessment are important; a low ECERS grade and a low Ofsted grade mean different things and can provide different and useful information about a setting.

Finally, we must consider the ways in which Ofsted and ECERS/ITERS assess quality for different age groups of children. While Ofsted assesses at the 'whole setting' level, ECERS and ITERS provide separate assessments of quality for the different age ranges. So far we have considered the relationships between Ofsted and ECERS scores, relating to provision for pre-school children aged 30 months to 5 years, where we identified statistically significant but small associations. However, for EYFS inspections, there were no statistically significant associations between Ofsted grades and quality for infants and toddlers as measured by the ITERS-R. This is an important finding, suggesting that a setting graded as good or outstanding by Ofsted would not necessarily be rated as providing good quality for children under 30 months by the ITERS-R scale. In fact, settings graded as outstanding by Ofsted often achieved the lowest scores on the ITERS-R. It is possible that inspectors are more skilled at

assessing provision for older children, or that they spend less time assessing provision for babies and toddlers. Although this analysis cannot establish beyond doubt what the reasons are, our findings do suggest that the extent to which quality for children under 30 months (and particularly for those under 2 years) is effectively evaluated via inspections, and reflected in Ofsted reports, should be considered. This conclusion is supported by the qualitative findings; some local authority staff reported that settings may provide lower quality for younger children, and were concerned that Ofsted does not always capture quality for this age range, highlighting the implications of this for identifying settings to provide free early education places for two year olds.

In summary, our findings suggest that Ofsted grades should not be relied upon as a complete indicator of quality, particularly for children under 30 months; Ofsted grades are associated with quality but cannot guarantee it.

6.3.2 Variation between Ofsted sub-grades

Following the methodology of Hopkin et al (2010), we explored the variation in grades awarded for different sub-headings within Ofsted reports. The results were striking: 45 per cent of EYFS Ofsted reports in our sample had the same grade for all sub-judgements; a further 26 per cent had only one or two grades different to the majority. This suggests that the different grades awarded by Ofsted may not provide useful information about a setting's varying strengths and weaknesses. It may therefore be useful to consider the extent to which the Ofsted grade descriptors enable and encourage variation between grades awarded. Interestingly, the text within Ofsted reports do often provide information about a setting's strengths and possible areas for development, suggesting both that the body of the report can provide useful information for practitioners, but also that inspectors are in fact observing these differences. This lends weight to the idea that it may be grade descriptors themselves which are restricting the variation in grades.

6.3.3 Associations between quality assurance schemes, Ofsted grades and ECERS-R/E assessments

Both providers and local authority staff were very positive about the use of quality assurance schemes. In support of these findings, the quantitative analysis of a sub-sample of our settings showed that providers participating in a scheme achieved significantly higher ECERS-R and E scores than settings which did not. The findings suggest that these differences were primarily related to settings taking part in quality assurance schemes led by local authorities. Settings taking part in these schemes were rated more highly than non-quality assured settings on overall childcare and curricular quality (ECERS-R and ECERS-E total scores), and on a number of specific dimensions of quality, including the quality of the physical environment and resourcing, the quality of interactions between adults and children, and the extent to which they provided a developmentally appropriate schedule, met children's individual needs and supported learning in specific areas. The identified differences were not large. However, this does suggest that settings which participated in a quality assurance scheme were more skilled at providing an appropriate and challenging learning environment.

The fact that local authority schemes showed a stronger relationship with ECERS-R and E quality than others may be due to the support that accompanies them. Both providers and local authority staff in the focus groups highlighted the importance of contact with professionals who know the setting well, and have worked with the setting over a period of time. It is not possible to establish whether settings take part in a quality assurance scheme because they are of higher quality, or whether the participation itself leads to higher quality. However, the findings do indicate that participation provides an additional and useful indicator of a setting's quality. This is particularly relevant since parents are more likely to have access to information about quality assurance awards than about ECERS and ITERS; they therefore provide another measure by

which parents can gain confidence in a setting. In fact, providers in the focus groups did state that quality assurance 'plaques' were an effective means of communicating to parents that they were committed to quality.

Settings that participated in a quality assurance scheme were also considered by Ofsted to be led and managed more successfully, to have greater capacity to maintain continuous improvement, and to be more effective in their self-evaluation (i.e. they received significantly higher grades on these dimensions in their Ofsted reports). This may indicate that the reflective approach employed by settings participating in a recognised quality assurance scheme is recognised by Ofsted and reflected in their inspection reports.

6.4 How effectively do the three approaches considered here support stakeholders in identifying and improving quality?

6.4.1 Parents

As users and purchasers of childcare, parents play an important role in driving up quality. When choosing a provider, parents in our focus groups said that they first considered practical considerations such as cost, location and opening hours. However, where they had a choice of settings which met their practical needs, parents were clear that quality was the primary driver in their decision. Most would only select a provider after making a visit; and the instinctive impressions gained during this visit formed the basis for their decision. The range of quality criteria parents reported using when initially choosing a setting was narrower than their current understanding of quality (reported in Section 6.1), suggesting that their awareness of different aspects may have broadened through experience. The parents themselves confirmed this, saying that although they were happy with their current settings, they wished they had 'known then what they know now' when making their initial choice. This may indicate a need for parents choosing childcare to have access to guidance on which dimensions of quality to consider when visiting settings.

Although our study showed that parents were aware of many of the same aspects of quality as 'experts', previous research (Cryer et al, 2001) tells us that parents have a tendency to overestimate the level of quality provided. Parents therefore need help, not only in knowing which aspects of quality to consider, but also in assessing them. If parents are to make informed decisions about choosing high quality care, they need accurate and accessible information to support their choice. The 'expert' information available to parents on the quality of settings is relatively limited (NAO, 2012), with Ofsted inspection reports often providing the only available measure. Although word of mouth and their own visits to settings were more important, the majority of parents did say that they were aware of Ofsted reports.

Of those parents who used Ofsted reports as part of their decision making process, most did so in order to identify settings which did not fulfil the basic requirements (i.e. if they had alternatives, they would not visit a setting with a low grade). Some said that they found the reports valuable as a reference, for example to identify what settings were required to do by law. However, the overriding message from parents was that Ofsted reports did not provide all the information they needed to make a decision about a setting, or include all the key aspects of quality they valued (e.g. adult-child interactions). Given that the text of an Ofsted report does generally cover these aspects, and that parents were positive about the coverage of the EYFS (on which the Ofsted evaluation schedules are based), this suggests the issue may lie in the accessibility of information.

The first point to note is a misperception around the information Ofsted provides. Many parents viewed Ofsted as being concerned with 'education', which they did not feel was of importance to them; again indicating that parents did not fully understand the term 'education' as it relates to early years. If Ofsted reports are to be considered as a means of

informing parents, some work may be needed to help them understand the role and scope of Ofsted, and to recognise that reports do contain information of value to them. The second issue relates to the transparency of information within the reports themselves; parents reported difficulties in finding and in understanding the information they wanted. For example, while many were positive about the Record of Inspection Judgements (which provides a summary of all the grades awarded) they found it difficult to identify the information in the text which related to each judgement. Parents had a number of suggestions about how to make the reports more parent-friendly, including clearer directions or hyperlinks in the 'summary judgements' table pointing to further detail in the main report; explanations of key terms; and a summary of parent views. Parents' reported use of the Inspection Judgements table indicates the importance of these sub-grades in providing a 'gateway', helping parents to decide whether they need to look any further into the report. However if, as the quantitative analysis suggests, these sub-grades do not reflect strengths and weaknesses as clearly as the text within Ofsted reports, parents may be making decisions on the basis of restricted information. This further highlights the need for a review of the Ofsted sub-grades.

6.4.2 Providers and local authorities

Turning now to quality improvement at setting level, responsibility for developing practice rests largely with the providers themselves, with local authority support and guidance[56]. Local authorities also play a role through commissioning, in identifying and funding high quality settings to provide early education places for three and four year olds, and now for disadvantaged two year olds. In order to drive improvement, providers and local authorities therefore need effective tools to help them evaluate and develop quality. Providers and local authority staff were asked for their views on Ofsted, on the ECERS and ITERS, and on any other quality improvement tools which they used. As a regulatory body, Ofsted assesses the provision offered by settings, but does not have a direct responsibility for quality improvement. However, the Ofsted process was considered here for its role in encouraging providers to improve to achieve a higher grade, in providing information to help settings and local authorities evaluate quality, and in identifying broad areas which require improvements.

Focusing initially on the Ofsted process, providers and local authority groups acknowledged that being due an inspection[57], or being awarded a poor grade, could drive settings to make improvements and to engage with the local authority for support. However, the relatively long Ofsted inspection cycle of three to four years was seen as a limiting factor, resulting in long periods without the motivating effect of being inspected and/or potentially receiving a new grade. Both providers and local authorities felt strongly that quality improvement efforts needed to be ongoing and regular; and that infrequent regulatory visits did not provide the continual encouragement needed. The other limiting factor noted by local authority staff was the tendency for providers to view Ofsted as the gold standard, with settings achieving a good or outstanding grade often feeling that they had no further improvements to make. This notion of being 'untouchable' following a grading by Ofsted has been identified in previous research (Campbell Barr & Wilkinson, 2010). It was viewed as a particular problem where the Ofsted grades awarded were higher than local authorities' own perception of the setting's quality. In these cases, while local authority staff felt that more improvement was needed, the settings were more reluctant to engage having been 'sanctioned' by Ofsted. Given the conclusions of the quantitative analysis that Ofsted does not capture all elements of quality (as measured by the ECERS and ITERS), this again indicates the need for the Ofsted judgement to be viewed as a single piece of the quality jigsaw, rather than the whole picture. If the grades are the driver for settings, then this also highlights the importance of the quantitative findings relating to

56. Central government also plays a role, for example in setting the policy context for early years provision. However, since central government is not one of the stakeholder groups considered here, this dimension is not covered in our report.

57. Inspections are unannounced, so the date is not known. 'Being due' an inspection in this case was interpreted as having gone for several years without an inspection.

the 'uniformity' of the sub-grades awarded; the fact that they do not tend to vary may limit their potential for encouraging improvement.

It is clear that regulation alone cannot provide a complete means of identifying quality, or of driving improvement. Local authorities who used a range of indicators to determine funding and to support quality improvement said that this encouraged providers to use a wider variety of schemes, rather than focusing solely on the Ofsted grade. Tools included the ECERS and ITERS, local authority quality assurance schemes, systems for rating the level of support needed by settings, adviser's own impressions based on visits and observations, national materials such as the Early Years Quality Improvement Support Programme (EYQISP), and levers relating to allocation of funding (e.g. providing funding only for settings engaging in a particular process, or with well qualified staff).

In terms of the measures considered as part of this study, local authorities were generally positive about the use of ECERS and ITERS as a tool to identify quality, both for the purpose of directing funding and support according to need, and as a tool for supporting providers in quality improvement[58]. Providers found the scales to be transparent and helpful in identifying areas which could be improved, and felt that they provided a richer picture of practice than Ofsted inspections. However, when used for external audit both providers and local authority staff noted that ECERS and ITERS could be subject to the same disadvantages as Ofsted, providing a view of quality at a single time-point, and with providers tempted to 'perform' on the day rather than being reflective and planning long-term improvements. The importance of a continuous commitment to quality improvement was a consistent theme within the focus groups, as was the value of self-evaluation. Both providers and local authority staff viewed a setting's ownership of the quality improvement process to be essential. Providers in particular were more positive about the use of ECERS and ITERS as self-evaluation tools, rather than as external audit tools. It seems that external tools such as Ofsted, and ECERS/ITERS when used for audit, are needed to provide local authorities (and also parents) with an external view on which to base decisions around childcare choice or commissioning. However, other perspectives are needed to broaden the view; and to truly encourage improvement, providers should be involved in the quality improvement process. In addition to using the ECERS/ITERS, the Ofsted Self Evaluation Form (SEF) and a range of other tools, providers were also very positive about the use of quality assurance schemes, which gave them ownership of the process, and encouraged self-reflection on an ongoing basis. The quantitative analysis provides further support for the use of quality assurance schemes, showing that settings that participated, particularly in a local authority scheme, achieved higher ECERS scores and were graded more highly on certain aspects by Ofsted.

The final point relates to the support provided for quality improvement. An interesting theme within both local authority and provider focus groups was the desire for Ofsted to provide more detail and guidance on areas for improvement, and to play a more supportive role. This is interesting given that Ofsted's role is regulatory rather than to actively support quality improvement. It may be possible for Ofsted reports to provide more detail on specific areas for development than they currently do. However, it is not currently the role of Ofsted to provide active support for improvement. This indicates that some providers want more support than they are currently getting; a very relevant observation in the light of cuts to local authority budgets. It also indicates that providers may benefit from additional clarity in understanding the purpose and approaches of the different tools available to them, including the role of Ofsted. Some misconceptions around the ECERS and ITERS were also noted, for example providers may need support in understanding that ECERS represents an 'ideal' model rather than something on which perfect scores can be achieved.

58. It should be noted that a good proportion of local authorities were part of the national ECERS Network

Chapter 7: Conclusions and Recommendations

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7.1 Conclusions

To conclude, we return to our three 'desired characteristics' of quality measures to ask whether the measures explored as part of the study ….

…capture a definition of quality which is recognised by all stakeholders?

To meet the needs of all stakeholders, quality measures need to capture the more complex elements of 'process quality' (e.g. interactions between staff and children) as well as the structural characteristics (e.g. ratios and qualifications) which underpin them. They also need to reflect over-arching aspects such as leadership and management, and the extent to which settings are committed to quality improvement. No single measure reflected all the aspects of quality valued by stakeholders, with each of the tools assessed as part of this research meeting different needs according to their purpose. Thus, a broad range of tools is needed to reflect multiple perspectives. As well as considering the range of dimensions assessed, stakeholders also highlighted the importance of capturing a rich and deep view of quality. In order to achieve this, external tools, particularly those completed at a single time-point, may need to be supplemented with measures which reflect practice over time, drawing on the views of professionals who know the setting well (e.g. local authority advisers).

…capture elements which are predictive of positive outcomes for children?

As discussed in Chapter 6, one cannot assume that ECERS and ITERS are perfect tools which capture all the important elements of quality. However, they have been shown through many research studies to be associated with children's outcomes; that is, children who attend settings which score higher on ECERS or ITERS do better than children who attend lower quality settings (e.g. Burchinal et al, 1996; Sylva et al, 2010). In contrast, a study by Hopkin et al (2010) found that Ofsted scores for early years settings did not predict children's later outcomes. Given this, the findings of the quantitative analysis that Ofsted grades do not necessarily capture the same dimensions of quality as the ECERS and ITERS are important. The fact that a setting has been awarded a high grade by Ofsted does not guarantee that children are experiencing high quality provision (as assessed by the ECERS and ITERS), particularly for children under the age of 30 months. This does not mean that Ofsted is not fulfilling its regulatory purpose; ECERS and Ofsted are different tools, intended to do different things. However, it does show that Ofsted grades, even those awarded for 'provision quality', do not provide a full picture of the quality of settings. Ofsted grades should not necessarily be relied upon as a complete and accurate measure of the quality of practice.

The third approach considered as part of our research was the use of quality assurance schemes, with settings participating in a scheme achieving higher ECERS scores and Ofsted grades than those not undertaking quality assurance. It is not possible to establish whether settings take part in a quality assurance scheme because they are of higher quality, or whether the participation itself leads to higher quality. However, the findings do indicate that participation provides an additional and useful indicator of a setting's quality.

…are useable by, and accessible to, all stakeholders for quality improvement?

Regulation plays a role in ensuring certain standards are met, and in providing public accountability and an external assessment on which to base decisions around commissioning (for local authorities) and childcare choice (for parents). In fact, Ofsted reports are often the

only external measure accessible to parents to support their childcare choices (NAO, 2012). Although reports do contain information on the aspects of quality valued by parents in our study, the parents themselves often did not recognise this. Therefore, if parents are to make effective use of Ofsted reports to select high quality provision for their children, they will need support in understanding the role of Ofsted (i.e., in recognising that reports do hold information of value to them), and the reports themselves need to be made more transparent and clearer to parents. The quantitative findings also indicate a need for the different sub-grades awarded within Ofsted reports to provide more meaningful information to allow parents, providers and local authorities to discriminate between aspects of high and low quality. This is important because, although the reports themselves provide detail on strengths and weaknesses of provision, parents reported using the grades as the 'gateway' to Ofsted reports, helping them to decide whether they should look further; and local authorities reported that the grades were one of the prime motivators for settings in responding to their inspection.

In addition to enhancing the useability of the information provided by Ofsted, our findings strongly indicate a need to supplement the regulatory process with additional measures to provide a broader and deeper picture of quality, and warn against over-reliance on what is by nature a relatively blunt instrument. Our research reflects the limitations on the extent to which a regulatory system, with infrequent inspections and limited capacity for detailed feedback and support, can provide all the information needed by different stakeholders, inspire settings to improve quality, or meet their needs for quality improvement.

Providers and local authority staff reported using a range of other tools to inform commissioning decisions, direct funding and support and guide quality improvement. If the picture of quality provided through regulation is by necessity a narrow one, then as well as using supplementary tools, it may also be necessary to reduce the perceived importance of the Ofsted grade as the 'primary measure' among providers. This is relevant because of the tendency reported by local authority staff for providers awarded a 'good' or 'outstanding' grade by Ofsted to feel they have no need for further improvement.

Given that parents do not currently have access to other measures to help them identify high quality providers, our research also prompts reflection as to whether this should be addressed. The focus group findings suggest that parents both want and need additional support, especially when choosing a setting for the first time. Local authorities might therefore consider whether aspects of the information they hold on settings could be shared with parents. However, our research also shows that different stakeholder groups, although similar in their concepts of quality, also had different priorities and understandings. It may not be appropriate for all information to be shared with parents. For example, some of it may be commercially sensitive and may therefore jeopardise the relationship between local authorities and providers if released. In addition, some information (e.g. ECERS or ITERS score-sheets) may not always be easily understood by parents. However, we do believe that local authorities could consider whether aspects of the information they hold on settings could be shared with parents, for example engagement in quality assurance schemes, or other indicators used to determine funding.

Finally, the focus group findings highlight the need for providers to be guided in their quality improvement efforts, and emphasise the importance of supportive partnerships between local authorities and providers. It may be that one of the reasons that settings taking part in local authority quality assurance schemes scored more highly on the ECERS-R and E than settings taking part in other schemes lies in the support which accompanies them. The fact that providers also expressed a desire for more guidance is particularly pertinent, in light of the fact that many local authority respondents felt funding cuts were already having an impact on their ability to provide ongoing support.

7.2 Recommendations for policy and practice

This final section draws the findings of the research together to make specific recommendations in relation to current policy developments.

In relation to local authorities and providers, we suggest:

- That decisions around quality, particularly those relating to funding and commissioning, are made using a broad range of quality indicators. We would caution against decisions being made on the basis of Ofsted grades alone. The recent government consultation on the statutory guidance for the delivery of early education for two, three and four year olds (DfE 2011) suggests that, for settings graded as 'satisfactory' by Ofsted, local authorities should use a range of quality criteria to assess whether providers should be eligible for funding. We would endorse this approach but suggest that decisions for all providers (including those graded as good or outstanding by Ofsted) should be made using information supplementary to the Ofsted grade.

- That, where possible, decisions around quality should encompass assessments made over time rather than on the basis of a single 'snapshot'. The knowledge of professionals who have supported settings over time can make an important contribution to assessing and improving quality, but this needs to be balanced against the need for commissioning decisions and quality measures to be transparent to both providers and parents.

- That local authorities are supported by central government in their use of additional quality measures and tools, through adequate funding and relevant policy/ statutory guidance. Measures might include quality assurance (particularly local authority schemes), ECERS and ITERS, and the wide range of other measures currently used to supplement regulatory assessments.

- That providers are supported by local authorities and provider representative bodies in using a broad range of quality improvement tools to supplement regulatory Ofsted inspections. Alongside this, efforts are required to ensure providers understand that Ofsted grades do not give a full and complete picture of quality.

- That, when designing and implementing quality improvement tools and support programmes, local authorities try to ensure that providers feel ownership of the process.

In relation to supporting parents in choosing high quality childcare, we suggest:

- That parents are provided with additional guidance to help them to understand key aspects of early years practice, support them in knowing what to look for when visiting settings, and understand the role and remit of Ofsted. One of the key outputs of this study will be a practical guide for parents on how to identify high quality childcare. Other guidance might be provided by Ofsted itself, or by local authorities through their Family Information Service.

- That, if Ofsted reports are to provide a means of guiding parental choice, Ofsted should review the language and structure of reports to assess how they could be made more transparent and accessible to parents.

- That efforts are made to ensure parents have access to other means of identifying high quality providers. Based on the findings of this study, we endorse the suggestions by the National Audit Office (NAO, 2012), and the recent government consultation on the statutory guidance for the delivery of early education, that some of the information on quality held by local authorities should be made more transparent to parents. However this should be balanced against considerations of the sensitivity of information, and how easily understood that information is likely to be for 'non-experts'. Appropriate indicators might include, for example, whether providers participate in quality assurance or other improvement schemes. Local authorities will also need to identify appropriate channels for providing this information, for example through their Family Information Service.

We also recommend:

- That Ofsted considers the extent to which quality for children under 30 months is effectively evaluated via inspections, and reflected in Ofsted reports. Alongside this, we recommend use of tools by providers and local authorities which consider the quality provided for different age ranges of children.

- That Ofsted reviews the way in which information on provider strengths and weaknesses is provided via their reports. If sub-grades are used, we recommend these are reviewed to ensure that they discriminate effectively between strengths and weaknesses. If sub-grades are not used, we recommend that this information is provided in other ways. Whatever the means, we support the need for reports to offer a quick-access overview of the quality provided.

Further research, particularly into the following areas:

- How best to capture and improve the quality of provision offered to children under the age of three years, particularly in light of the expansion of funded places for disadvantaged two year olds.

- The most effective means of making Ofsted and other quality information accessible and transparent to parents.

- The role played by local authorities in supporting quality improvement.

Other reports which may be of interest:

Mathers, S., Singler, R. and Karemaker, A. (2012b) Improving Quality in the Early Years: A Comparison of Perspectives and Measures: Full Research Brief

Karemaker, A., Singler, R. and Mathers, S. (2012) Improving Quality in the Early Years: A Comparison of Perspectives and Measures: Technical Report

Mathers, S. and Karemaker, A. (2012) Improving Quality in the Early Years: A Comparison of Perspectives and Measures: Quantitative Research Brief

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Appendices

Appendix A:
Environment Rating Scales Overview of Subscales And Items

Overview of the subscales and items of the ITERS-R
(Harms, Cryer & Clifford, 2003)

Space and Furnishings

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

Personal Care Routines

- Greeting/departing
- Meals/snacks
- Nap
- Diapering/toileting
- Health practices
- Safety practices

Listening and Talking

- Helping children understand language
- Helping children use language
- Using books

Activities

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

Interaction

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

Program Structure

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

Parents and Staff

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

Overview of the subscales and items of the ECERS-R (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2005)

Space and Furnishings

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

Personal Care Routines

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

Language-Reasoning

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

Activities

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

Interaction

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

Program Structure

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

Parents and Staff

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

Overview of the subscales and items of the ECERS-E (Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart, 2011)

Literacy

- Print in the environment
- Book and literacy areas
- Adult reading with the children
- Sounds in words
- Emergent writing/mark making
- Talking and listening

Mathematics

- Counting and the application of counting
- Reading and representing simple numbers
- Mathematical activities: shape
- Mathematical activities: sorting, matching and comparing

Science and Environment

- Natural materials
- Areas featuring science/science materials
- Science activities: science processes: non-living
- Science activities: science processes: living processes
- Science activities: science processes: food preparation.

Diversity

- Planning for individual learning needs
- Gender equality and awareness
- Race equality and awareness

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