

The Early Years Pupil Premium: practitioners' perspectives on if the funding supports 'closing the gap' for looked after children?

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**The Early Years Pupil Premium: practitioners' perspectives on if the funding supports
'closing the gap' for looked after children?**

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Abstract

The paper investigates practitioners' perspectives on the Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) and its use for looked after children (LAC) in England. The paper considers what practitioners in one Local Authority (LA) think now that the funding has passed its infancy. Specifically, does EYPP funding help 'close the gap' for looked after children?

Q-methodology was used to investigate 19 practitioners' perspectives; all were owners or managers in 19 different settings. This approach was complemented with a questionnaire survey and focus groups held with 14 practitioners in 13 different settings in the same LA.

The findings revealed that practitioners consistently focused on whether all looked after children should be eligible for this funding and/or whether the funding is able to 'close the gap' between them and their peers. It concludes that EYPP funding can support 'closing the gap' for looked after children with developmental delay, but its purpose needs to be clarified.

Keywords: Early Years, Pupil Premium, looked after children, education and practitioners

In England, successive governments have committed to reducing inequality between disadvantaged children and their peers. Mathers and Smees (2014), p.11) state:

...an array of policies have been developed with the single or dual aims of supporting disadvantaged children to catch up with their more affluent peers through access to good quality early education, and supporting poor families to work in order to reduce child poverty.

Policies in England include free early education provision and the Early Years Pupil Premium.

The Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP)

The Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP) was introduced in 2015 as additional funding targeted at disadvantaged 3-4 year-olds before they were eligible for Pupil Premium funding. The funding seeks to provide early intervention in closing the [educational] gap for disadvantaged children through high quality early childhood education (Early Education, 2019a). The government initiative provides eligible children with additional funds to support their education (Gov.uk, 2019a). The funding is £302.10 per annum (53p per hour for each child) and is focused specifically on children who are seen as disadvantaged. In this context that means children from low income families and looked after children (LAC). The focus of EYPP is to provide support for 'closing the gap' alongside established strategies to help children and their families.

Similarities and differences between EYPP and the Pupil Premium

The EYPP was intended to bridge the gap for eligible 3-4 year olds until they are able to claim the Pupil Premium. The Pupil Premium (established since 2010) similarly provides funding for disadvantaged children and aims to raise their educational achievement (West, 2015). In 2019, the rates are £1320 for primary children and £935 for secondary aged pupils. Looked after children are eligible for a higher amount of £2300 per annum (Gov.uk; 2019c). In 2015, press releases focused on how the EYPP would further support the educational attainment of disadvantaged children. Sam Gyimah, Childcare and Education Minister at this time said:

I'm delighted we are helping the most disadvantaged children access high-quality early education, giving them the best possible start in life. The early years pupil

premium gives money to providers so they can make sure eligible children have the best possible outcomes when they start school and beyond. The early years count and it will be life-changing for many of these children.

(Gov.uk, 2019b)

There are, however, clear disparities in the amount of funding from the EYPP for children aged 3-4 years and the amount they will receive when they are entitled to the Pupil Premium. One study conducted by Mathers and colleagues (2016, p. 69) questioned how much the EYPP can close the gap for disadvantaged children given its limited resource. It found that participants did not consider the amount sufficient for looked after children and called for it to match the pupil premium ‘to meet the potential significant needs of looked after children.’ This study wasn’t specifically focused on EYPP funding but included it in its practice recommendations for looked after children.

Since 2015 there has been limited literature that examines the Early Years Pupil Premium. Most of the literature consists of official documents designed to support practitioners and settings to use the funding effectively (Early Education, 2019b). To date, there appears to be only one publicly available project that has explored issues around EYPP funding. *Early Education* carried out a project in 2015-16 that was entitled, ‘Learning Together About Learning’ (LTAL). The project was funded by the Department for Education and its findings supported indications that the EYPP funding did make a difference to children’s outcomes. However, the report evidenced difficulties in identifying eligible children and ‘teething problems’ in the application process.

Whilst practitioners are responsible for using the funding appropriately, Ofsted is responsible for deciding whether the funding is being spent wisely, with ‘maximum impact.’ Early Education (2019b, p.2) stated:

Even if you don’t claim the funding, Ofsted will expect you to demonstrate how you are providing additional support for eligible children – so it makes little sense not to claim the funding that would support that activity

adding:

It's also likely that if EYPP is claimed widely and used effectively, the sector will be better able to argue the case for increasing it to a similar level to schools' pupil premium in future. Whereas, if the sector doesn't use it, it may lose it.

The use of EYPP for looked after children

Berridge (2012, p.31) states "it is recognised that looked after children often have the worst start in life and require, as well as morally deserve, highly compensatory experiences in response". This is reiterated by Mathers and colleagues (2016, p.63) who state:

the research evidence is conclusive on the link between early adversity and poorer outcomes. Looked after children - 60 per cent of whom enter care as result of abuse or neglect in England - are at risk of poorer cognitive, socio-emotional and academic outcomes and almost ten times more likely than their peers to have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan.

The EYPP eligibility criteria automatically entitle all looked after children to receive this fund. This includes children who have been in Local Authority (LA) care for one day or more, those who have left care under special guardianship or residential orders and children adopted in England and Wales (Gov.uk, 2019a).

However, this means that looked after children are eligible for this funding regardless of whether they have any developmental delay. Therefore, some children are likely to be eligible for this funding without having a specific area of need that requires additional funding. Referring generally to the complexity in considering the educational outcomes of looked after children, Goddard (2000, p.80) stated:

The looked after population is a dynamic group and many young people will spend only short periods of time in care in the direct care of the state. For this and for a variety of other reasons (the most important of which is, of course, experience prior to being looked after), the looked after experience itself cannot always be blamed for poor outcomes. This creates a major problem with assessing the educational impact of the experience - we have very little data available on pre-care performance. What we do know is that educational problems are often associated with admission to care in the first instance

The Early Education (2019b, p. 4) project suggested that the EYPP funding could be tailored to the needs of the child, regardless of whether the child had any developmental delay. The report stated that:

the purpose of EYPP funding is to ensure those children who are inexperienced make accelerated progress to close the gap between their progress and that of their less disadvantaged peers. It could also be used to ensure those EYPP children who are currently where they are expected to be in terms of attainment and progress, are enabled to be more experienced in some areas of learning.

It was recommended in the report that practitioners compare the progress of EYPP children with non-EYPP children to make sure that all children who have been identified as being 'inexperienced' or 'not meeting age related expectations' make progress, presumably to ensure that children who are not eligible for EYPP continue to have their developmental needs met (Early Education, 2019b, p.8).

The breadth of ways the funding can be used is vast, including resources for an individual child's development, group resources that support more than one eligible child, parental support, staff training and professional development. Examples in the *Early Education* project included support materials covering topics such as toilet training, enrichment activities, such as a visit to a wildlife park, additional forest school provision, speech and language sessions for parents and a professional library to support staff to refine pedagogical thinking (Early Education, 2019a, p.8).

In 2019, the EYPP is still available with the same application process, eligibility criteria and rates as in 2015. It is vital to find out what practitioners think about this funding now that it is past its infancy. Do practitioners think that EYPP funding help 'close the gap' for looked after children?

The study's methodological design

The present study had two main objectives. First, it sought to investigate the views of practitioners on their general use of EYPP funding for disadvantaged children. Second, it aimed to investigate practitioners' decisions on how this funding is used specifically for

looked after children. This paper focuses on the study's second objective. The research questions associated to this objective were as follows:

- What are practitioner's perspectives on the Early Years Pupil Premium? Can this funding support 'closing the gap' for looked after children?
- How is the Early Years Pupil Premium being used in practice to support looked after children?

The interpretivist focus of the study was on the participants' positions (Basit 2010), acknowledging that these positions and one's actions can alter over time and can be dependent on situational circumstances. Findings can then be compared and contrasted between different periods of time or between different places (Cohen *et al.*, 2011).

Phase one of data collection

To identify shared perspectives, this study used Q-methodology. Q-methodology was deployed because it is a means of gathering quantifiable data from highly subjective viewpoints (Brown, 1997). Q-methodology investigates the complexity in different participant's positions on a given subject where differences of opinion are expected (Combes, *et al.*, 2004). It is a way of thinking about research that focuses on providing subjectivity to participants. In doing so, "it is a useful tool for exploring opinions, perspectives and attitudes, without directly requiring participants to expressly state (or even understand) their overall position on a topic" (Rhoades and Brown, 2019, p.88).

Q-methodology involves participants sorting a set of statements onto a distribution grid, shaped as a reversed pyramid. Participants sort these cards based on whether they agree or disagree with each statement. The distribution went from -4 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). As such, participants are comparing and contrasting the statements – there is no right or wrong response in the card sort (Brown, 1991/1992). The statements derived from discussion with a focus group drawn from the LA's 'good to outstanding' group. The differing perspectives evident in the focus group generated 34 differing statements on EYPP funding and were taken to the same group for respondent validation before being used in the project's main data collection activity. The final statements were also piloted before main

data collection. Example statements include: *the funding is essential to support children's development; all children from low income families need this funding, and; some looked after children miss out because the adoptive parents don't declare their status* (please see Appendix 1 for the full list of statements and factor arrays). Findings based on the participant's general perspectives on the EYPP funding were published as the first paper from this study (see Brown, 2018). This paper focuses on where the participants placed the statements that specifically relate to the use of EYPP funding for looked after children in relation to the other statements in the card sort.

Data collection occurred on one day during the LA's Sector Senior Leadership update meeting for the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) settings. Attendees (who are owners and managers of settings) were asked if they wanted to take part in the project and provided time during this update to be part of the research. Data collection began with a short presentation about the project to all attendees at the PVI update. Attendees were made aware that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could choose to take a break instead of participating in the data collection. Participants signed a written consent form that detailed all relevant research information, prior to their participation in the research. The confidentiality of the participants, settings and LA was detailed in this presentation. This was essential as the study was carried out in one LA. There were approximately 50 attendees at the update, however 24 decided to take part in the study. Thankfully Q is well known for its facility to generate large amounts of quantitative and qualitative material from small numbers of participants (Watts and Stenner, 2005). In fact, it is possible to conduct a Q study on one participant's perspectives on any given subject. Having fewer participants in a Q study means that each individual Q-sort forms a greater proportion of each factor produced and will provide more detail on each individual participant's perspective (Watts and Stenner, 2012).

Q data is analysed collectively to produce consensus viewpoints, which have statistical significance (Brown, 1993). These consensus viewpoints are known as 'factors' in the analysis. Q data is usually analysed using specific factor-analysis software and in this study PQ method was used to input the data and produce the factors. It is possible to analyse the data manually, however this can be a lengthy and error-prone process (Rhoades and Brown, 2019). In this study, the researchers used centroid analysis to extract the factors in PQ method for varimax rotation. This meant that the researchers used the Q software to run the factor analysis process, rather than choosing to extract and/or rotate the factors manually.

The study retained factors that had an eigenvalue (strength of that factor in relation to others) of 1.00 or higher. The data generated three factors that were kept for interpretive analysis and are detailed in this paper.

In total, 20 participants successfully completed the card sort and were included in the analysis. The factors in the study represented 19 of the 20 participants included in the analysis. This is because one of the participant's perspectives did not load on any one factor and therefore did not hold commonalities in their position that were directly associated with the generated groups in these findings. Therefore, the sample represents 19 perspectives from owners/managers of 19 settings in one LA. To enhance the qualitative data at card sort, participants were asked to describe on a report sheet why they had placed statements in the most extreme distribution columns. Findings from the report sheets that related directly to looked after children are included as direct quotes in the factor interpretations detailed in the findings section.

Phase two of the data collection

The research questions for this study endeavoured to discover practitioners' perspectives on the use of EYPP for looked after children and how the funding is used in practice. It was therefore important to also investigate examples of practice. However, in contrast to the first phase of data collection it proved difficult to find participants in 2017-2018 who had experienced using EYPP funding for a looked after child in their setting and who were willing to take part in this phase of data collection.

A questionnaire survey was designed that provided open-ended questions. The questionnaire asked practitioners about their perspectives on EYPP for looked after children and asked them to detail an example where they had used the funding to support a looked after child in their setting. The questionnaire was designed to provide space for practitioners to reflect on their experiences and provide a narrative account similar to how they evidence children's development in their settings. It was not possible to interview participants. However, the use of narrative accounts in the questionnaire was influenced by some of the principles of Narrative Inquiry (Sandelowski, 2007). It was important that open questions were used to "offer the participants the chance to tell their stories, to detail their experiences, and to dwell upon those aspects that they wish to convey to their listener" (Richards, 2019, p.175).

Questionnaires and informed consent forms were sent out by email to all settings in one LA that had a looked after child of age to receive EYPP funding. Additionally, questionnaires were handed in person to practitioners at four of the LA's quarterly owners and managers meetings. Demographic information of the practitioners was not sought at this phase of data collection because the focus was on how the funding had been used by the setting. In total eight questionnaires from practitioners in eight different settings were completed with varying levels of detail included. These questionnaires provided reflections on children who had access to this funding in 2016-2017, 2017-2018 and 2018-2019.

The data was then analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) version of thematic analysis. An inductive approach was taken where coding and theme development was directed by the content of the data. The analysis used Braun and Clarke's six-phase process that includes coding, searching and reviewing themes and defining and naming themes. Whilst analysing this data it became apparent that data from the questionnaires significantly related to data generated from the second focus group in the first phase of data collection. The data from this focus group was consequently analysed alongside the questionnaire data. Therefore, the findings from the second phase of data collection detail the perspectives of 14 practitioners from 13 settings in one LA. Many of these settings were different to the Q-methodology settings and this sample included maintained nurseries. These findings extend key findings raised from using Q-methodology and also consider some of their positions that were not addressed in the Q-sort.

Findings

The Q-methodology findings:

Factor One: 'The EYPP limited funding does not support 'closing the gap' for looked after children. We have to use innovative ways to make the funding work to meet the needs of our children. Not all looked after children need this funding'

The amount of variance accounted for is 35% and its eigenvalue is 6.9225, which is over six times the value needed to be a significant factor. In total, eight practitioners held these

commonalities in their positions. Table 1 represents the practitioners' demographic information.

[Table 1]

Practitioners in this group disagreed that the funding supports 'closing the gap' for looked after children (21; -3). Participant eight stated 'it's too blunt a tool. It's not based on the child.' They agreed that more funding needs to be allocated per child (8; 2). These participants did not think that looked after children miss out on accessing the funding because the adoptive parents don't declare their status (17; 0). They also did not believe that they found it more difficult to decide how to use the funding for looked after children (20; -1). For this group they disagreed that all looked after children need this funding (5; -3). Participant fourteen declared, 'not all children who can claim need the money to improve their outcomes... it is difficult to spend money to 'bridge the gap' that isn't there'. Participant thirteen added 'not all LAC need additional support and often the government dictate on what 'they' think best rather than giving choice to those who know best.'

These participants agreed that they have children who are not eligible for this funding but would benefit from it (30; 3). They would like more autonomy themselves to allocate the funding to children who really need it (4; 3). Participant thirteen said 'if we could choose children who need it and access funding immediately I feel this would benefit the child and setting better.' Similarly, participant fifteen stated, 'we work with the children and know the ones who need the funding.' Instead these participants choose to use the funding for group activities that benefit more than one child (6; 2).

Factor two: 'All funding is good funding, but we do struggle to decide how to use it to meet the needs of all eligible children. The EYPP funding does not 'close the gap' for looked after children.'

The amount of variance accounted for is 6% and its eigenvalue is 1.2481, which is comfortably over the amount needed to be a significant factor. In total, seven participants

held these commonalities in their positions (see Table 2). These participants worked mostly in nurseries; they are mostly managers at these settings and all had over 10 years' experience.

[Table 2]

In contrast to factor one, these participants believe the EYPP funding is essential to support children's development (1; 2) and they generally stated that all funding in the early years is good funding (19; 2). Participant twenty said, 'it is good for the children that need additional support.' However, these participants did declare that they had not been personally responsible for allocating this funding in their setting (26; -3). Participant three said, 'as of yet haven't had a child eligible for this funding'. This may be why they placed some statements about it use in the neutral columns of the distribution grid. These included, being indifferent about whether it is more difficult to decide how to use the funding for looked after children (20; 0).

However, in comparison to factor one (though not as strongly stated) these participants did not believe that the funding 'closes the gap' for looked after children (21; -1). They did not believe that looked after children miss out because the adoptive parents do not declare their status (17; -1). However, they too did not strongly agree that all looked after children need this funding (5; 1). The group agreed that they find it difficult to decide how to use the funding if the child has no developmental delay (33; 3). They appear to not consider using the funding for group activities to benefit more than one child as this statement was placed in the neutral columns of the distribution grid (6; 0). They did however state that they would struggle to know how to use the funding for each individual child (3; -3). Participant nine explained 'I feel that EYPP is great when it is used effectively for a child but if a child doesn't have any areas of developmental delay it can be hard to identify where support is needed.'

In comparison to factor one these participants strongly agreed that they had children who were not eligible for this funding, but would benefit from it (30; 4). Participant five said that it needs '...to be more accessible to all children who need help.' Participant nine added, 'because we feel that we have children who would benefit – however they would miss out due to the criteria.' Again, these participants believe the funding would be better used if they could allocate it to children whom they feel really need it (4; 3). Participant three declared, 'funding should be targeted to meet need rather than automatically being based on

need/looked after status. We have many children who would benefit but don't meet the criteria.'

Factor three: 'The EYPP funding is essential funding that could not be better spent elsewhere. All looked after children do not need this funding, but the funds can be used to provide further interventions and support in settings.'

The amount of variance accounted for is 7% and its eigenvalue is 1.3709, which is over the value needed to be a significant factor. In total four practitioners held these commonalities in their positions. These participants mostly worked in nurseries and were managers, and those who supplied information on their careers had over 12 years' experience.

[Table 3]

In comparison to factor two these practitioners strongly believe that the funding is essential to support children's development (1; 3). Participant sixteen said, 'the EYPP is very useful and allows practitioners to focus upon a child's next steps; funding provides PVI settings with the financial freedom to purchase resources otherwise out of remit.' They agree that all funding in the early years is good funding (19; 2) and strongly state that the funding could not be better spent elsewhere (15; -4).

These participants have children who are not eligible for this funding, but would benefit from it (30; 2). Participant eighteen declared that the funding 'needs to be extended to all children with developmental delays and the eligibility needs to be revised.' They do not agree that all looked after children (5; -2) need this funding. They also held a weak agreement that the funding 'closes the gap' for looked after children (21; 1). However, they do not agree that the funding would be better used if they could allocate it to children whom they feel really need it (4; -1).

These participants do not always know how they will use the funding for each child (3; -1). However, they find no extra difficulty in allocating funding to looked after children (20; -3) or children who have no developmental delay (33; -2). Importantly, they too use the funding for group activities that benefit more than one child (6; 3). Participant sixteen stated, 'with or

without the EYPP, I feel I would know what interventions or support was needed for the children in my care.’

Findings from the questionnaire and focus group:

Looked after children with developmental delay

The EYPP’s use to support the child’s needs

Participant three detailed her thoughts on how the EYPP funding benefits looked after children. She said “looked after children can have a wide range of complex needs, which cannot be met easily in traditional settings with standard resources and training. The premium allows providers the opportunity to access learning opportunities and greater comprehension of a child’s needs; thus equipping them better to meet said needs”.

Three participants in the questionnaire and focus group data felt that EYPP funding benefits individual needs. Participant four stated, “the child’s needs are at the forefront of spending the EYPP”. Equally, participant two said, “it is good to know that the money will be allocated to the child...”. The benefits of extra resources and experiences that specifically support children’s needs were highlighted by participant two and five. However, they both also voiced concerns about how the money is spent and how much money is allocated per child. Participant five stated, “it is useful to buy resources for speech and language, emotional support but you can only buy so much resources”. Participant two also said that the EYPP funding is “...not enough money to support serious behavioural problems where 1:1 or small group supervision is required”.

Examples in practice: additional resources

Five practitioners mentioned the allocations of resources to support the developmental needs of looked after children. However, there were only two practitioners that mentioned what resources were allocated specifically to these children. Participant one described a child who had speech and language difficulties and self-confidence issues. To support the child’s self-confidence issues they organised age-appropriate dance lessons provided for by an outside agency. One of the participants in the focus group also explained that they had a child who was underdeveloped in maths, but he loved construction so they brought him bricks as a resource that would support his and his peer’s development.

Examples in practice: additional training

Five of the practitioners mentioned training staff in their examples of the EYPP's use in practice. Four participants (participant one, two, three and one of the focus group participants) stated that the EYPP fund was used for speech and language training for staff members. Two of these participants said the funding had also been used for Makaton training. Participant three explained that their child could not speak when he/she started at the setting. The child's key worker attended Speech and Language and Makaton training and the child had 1:1 sessions that supported his development. Participant three's example was based on a different need to the other participants. She described a child who had recently been adopted and had a slight delay in Personal Social and Emotional Development (PSED). The setting decided to use the EYPP fund to "...upskill staff to better understand early childhood trauma, attachment and emotions"

All of the practitioners that provided these resources and training examples stated that their children did make progress (albeit for some the progress was minimal) in the targeted developmental areas. The most significant progress was made when the child received the funding for the full three terms. This was detailed by two of the participants. Participant three stated that the child with PSED delay had made 'vast progress' in 'narrowing the gap' between him/her and their peers. She went on to say that the "funding 100% contributed to the setting being able to extend its usual research opportunities, to allow access to non-traditional training [into childhood trauma, attachment and emotions]". Participant four also stated that their child with multiple areas of developmental delay did make progress and they "...saw a marked improvement in behaviour and ability".

Looked after children with no developmental delay

Not all looked after children have developmental delay

Three participants mentioned that looked after children are presumed to have developmental delay. Participant two stated "it is presumed that all children looked after need extra support". Participant four added, "a child who is LAC is not always falling behind in their development. We have had some LAC who have met their age development bands". She added that if a looked after child is falling behind the extra funding is good for them, but it is not always looked after children who need the funding. One of the focus group participant reiterated that some of the looked after children in their setting did not need the funding, however they had other children who did need additional funding to support their development, but were not eligible.

Support beyond the child's development

Three participants mentioned examples of support that went beyond targeting developmental delay. Participant two stated that if the child is not developmentally delayed her setting looks at experiences that would benefit the child. She listed examples that included garden centres, dance classes and PE. One of the focus group participants explained that one of their looked after children suddenly experienced their dad passing away and they brought a persona doll to support the child's bereavement. Furthermore, participant five provided an example of using the fund to support one of their children's interests. She said that this child loved playing in the home corner and making food out of items such as dough and mud. They organised a trip to pizza express and then continued food making activities at their setting.

Discussion

Clarifying why all looked after children are eligible for this funding

Practitioners in both phases of data collection consistently focused on whether all looked after children should be eligible for this funding and/or whether the funding is able to 'close the gap' between them and their peers. In 2015, the EYPP funding was introduced to provide early intervention in closing the gap for 'disadvantaged' children, including looked after children (Early Education, 2019a). There appears to be a presumption in the funding eligibility criteria that all looked after children need to educationally 'catch up' with their peers, which is why practitioners focused on whether eligible children had any form of developmental delay. As Mathers and colleagues (2016, p.63) states, there is research evidence that conclusively links early adversity with poorer educational outcomes. Looked after children "are at risk of poorer cognitive, socio-emotional and academic outcomes and almost ten times more likely than their peers to have a statement of special educational needs or an education, health and care plan". It is inarguable that looked after children are disadvantaged in comparison to their peers and that this persists and worsens over time. This may be why the EYPP eligibility criteria automatically entitle all looked after children (those who have been in LA care for 1 day or more) to receive this fund (Gov.uk, 2019a). However, experiences vary widely for those defined as looked after. This category of children includes those who are in care, under guardianship orders and those adopted. There appears to be a deficit model of looked after children that focuses on a narrow view of children's development and educational outcomes. This generalises the experiences of looked after children and presumes that all looked after children will have some form of developmental

delay and will need to be supported to ‘close the gap’ between them and their peers. In doing so, the broader ways this funding can be used to support eligible children are missed or only considered if there is no form of developmental delay.

Practitioners in the studies Q-methodology data collection presented varying negative positions on the use of EYPP funding for looked after children. In contrast, practitioners who completed the questionnaires and were involved in the focus group had more positive reflections when detailing its use for individual children. Those that detailed examples of its use for children with developmental delay did state that they believed the funding supported the child’s development. This compares to the Early Education (2019b) findings that supported indications that the fund did make a difference to children’s outcomes.

However it is evident in the findings from this study that not all looked after children are developmentally delayed. Practitioners have the responsibility for using the funding appropriately, Ofsted is responsible for deciding whether the funding is being spent wisely, with ‘maximum impact’ (Early Education, 2019b). It is therefore understandable that practitioners are concerned about evidencing how they use the funding for children who are achieving their developmental milestones. How do they evidence that the funding has supported ‘closing the gap’ and improved each child’s educational outcomes?

Does the EYPP funding have a dual purpose?

It would appear from the findings of this study that the EYPP funding does have a dual purpose. The funding is available to support ‘closing the gap’ for looked after children with developmental delay, but it can also be used for additional resources/experiences for those achieving their developmental milestones. It is important to clarify what ‘need’ is being supported with this funding. Berridge (2012, p.31) states looked after children deserve “highly compensatory experiences”, but as Goddard (2000, p.80) explained the looked after population is a dynamic group who have had a variety of life experiences. Is it that all looked after children are presumed to be developmentally delayed and therefore ‘need’ this funding to ‘close the gap’? Alternatively, are looked after children seen as ‘disadvantaged’ and therefore are automatically eligible for this funding to support any aspect of their learning? If this is the case then ‘closing the gap’ should not focus on developmental delay and there should be more emphasis on practitioners using the funding in any way that supports eligible

disadvantaged children. Therefore, the gap would be broadened and refined between disadvantaged children and their peers, rather than a focus on development and educational outcomes. Practitioners in the Q-methodology data collection (factors one and three) stated that they used the funding for group activities that benefited more than one child. Equally, practitioners in the questionnaire and focus group data collection mentioned examples in practice where the funding had supported areas of learning, such as the child's interests.

The objectives of the EYPP funding seem to also imply a dual purpose whereby the funding is used differently for children with developmental delay and those that have met their developmental milestones. Early Education (2019b, p.4) recommended that the EYPP funding is tailored to meet the needs of the child, regardless of whether they had any developmental delay. The report stated:

the purpose of EYPP funding is to ensure those children who are inexperienced make accelerated progress to close the gap between their progress and that of their less disadvantaged peers. It could also be used to ensure those EYPP children who are currently where they are expected to be in terms of attainment and progress, are enabled to be more experienced in some areas of learning.

The Pupil Premium also states that “it is designed to help disadvantaged children of all abilities perform better, and close the gap between them and their peers” (Gov.uk; 2019c, p.1). However, the EYPP and Pupil Premium place emphasis on ‘learning’ and ‘performance’ which implies that there is an educational outcomes focus to this funding. This may be why practitioners in this study focused on developmental delay. To add further complexity to the purpose of this funding there is a breadth of ways the funding can be used. Examples provided by Early Education (2019a) include additional forest school provision and professional library provision to support staffs pedagogical thinking, but these cannot be easily evidenced to support ‘closing the gap’ for individual children who are age appropriate in development.

Conclusions

The EYPP purpose for looked after children needs to be clarified. There are potentially two ways that this could be achieved considering the findings of this study.

(1) Funding could be allocated to looked after children with developmental delay to support ‘closing the gap’ between eligible children and their peers. Practitioners would then need to allocate resources and training to support ‘closing the gap’ for these children and evidence the outcomes for Ofsted. However, as stated by factor one participants the amount of funding allocated per child would need to be reconsidered. As participant two stated, the EYPP funding is “not enough money to support serious behavioural problems where 1:1 or small group supervision is required”. In comparison to the findings of Mathers and colleagues (2016), these children would benefit from the funds matching the Pupil Premium fund. Practitioners in this study clearly presented their frustrations in the eligibility criteria of this funding. It is clear from the findings that if the funding focuses on developmental delay then it may be more effectively used if there was devolved responsibility and practitioners were able to apply for children who need this additional funding on a case by case basis.

(2) The gap focused on in this funding could be extended to consider more broadly the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, rather than (as evidenced in these findings) focusing on development and educational outcomes between looked after children and their peers. Practitioners could be supported to see ways the funding can be used to support the child or groups interests and experiences that are not necessarily focused on ‘closing the [educational] gap’. However, in order for this to be successful Ofsted would need to be happy with evidence that was not focused on development and educational outcomes and accept varied ways of using the funding that benefits those that are eligible for the funding.

This project is not without its limitations. An advantage of the study is that it includes 19 differing settings in the first phase and 13 settings in the second phase of data collection from one LA. However, that is not a sufficient number of settings to allow generalization of these findings across all in England. These findings show a significant need to carry out a longitudinal study examining the use of EYPP nationally and examining further the focus on ‘closing the [educational] gap’ for disadvantaged children. However, this was not the purpose of this particular study, though issues raised are likely to be relatable to the wider field. These issues need to be explored on a national scale.

In conclusion, it is important to return to the project’s research questions. Practitioners in this study presented mostly negative perspectives on the general use of EYPP funding for looked after children, but presented the funding in a more positive light when referring to its practical use for individual children. This appears to relate to an acceptance of government

rhetoric on the use of EYPP funding, that is overcome when practitioners focus on individual children. These findings suggest that the funding can support ‘closing the gap’ for looked after children with developmental delay, but its purpose needs to be clarified and the objectives of the funding made explicit to better meet the needs of looked after children. The paper has recommended considering the gap in its broadest sense to mean the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, rather than focusing on development and educational outcomes.

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No.	Statement	1	2	3
1	The funding is essential to support children's development	-1	2	3
2	Parents/carers are involved in how we use the funding	-2	0	-3
3	I always know how I will use the funding for each child	0	-3	-1
4	The funding would be better used if I could allocate it to children whom I feel really need it	3	3	-1
5	All looked after children need this funding	-3	1	-2
6	I use the funding for group activities to benefit more than one child	2	0	3
7	We get the funding too late in the academic year	4	0	4
8	More funding needs to be allocated per child	2	-2	0
9	It is easy to access this funding	-4	-4	0
10	I do not know how the effects/benefits of this funding are measured	-2	-2	-2
11	My position is influenced by my general experience	0	-2	0
12	My position is influenced by government objectives	-3	-1	-1
13	I believe I have autonomy to decide how to best use	1	0	1

Appendix
 Appendix 1: Full list of statements and factors

	this funding			
14	All children from low income families need this funding	-4	1	1
15	Funding could be better spent elsewhere	-2	-3	-4
16	Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities should be entitled to this funding	2	2	2
17	Some LAC miss out because the adoptive parents don't declare their status	0	-1	-1
18	The government need to give clearer guidance on how this funding can be used	-1	1	-3
19	All funding in early years is good funding	1	2	2
20	I think it is more difficult to decide how to use the funding for looked after children	-1	0	-3
21	This funding 'closes the gap' for looked after children	-3	-1	1
22	This funding 'closes the gap' for children from low income families	-2	-2	0
23	This funding supports inclusive practice	1	1	1
24	Ofsted are interested in how we use this funding	1	2	0
25	Parents are aware of the funding	-1	-4	-1
26	I have been responsible for allocating this funding for at least one child in my setting	1	-3	1
27	It is a struggle to get parents to complete the online form	4	3	3
28	I would prefer to apply for the funding on behalf of children in my care	3	4	4
29	I have children in my setting that are eligible for the funding, but have not received it	2	-1	-4
30	I have children who are not eligible for this funding, but would benefit from it	3	4	2
31	Funding should only be used on resources/support inside the setting	0	0	-2
32	The eligibility criteria for this funding need to change	0	1	2
33	It is difficult to decide how to use the funding if the child has no developmental delay	0	3	-2
34	My position is influenced by my experience particularly with one child	-1	-1	0

Table one: Demographic information for factor one

Participant number	Female/Male	Nursery/Preschool	Role at setting (if stated)	Years' experience (if stated)
4	Female	Preschool	Not stated	Not stated
7	Female	Preschool	Manager	14 years
8	Female	Preschool	Owner and Deputy Manager	5 years
10	Female	Preschool	Manager	23 years
13	Female	Preschool	Manager	20 years
14	Female	Preschool	Manager	10 years +
15	Female	Nursery	Not stated	Not stated
19	Female	Nursery	Not stated	Not stated

Table two: Demographic information for factor two

Participant number	Female/Male	Nursery/Preschool	Role at setting (if stated)	Years' experience (if stated)
2	Female	Nursery	Manager	15 years
3	Female	Preschool	SENCO	Not stated
5	Female	Nursery	Manager	10 years
6	Female	Nursery	Manager	20 years
9	Female	Nursery	Manager	12 years
17	Female	Nursery	Deputy Manager	10 years
20	Female	Nursery	Manager	11 years

Table 3: Demographic information for factor three

Participant number	Female/Male	Nursery/Preschool	Role at setting (if stated)	Years' experience (if stated)
11	Female	Preschool	Manager	15 years
12	Female	Nursery	Not stated	Not stated
16	Female	Nursery	Owner/manager	12 years
18	Female	Nursery	Manager	Not stated