Ready, steady, learn: school readiness and children's voices in English early childhood settings

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Abstract

Abstract

Internationally, school readiness is increasingly the rationale for early childhood education and care. This is the case in England, yet the statutory English Early Years Foundation Stage framework for children 0-5 years also requires practitioners to listen to children's voices: discourse indicates dissonance between school readiness and listening to children's voices so this paper discusses an intrinsic case study that investigated beliefs and practices of 25 practitioners in the English midlands regarding school readiness and listening to children's voices. In survey responses and semi-structured interviews, practitioners indicated they listen to – and act on – children's voices but are confused about school readiness; their beliefs and practices align more strongly with social pedagogy than pre-primary schoolification. Findings carry messages for policymakers regarding the need for coherent policy concerning the purpose of early childhood education and care, with practitioner training and a framework aligned fully with that policy. A larger study is indicated.

Key words
School readiness, Children's voices, Early childhood education and care, Pre-primary approach, Social pedagogy.

Introduction
This paper focuses on two features of statutory curriculum currently experienced by 99% of children in England prior to entering primary school (Whitaker 2015): school readiness and listening to children's voices. To an increasing degree, school readiness is the rationale for early childhood education and care (ECEC) internationally (Moss 2013; United Nations (UN) 2015). However, practitioners in government funded English early childhood settings must assure that children aged 0-5 years achieve the government's pre-determined goals to 'ensure they are ready for school' (Department for Education (DfE) 2014a, 7), whilst also providing for 'the needs and interests of each individual child' (DfE 2014a, 5) and giving children 'opportunities… to develop their confidence and skills in expressing themselves' (DfE 2014a, 8). In short, the *Statutory Framework for the English Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) (DfE 2014a, 5) is characterised by dissonance concerning requirements for 'school readiness' on the one hand and children's own interests and needs and communication of these – their 'voices' – on the other. In the EYFS, each child is regarded as a 'unique child' who develops and learns 'in different ways and at different rates' from other children (DfE 2014a, 6), yet all children are expected to attain one set of goals. This paper examines these tensions in the light of a small scale intrinsic case study for which the aim was to investigate practitioners' beliefs and practices regarding school readiness and children's voices in early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision in an English county. Evidence is drawn from the case study to argue that revisions to the EYFS (DfE 2014a) may be needed to secure early childhood provision in English settings that is coherent in purpose and practice.

The study captured practitioners' perspectives concerning their everyday lived experiences in 25 settings. Whilst findings highlight multiple ways that practitioners said they recognise and accommodate children's voices in their settings, they also indicate confusion amongst practitioners about what 'school readiness' means. Their confusion may be symptomatic of the dissonance in the EYFS, alongside the wider issue that the United Kingdom's 1991 ratification of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (OHCHR 1989) has not been fully realised in England (Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) 2014). English government admits that UNCRC is not incorporated into English law yet has stated a commitment to paying 'due regard' to UNCRC and encourages schools to do so (DfE, 2014b). While a school readiness process may contribute to securing the 'right of the child to education' (Article 28), it may prove counter-productive if it is coercive or inappropriate to a child's needs. Article 12 requires that children who are 'capable of forming their views' be assured 'the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' (OHCHR, 1989). With regard to UNCRC Article 12, English government has produced statutory guidance to give students opportunities to be '…consulted on matters affecting them or contribute to decision-making in the school' (DfE 2014b, 1), yet this guidance does not include increasing numbers of children outside maintained community schools in England (DfE, 2015). The UNCRC asserts that children should be recognised 'as social actors from the beginning of life' (OHCHR 2005, 2), so are capable of forming their views: those views should be accorded 'weight', regardless of age.

School readiness and children's voices: A review of the literature
School readiness
International policymakers have become progressively interested in ECEC, largely due to evidence of investment return (Heckman and Masterov 2007). Contemporaneously, focus on 'school readiness' has gained traction, characterised by 'schoolification' (Arnold, Bartlett, Gownai and Merali 2007; OECD 2006) with emphasis on cognitive skills alongside pre-determined standards and goals dovetailed into compulsory formal schooling (Kaga, Bennett and Moss 2010; Moss 2013). In ECEC provision, the schoolified 'pre-primary' model and social pedagogic tradition are at opposite ends of a continuum (OECD 2006). Murray (2015) provides definitions of social pedagogy amounting to the nurture of young children's development in a broad sense, as part of a balanced ECEC approach. The social pedagogic model in ECEC values children as '…human beings, not only "human becomings"' (Qvortrup 1994, 8); it is a rights-based approach that adopts educational practices congruent with supporting young children's development, well-being and health, in a wider context of building positive relationships (Kaga *et al*. 2010).

Schoolification has been promoted particularly strongly within neo-liberal ideology: as Wrigley (2014) and Robertson and Hill (2014) note, this is exemplified in various iterations of the English EYFS framework (DCSF 2008; DfE 2012a; 2014a). *Prima facie* the most recent iteration gives primacy to young children's personal, social and emotional development, physical development and communication and language development and requires that provision 'reflects… characteristics of effective teaching and learning' including children's exploration, play, critical thinking, creativity and active learning (DfE 2014a). However, the EYFS goals emphasise imperatives attuned to the pre-primary model. By the end of the EYFS, children at 4-5 years are expected to *'...read and understand simple sentences'* and *'…count reliably with numbers from 1 to 20, place them in order and say which number is one more or one less than a given number'* (DfE 2014a, 9-11). While the

EYFS (DfE 2014a) includes safeguarding and welfare requirements, these are relegated to the end of the document.

Internationally, OECD, European Union and UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2015, 19) state that provision with educational content for children below compulsory school age will 'aim to develop cognitive, physical and socio-emotional skills necessary for participation in school and society'. Equally, early childhood development is framed as school readiness within the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals:

> *'By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education'* (UN 2015).

Schoolification now pervades other areas of young children's lives, including family life (Murray 2015, 4) and outdoor play (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff and Gryfe 2008, 307). School readiness characterised by schoolification, is even beginning to penetrate Nordic countries which have previously cleaved to the social pedagogic model of ECEC alongside success in global educational comparisons (Clausen, 2015; Otterstad and Braathe, 2016; Gunnarsdottir, 2014).

Although policymakers are attracted to early childhood provision as preparation for primary schooling, school readiness narratives are highly contested. Dahlberg and Moss (2005, 24) challenge the 'imperial' position taken by schooling towards ECEC which assumes that young children only learn if they are assimilating 'early literacy, language and numeracy skills': schoolified knowledge. Whitebread and Bingham (2011, 4) propose that the onus should shift from children being readied for schools to schools being readied for children and that schools should accommodate children's 'emotional and cognitive needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness'. Equally, Evans (2016, 72) proposes reframing school readiness as 'potential and possibility', while Lenz Taguchi (2010) argues for an open-ended approach to school readiness, rejecting simplistic goal-centred pedagogic approaches in early childhood in favour of egalitarian models where meanings are co-created through communicative, complex relationships between people, ideas and material objects. These are spaces where children's voices emerge and are valued.

Children's voices
Defining children's voices
In the educational literature the terms 'child voice', 'children's voice', 'children's voices', 'student voice' and 'pupil voice' are not always well defined and are sometimes used interchangeably, though they may not be synonymous. The words 'pupil' or 'student' may position learners as subordinate to teachers (Cruddas 2007): they reveal an assumption that teachers do not learn and students do not teach so position children less powerfully than adults. However, if '...effective pedagogy depends on the learning of all those who support the learning of others' (James and Pollard 2011, 306), the roles of teacher and learner are interwoven (Fielding 2004). This paper is concerned with practitioners' perspectives regarding the positioning of children - 'every human being below the age of eighteen years' (OHCHR 1989), in regard to the juxtaposition of children's agency, views and interests and the school readiness agenda in England (DfE 2014a).

Maybin (2013, 383) proposes that the concept of 'voice' is congruent with 'identity, agency and empowerment' and this view is well supported in the literature (*i.a.* Kellett 2010; Taylor and Robinson 2009). Nevertheless, it cannot be assumed that one collective voice speaks for many individuals (Bakhtin 1963): the term 'children's voices' seems apposite. Children's

voices have been strongly linked to UNCRC participation rights (*i.a.* Whitty and Wisby 2007). Lancaster and Kirby (2014, 92) emphasise that young children's participation is predicated on listening to children '…making decisions about matters that affect them in their daily lives', yet Singer (2014, 381) notes, 'Too often children's voices are not heard or not heeded'. Since authentic power sharing is about valuing learners' views (Fielding 2004), a tokenistic approach is likely to be ineffectual (Whitty and Wisby 2007). For this paper, children's voices are defined as 'views of children that are actively heard and valued as substantive contributions to decisions affecting the children's lives'.

Some historical and policy perspectives on children's voices
The present study was conducted in England, one of four jurisdictions comprising the United Kingdom (UK). England has a long history of suppressing children's views (Mirk c.1405; Booth 2006). It was not until the mid-twentieth century that children's voices began to be taken more seriously in the UK, signalled by a series of publications attributing agency to children (*i.a.* CACE 1967; Meighan 1978; Pollard and Triggs 2000). The 1991 UK ratification of UNCRC (OHCHR 1989) increased policy emphasis on children's voices but in England, children's participation has remained limited (Mayall 2006, 9) and children's voices on matters concerning their education are inhibited currently by English education law and policy (Wrigley 2014; CRAE 2014). Equally, contradictions are evident in policy and practice in England. For example, the English schools' regulator Ofsted (2015, 11) claims that 'Inspectors will use all the available evidence to evaluate what it is like to be a child', yet its ability to do so is constrained by its own judgement criteria relating to standards set by government, developed without consultation with children. Coleyshawe, Whitmarsh, Jopling and Hadfield (2012, 4) also note weaknesses in the capacity of English ECEC practitioners to elicit and respond to young children's voices regarding their educational experiences.

However, the English position is not universal. For example, despite increasing focus in Nordic countries on the pre-primary approach, consulting children about their own education is well established there (Einarsdottir and Wagner 2006). Nordic children have long been regarded as active citizens within an 'ethics of an encounter' (Dahlberg and Moss 2005): a 'meeting place' where adults and children operate together to ensure children actively participate 'in the creation of themselves and their knowledge' (Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi 1994, 2).

School readiness and children's voices in English early childhood settings
This brief review of the literature has considered two prevailing discourses: school readiness and children's voices. Both are highly contested and arguably dissonant. Yet the EYFS requires practitioners in England to ensure children aged 0-5 years achieve a set of centrally determined goals 'to ensure they are ready for school' (DfE 2014a,7), whilst also catering for each child's interests and needs and providing opportunities for children to express themselves. The present study investigated practitioners' beliefs and practices regarding school readiness and children's voices in ECEC provision in the English midlands.

Methodological discussion
Study context and participants
The English midlands county where the study was conducted has a population of around 700,000 (Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2012), with 320 early childhood settings and 250 primary schools in rural, suburban and urban locations. In England, children must start school in the term after their fifth birthday but most join reception classes in schools at the start of the school year (September) in which they reach their fifth birthday, so most children

are four when they enter reception classes which make provision according to the EYFS (DfE 2014a). In England, around 94% of three-year-olds and 99% of four-year-olds currently attend ECEC settings, including reception classes (Whitaker 2015, 1). English ECEC has long been characterised by the diversity of its settings (Early Childhood Forum 2003, 7) and schools in England are now experiencing increasing diversity with academies and free schools replacing many maintained community schools (Wilkins 2015, 1144). Just over 10% (n=60) of the study county's EYFS settings were invited to participate in the study with a balance of urban, suburban and rural locations and a range of inspection outcomes 1-3 from national regulator Ofsted which makes judgements according to four criteria: 1 (Outstanding), 2 (Good), 3 (Requires Improvement) and 4 (Inadequate). Settings judged 'Inadequate' were not approached for the study; whilst a limitation, this was an ethical step to avoid overburdening them.

25 practitioners from 25 of the 60 selected settings (42%) participated in the academic year 2014-15: 20 practitioners from settings for children aged 0-5 years and five primary school teachers working with children aged 4-5 years. Participating practitioners were qualified variably across European Qualifications Framework Levels 2-7 (Table 1).

Table 1 – about here

Participants indicated that they had varied experience in early childhood and different levels of responsibility, ranging from nursery assistants to setting leaders.

The 24% of participating graduates with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) had demonstrated competence according to Teachers' Standards for England (DfE 2012b) or equivalent, designed to secure academic attainment of students aged 3-18 years: a 'schoolified' approach. Some other participants (28%) had a degree in early years and some held Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) or equivalent, which had required them to demonstrate competence according to Teachers' Standards (Early Years) (DfE 2013) for working with children aged 0-5 years; the Teachers' Standards (Early Years) focus on children's care, welfare and learning, aligning with a social pedagogic approach. In maintained community schools in England, practitioners must have QTS to teach children from the term after their fifth birthday, but practitioners who work with children aged 0-5 years are not required to have QTS or EYTS.

Selected methodology
The research question was: 'What are practitioners' beliefs and practices concerning both school readiness and the voices of the children in the context of their everyday lived experiences in twenty-five English settings?' Because the study focused on beliefs and practices, a qualitative approach was adopted (Olafson, Grandy and Owens 2015). Yin (2011, 9) posits that this type of research lends credibility because it elicits participants' 'real life' views and experiences rather than relying on the researcher's own values and presumptions of their situations. The methodology was intrinsic case study because the research focused on gaining deep understanding of a singular extant phenomenon (Creswell 2013, 98): practitioners' beliefs and practices regarding the statutory requirements of school readiness and children's voices in early childhood settings in an English county.

Research instruments
Two research instruments were developed: a questionnaire focused on participants' beliefs and attitudes followed by a semi-structured interview schedule based on questionnaire responses. Triangulating the methods secured rigour (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). The questionnaire captured qualitative data concerning beliefs and practices of practitioners across a limited, but relatively large geographic area (Bulmer 2004). It contained predominantly open-ended questions to minimise researcher bias that can result from limiting the range of responses (Reja, Manfreda, Hlebec and Vehovar 2003, 159). Questions focused on the research aim and question, so were concerned with school readiness and children's voices. Following a pilot, the questionnaire was disseminated to the 25 participants. Questionnaire respondents indicated whether they would also participate in semi-structured interviews to explore their questionnaire answers further: the interview schedule was drawn from survey data. Five participants (20%) agreed to interviews and following their own interviews, each was invited to verify the transcript.

Ethical considerations
The study was conducted according to British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2011) guidelines, alongside ethical protocols required by the university where the study was based. Ahead of the study, voluntary informed consent was obtained from the study county's local authority; early years' practitioners were then invited to participate and were provided with information about the study and its ethical conduct before giving voluntary informed consent. Assurances were given and honoured regarding anonymity, confidentiality of data and participants' rights to withdraw during data collection.

Analysis
The study's analysis was inductive: themes were elicited from responses, refined through the identification of common factors and meanings were compared (Marvasti 2004; Silverman 2006). It was possible to quantify the frequency of themes in the questionnaire data for comparison. The 25 survey respondents comprised EYs graduates (n=7), QTS graduates (n=6) and non-graduates, EQF levels 2-5 (n=12). The five interview participants comprised:

Table 2 – about here

Study findings
School readiness data
25 practitioners responded to survey questions that addressed three sets of themes: (i) skills, knowledge and attitudes they thought children should have prior to school entry, (ii) activities in the learning environment that practitioners considered important for school readiness and (iii) the influences practitioners thought affected their own views about young children's school readiness (Table 3). Five practitioners provided in-depth interview data regarding similar school readiness issues because the interview schedules were based on survey data.

Table 3 – about here

(i) School Readiness: Skills, Knowledge and Attitudes practitioners believe children need prior to school entry

Practitioners identified eight sets of skills, knowledge and attitudes they considered valuable for a child prior to school entry (Table 3). Selected examples of practitioners' interview responses are discussed below.

In regard to **social skills**, practitioners suggested that before children transition to school, they need '*...knowledge of how to get on with others*' (I2) and thought that '*Personal Social and Emotional Development (PSED) plays a huge part*' in what children need prior to school entry (I4). There was little allusion to **self-care** in interviews though a QTS graduate noted that '*toileting skills are really important, washing hands*' (I3). Practitioners thought that children need to be able to **manage their own behaviour** prior to school entry and suggested that this should include '*…some boundaries*' (I2) and '*...accepting responsibility with small tasks such as tidying up and being responsible for setting up snack* (I4). One practitioner focused on what her nursery children needed now, rather than school preparation: '*... when they're in nursery, we try to teach them ways they need to be acting in nurseries*' (I5). Practitioners talked about how they equipped children for **reading** prior to school entry: '*...we start to work towards… knowledge… things like, you know… sounds and some letters that are significant to them*' (I2). Most practitioners – though not the QTS graduate - also talked about ways they recognised and supported children's **well-being** as a factor in school preparation: '*...equipping them with the tools that they need to feel strong and capable... and valued, definitely.* (I2).

(ii) School Readiness: Activities participants considered important in the learning environment

In the survey, practitioners identified seven fairly diverse activities in the learning environment that they regarded as significant for children's school readiness (Table 3). For each aspect, fewer than half the practitioners agreed, indicating lack of consensus regarding what activities in the learning environment help children to be school ready. Selected examples of practitioners' interview responses relating to this section are discussed below.

One practitioner observed that children should '*...have ownership of their activities*' (I4), but practitioners tended to equate activities that encourage **independence** with self-care, rather than cognitive skills, for example, '*... they know…to wash their hands, and get their snack out themselves independently*' (I1). Practitioners generally aligned **writing** with children's individual developmental readiness, rather than school readiness: '*...if they don't want to sit down and write their name, that's completely fine, they don't have to, but if...they want to, they can*' (I1). Some practitioners specified pre-writing activities for school readiness: '*...developing the control, the gross motor, fine motor, is much more important than actually having the ability to form your own name on a piece of paper, but all incorrectly*' (I3). One practitioner noted: '*...I don't think that we should need to sit children down and write because they are starting school in six months*' (I5). Practitioners said they provided **counting** activities: '*...nursery rhymes and songs and the child usually can organise numbers in their heads from songs*' (I3). One practitioner explicitly linked number recognition and school readiness: '*...most of the children here...know their numbers, so when they get to school, they've got...a head start*' (I1).

Practitioners offered few examples of provision to help children **manage their own behaviour** before starting school. Apart from allusion to 'boundaries' (I2), only one practitioner provided a tangible example, focused on overcoming fear: *'We get the child to meet...different animals, because if you don't come into contact with animals you might have a fear of them.'* (I3). Some practitioners were positive about **school preparation activities**: *'...we start to work towards this is what will be expected of them...we're not equipping them well if we don't let them have a practice'* (I2). However, not all practitioners agreed: *'I just don't feel it's right that a child should be told they need to be school ready, in a sense of they need to meet with certain goals once they do start school'* (I5). Practitioners specified activities they provided for school preparation: *'queuing'* (I2), *'recognizing their own name, holding a pencil, knowing numbers'* (I1) and *'colour recognition'* (I3). One had found that schools often disregarded the potential value of the first teacher visiting children at nursery before entering school: *'... we had six different schools that children were going to: I phoned them all and had two come to visit.'* (I4).

(iii) School Readiness: Influences on practitioners' definitions
Practitioners identified eight influences on how they defined school readiness, but there was little consensus (Table 3). Only one influence – schools – was identified by more than 50% of the practitioners. Interviewees did not discuss schools, practitioners' own experiences, CPD, school managers or children, but for other influences, selected examples of practitioners' interview responses are discussed below.

Just one practitioner alluded to **Ofsted** as an influence on defining school readiness: *'There was once a ten-point tick list of being able to write your name and go to the toilet and everything but to me that's not school readiness'* (I4). Although only 12% of practitioners overall said **parents' voices** influenced the way they defined school readiness, interview responses lacked consensus. One practitioner noted *'Parents expect quite a lot. They, their expectations are not necessarily the expectations that school expect or even what we do'* (I3), whereas another said: *'...my own personal opinion comes a lot from parents and what they feel is best...for their child'* (I5). Two practitioners said their influences came from organisations other than schools: *'I have no input from the local schools their version of school interaction with settings has been a brief visit in the summer term'* (I5) and *'We do get the...Under 5s magazine. There isn't a great deal out there for school readiness'* (I3).

Children's voices data
25 practitioners responded to questions in the survey about children's voices. Survey questions concerning children's voices focused on (iv) ways that practitioners thought children's voices were heard, listened to and (v) acted on in their settings, (vi) ways that practitioners thought children influenced aspects of the learning environment and (vii) ways that the practitioners thought they involved children in decisions that affect them (Table 4). Five practitioners provided in-depth interview data regarding similar issues concerning children's voices.

Table 4 – about here

(iv) Children's voices: How are children's voices heard in settings?

Practitioners identified four themes concerning how children's voices are heard in their settings (Table 4). No practitioners linked parents' voices with children's voices in settings. Selected examples of practitioners' interview responses concerning other themes are discussed below.

When discussing **interactions**, one practitioner identified that '*Everything springs from…relationships'* (I2) while another explained how this worked in practice: *'The children here are able to, they're not worried about us, so they are able to come up to any adult and talk to us'* (I3). Practitioners emphasised more strongly in interviews than in the survey children's **individual choices** as a way children communicate their views in settings. For example: '*They have water or milk and they pick their own… they'll pick the certain toys that they like… (children have) their own opinion in what they enjoy doing and like'* (I1). One practitioner noted that she and her colleagues '*…skilfully know what children like by…what they're not saying as well as what they are saying*' (I2). Only one practitioner discussed **documentation** in her interview: '*We're recording (what children want to do) and then we're putting it on the planning and it's being followed through, through next steps'* (I5).

(v) Children's voices: How are children's voices acted upon in settings?
Practitioners identified six themes concerned with how children's voices are acted upon in their settings (Table 4). No interviewees discussed staff training or parents' voices in conjunction with how children's voices are acted on in settings. Selected examples of practitioners' interview responses concerning other themes are discussed below.

Only one interviewee alluded to **documentation**: '*…when children tell us things, we write stickers and they're put in the child's profile or special book as we like to call it'* (I3). The same practitioner was the only one who referred to **children's progress** when asked how children's voices are acted upon in the setting: '*…there are sort of levels of achievement'* (I3), while just one other practitioner addressed **children's choices** as a way children's voices are acted upon in her setting: she said that activities and planning emerge 'from the child…they all have their own say in the sorts of things that they want to do' (I2) . However, all but one of the practitioners discussed **well-being and involvement** as ways children's voices are acted on in their settings. For example, '*I always think we do have to be a bit careful that it's not teaching children, you know, in ways that is not exciting or motivating for them* (I2).

(vi) Children's voices: How do children influence aspects of the learning environment?
Seven themes were identified by practitioners concerning ways children influence aspects of the learning environment (Table 4). No interviewees alluded to toilet training. Selected examples of practitioners' interview responses concerning other themes are discussed below.

In interviews, practitioners tended to link **children's choices** and practitioners' **flexibility** as ways that children's voices influence aspects of the setting learning environment: '*…we do actually ask (children) what they would like to do or how they want an activity to develop'* (I4) and '*…if we don't put anything out what they like doing, they'll pick the certain toys that they like'* (I1). In interviews, practitioners also alluded to **fixed routines** as ways children's voices influence the setting learning environment: *'...if we usually get ready for snack they know… to wash their hands'* (I1). However, practitioners indicated that **parents' voices** sometimes counteract children's voices from influencing aspects of the learning environment: *'...parents often will come in and see things from a slightly different perspective from the child'* (I3).

(vii) Children's voices: How do practitioners involve children in decisions that affect them?
Practitioners identified five themes about ways they had involved children in decisions affecting them (Table 4); selected examples of interview responses concerning these are discussed here.

Practitioners indicated that they involve children in decisions affecting them through the **key person** relationship: '*Every child has a key worker and the child forms a bond with that key worker*' (I3); '*…the key relationships are vital, to know your children really, really well, so that we get their voice by watching them and knowing them*' (I2). Practitioners also said they include **children's choices** as a mechanism to involve children in decisions that affect them: '*…they (the children) all have their own say in the sorts of things that they want to do*' (I5). Practitioners suggested that **transition processes** may not involve children in decisions that affect them and this can be detrimental to children's experiences of starting school: '*...when we had children leave us, one school come and visit us for a chat ...none of the others would come*' (I5): '*...it takes the poor mites at least half a term to settle in when they don't know where they are going – or who to!*' (I4). One practitioner observed that school teachers tend to have little or no discussion with nursery children and their practitioners before children start school: '*...they have got a superior attitude and are just not prepared to spend any meaningful time on helping children through transition*' into school (I4). Conversely, practitioners exemplified **democratic discussions** children had with them that enabled children to be involved in decisions affecting them: '*...we ask the children what they've learnt to play with that week, so they've got their own opinion on what they enjoy doing and like*' (I1).

Key messages
Messages from the school readiness data
Data indicate that practitioners are confused about school readiness. Data themes traverse both social pedagogic and pre-primary approaches: social skills, well-being, parents, self-care and children's management of their own behaviour align with the social pedagogic model (Kaga *et al*. 2010), whereas reading, numeracy, writing, and school preparation activities are congruent with the pre-primary approach (OECD 2006). Yet within the themes, anomalies disrupt the social pedagogic/pre-primary dichotomy. For example, practitioners prioritised self-care in the survey but made little allusion to children's self-care in interviews. In regard to managing behaviour, practitioners thought children needed boundaries to prepare for school, yet also thought nursery children's management of their own behaviour should focus on '*ways they need to be acting in nurseries*' (I5). Equally, though 40% of practitioners thought that providing activities to support children's management of their own behaviour is beneficial for school preparation, 60% identified that children's management of their own behaviour impacted positively on school readiness, suggesting that 20% of practitioners expect children to know how to manage their own behaviour before starting school without help to learn how (Murray and Garner 2015).

Overall, in terms of school readiness, practitioners valued children's e*xperiences* of counting activities (44%) more than children's *acquisition* of numeracy skills (32%), indicating that some practitioners prioritise processes over outcomes (Lenz Taguchi 2010). Although just over half the surveyed practitioners identified reading as a school readiness skill, they seemed ambivalent about it in interviews. Only one identified specific reading skills her setting gave children before starting school. Equally, most practitioners saw writing as an issue of individual children's developmental readiness. However, although literacy is not a 'prime'

area of learning and development in the EYFS (DfE 2014a, 7), 67% of QTS graduates surveyed had high regard for writing skills as a factor for school readiness. While just over a third of practitioners valued specific school preparation activities, one argued strongly against: *'I just don't feel it's right that a child should be told they need to be school ready'* (I5).

Practitioners indicated that there was little to support them to understand how to help children prepare for school. QTS graduates were more focused on pre-primary aspects and less focused on social pedagogic qualities than other practitioners: whilst this group thought writing salient for school preparation, group members did not value children's well-being. Equally, while 12% of practitioners said **children** influenced how they defined school readiness, no interviewees expanded on this point, providing little evidence of practitioners including children's voices in how they defined school readiness. This indicates that practitioners do not equate the school readiness agenda with children's choices, voices or decision-making (Kaga et al. 2010; Lenz Taguchi 2010; Evans 2016, 72).

Messages from the children's voices data

Participating practitioners had greater clarity regarding children's voices than they had regarding school readiness. Survey results indicated themes that align predominantly with social pedagogy: interactions, voices, people, discussions, children's choices and documentation as ways practitioners ensure children's voices are acted on in settings and the key person involving children in decision making. This disputes work from Coleyshawe *et al.* (2012, 4) suggesting English early childhood practitioners have poor capacity for eliciting and responding to young children's voices.

Practitioners' responses concerning children's voices reveal they believe they engage in an 'ethics of encounter' with their children, valuing them as active citizens in their settings (Dahlberg and Moss 2005). Evidence for this is located in their focus on relationships. Practitioners indicated they facilitate 'meeting places' with children (Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi 1994, 2) by combining children's choices with documentation, recording what children want to do *'on the planning and it's being followed through, through next steps'* (I5). When preferences and decisions emerge *'from the child'* (I2) and practitioners account for these preferences and decisions to inform children's new activities, this is authentic power sharing (Fielding 2004). However, practitioners indicated that documentation was sometimes used only to record what children said and was not taken further: this is tokenistic and unlikely to result in genuine participation (Whitty and Wisby 2007).

Practitioners' focus on **children's choices** was a way they involved children in voicing their decisions, aligning with UNCRC Articles 12 and 13 (UHCHR 1989) and securing children's 'identity, agency and empowerment' (Maybin 2013, 83). Practitioners also linked **children's choices** to their own **flexibility** as ways that children's voices influence aspects of the learning environment in settings: '…*we do actually ask (children) what they would like to do or how they want an activity to develop'* (I4).

This open-ended egalitarian approach accounts for children's voices and rejects a reductionist goal-centred pedagogic approach to allow meanings to be co-created (Lenz Taguchi 2010). It is a space for 'potential and possibility' (Evans 2016, 72). Moreover, practitioners' indications that the key person involves children in decisions is another way they strive to co-create meanings with children through communicative, complex relationships between people, ideas and material objects (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). A further example of practitioners'

egalitarian approaches with children was **democratic discussion** enabling children to be involved in in decisions that affect them (Lancaster and Kirby 2014; Lenz Taguchi 2010).

Practitioners' identification of **well-being and involvement** as vehicles for ensuring children's voices are acted on in settings revealed practitioners' allegiance to an assessment model which gives primacy to young children's interests (Laevers 2000). A practitioner's observation that '*...we do have to be a bit careful that it's not teaching children...in ways that is not exciting or motivating for them*' (I2) exemplifies rejection of a requirement to ready children for school (DfE 2014a) in favour of valuing children's agenda, accommodating children's '…emotional and cognitive needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Whitebread and Bingham 2011, 4).

Most responses relating to children's voices revealed practitioners' allegiance to a social pedagogic model. However, they were challenged by some external influences. One practitioner framed **children's progress** in terms of EYFS goals (DfE 2104a): '*...there are sort of levels of achievement*' (I3). Practitioners also indicated that **parents' voices** sometimes counteract children's voices in influencing aspects of the learning environment, exemplifying Singer's point (2014, 381) that '…Too often children's voices are not heard or not heeded'. Equally, practitioners highlighted that **transition processes** failing to involve children in decision-making are detrimental to children's successful transitions into school (I4; I5). One practitioner's observation that school teachers refused to engage with nursery children before children started school, betraying a '*superior attitude',* accords with Dahlberg and Moss' description of the 'imperial' position taken by schooling towards ECEC (2005, 24).

Conclusion

This study investigated practitioners' beliefs and practices concerning school readiness and children's voices in the EYFS in an English midlands county. Findings indicate that practitioners have clearer understanding about children's voices in early childhood settings than they do about school readiness. Overall, they provided evidence that they are committed to their children's views being actively heard and valued as substantive contributions to decisions affecting the children in their settings (OHCHR 1989).

However, practitioners seemed confused about school readiness. Their evidence reveals a landscape where social pedagogic and pre-primary approaches are dissonant. This mirrors the EYFS *Statutory Framework* (DfE 2014a, 6) for which each 'unique child' develops and learns 'in different ways and at different rates' from other children, yet is expected to attain the same goals as all other children in England; where preparation for formal schooling is a strong narrative, yet children's exploration, play, critical thinking, creativity and active learning are highlighted as effective pedagogy (DfE 2014a).

Where the EYFS recognises young children as unique individuals and provides opportunities for their voices to emerge through pedagogies concerned with exploration, play, critical thinking, creativity and active learning, it is respectful of children's rights in regard to not only education, but also freedom of expression and gives due weight being to their views (OHCHR 1989). However, when early schoolification and pre-primary methods are prioritised, young children's rights to freedom of expression are not honoured or respected and their views are not given due weight (OHCHR 1989). When an agenda that is not the child's is forced on a child, that agenda is anti-democratic.

The study evidence provides useful data for practitioners working in the study settings though its small scale limits potential for generalisability, so a larger scale study is indicated. However, the present study provides a touchstone indicating that the current English ECEC framework (DfE 2014a) lacks coherence regarding its role and purpose, leaving practitioners confused and young children caught within resulting tensions. Findings suggest the need for policymakers to revise England's early childhood framework to provide coherent guidance to practitioners regarding a clear purpose for ECEC. If that purpose is the pre-primary schoolification model, policymakers will need to define 'school readiness' without ambiguity. Conversely, a revised ECEC framework in England may adopt the social pedagogic model. Whichever, findings indicate that all practitioners working with children aged 0-5 years in English ECEC may benefit from training that has universal core content aligned to coherent policy.

The issues raised by this study may also serve as an early warning to other countries considering a move from social pedagogy towards a pre-primary approach. The practitioners who participated in this study work with young children every day and know them well. Their evidence indicates that, notwithstanding their confusion regarding school readiness, their preference is for a model that assumes a democratic stance, respects children's rights and supports young children's development and well-being, in a context of positive relationships. That is a model which subordinates school readiness to children's voices. It is social pedagogy.

7998 words (excluding abstract, key words and author bios)

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